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Paradox and Ambiguity at Work in the Representations of Female Characters in Toni Morrison's Fiction

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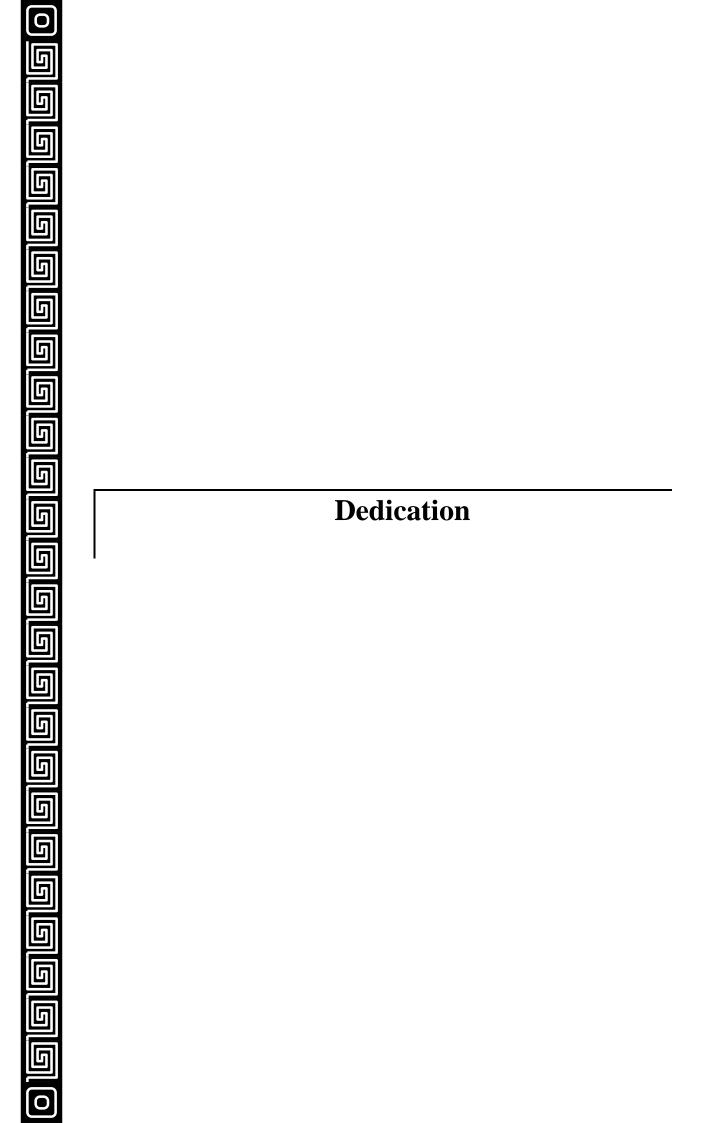
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Title Paradox and Ambiguity at Work in the Representations of Female Characters in Toni Morrison's Fiction

Presented and submitted by: Houria AGGABOU



This work is dedicated to Dad and Mom

Papa, you have always been my source of inspiration. You instilled in me the strong love for literature and art since the tender age. You are my idol and no words will ever be enough to express how grateful I am for having you in my life. I am so proud to be the daughter of such a great man and father.

Mama, you have always believed in me. You restored my hope and determination. Thank you for your unwavering affection and support throughout my long journey. You were the light in my dark days.

To my son Nizar

You are 'my best thing'. Despite your young age, you gave me unmeasurable strength. Without your presence in my life, I could never have fulfilled this work. Thank you for being always by my side young man!

To my dear sisters Manel, Yasmina and Lilia

Thank you for your constant encouragements. You are my benediction.

To my soulmate Imane

To my inexhaustible source of support; Imane. Thank you for having generously shared your time and energy all along this challenging journey. Our intellectual discussions will be engraved in my memory.

To my dear friends Hassiba and Radia

In memory of my dear friends, who left this world too soon. Your friendship was a gift, and I dedicate this work to you as a way to keep your memory alive forever.

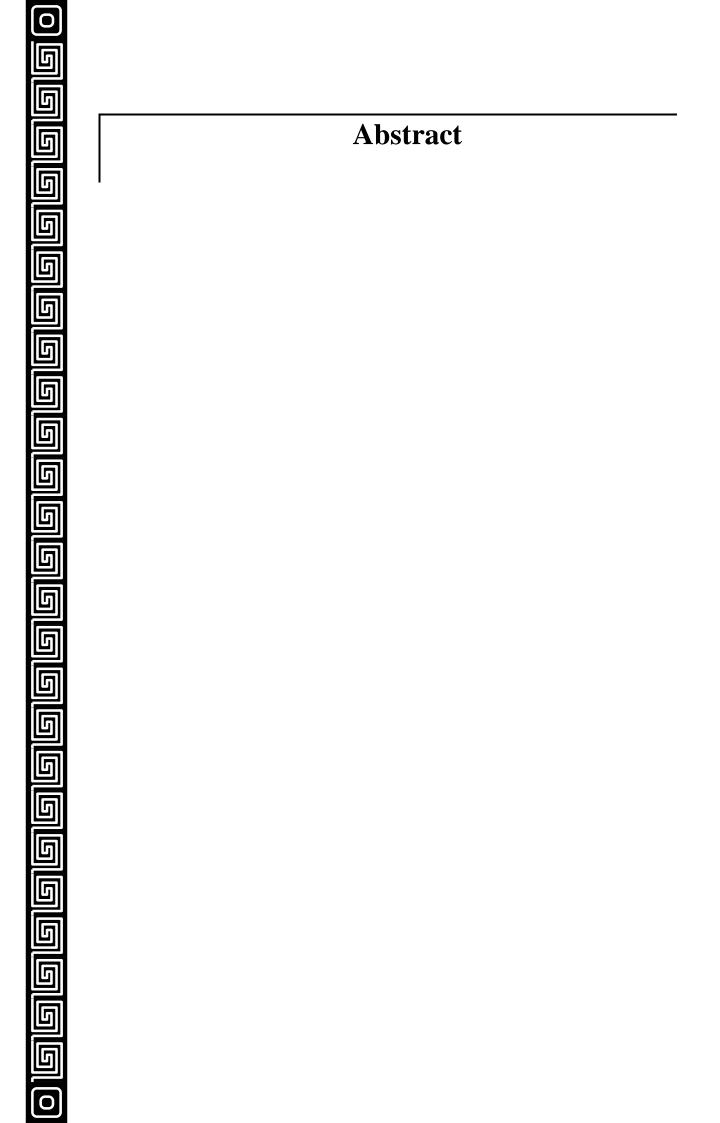
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Abstract

Entitled Paradox and Ambiguity at Work in the Female Representations in Toni Morrison's Fiction, this research examines a representative set of the author's novels *The* Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974) and Beloved (1987) to address the question of the intricate portrayal of black female characters. The subject explores Morrison's use of the narrative devices of paradox and ambiguity as a characteristic feature underlying her narrative strategy in her treatment of the question of black women. By giving voice to each of her characters, Morrison aims to show the complexity of their condition as well as their expectations of an existence in a white hegemonic society that deprived them of their fundamental rights and blurred their identity. Against this background, this study seeks to advance the argument that Morrison's use of ambiguity and paradox serves to illustrate the differences and even contradictions regarding black women's quest for self-definition, identity and life prospects. To this end, the author proceeds to the representation of the multiple dilemmas of her female characters through the tragic intrigues of her novels at different phases of African-American history. Her inclination for unresolvable oppositions exemplifies her use of narrative discourse that seeks to offer a plural view of the conditions and concerns of black women. Morrison's adoption of a narrative discourse that relies on the display of contrary but complementary characters in a multitude of contexts aims to deconstruct stereotypical images of black women shaped by whites. In order to account for these questions, it seemed to me useful and insightful to draw inspiration from the theories of feminism and psychoanalysis. Particular attention is equally paid to Morrison's display of post-modernistic postcolonial trends in her narration. Such analytical concepts seem to me decisive in approaching the writings Morrison devotes in their globality to the question of black women and their experience in the U.S.A. As a result, by doing so, Morrison succeeds in constructing an ingenious counter-narrative that re-establishes the black woman in a context free from the prejudices of white rhetoric.

Keywords: paradox, ambiguity, black women, Morrison.

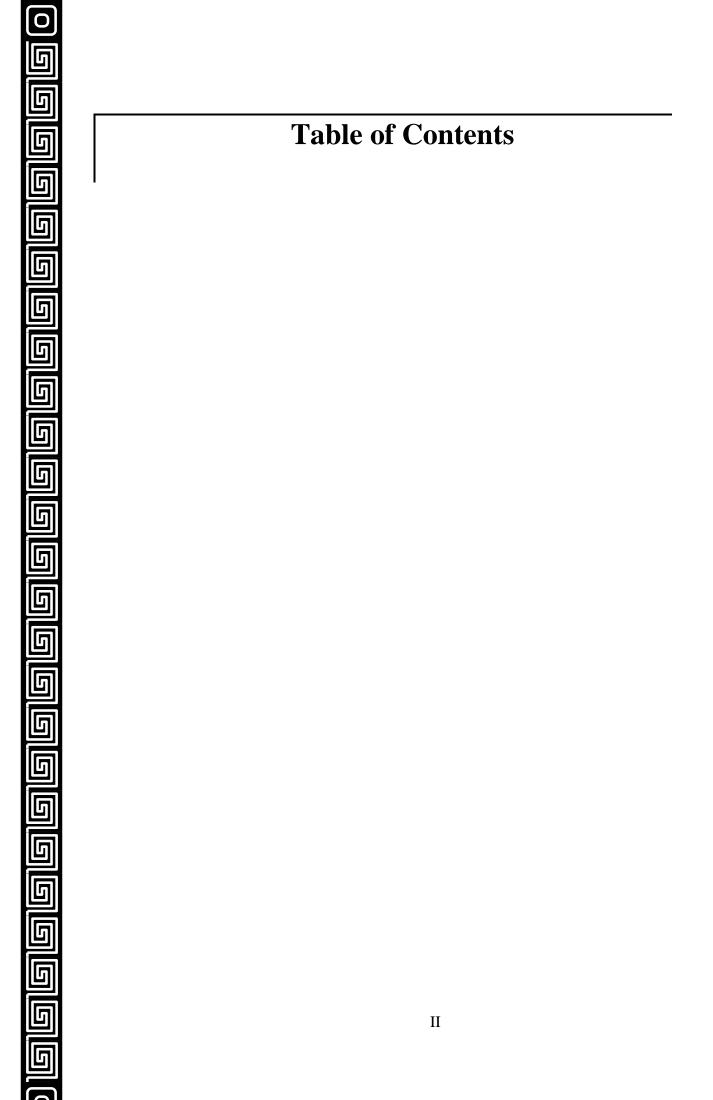


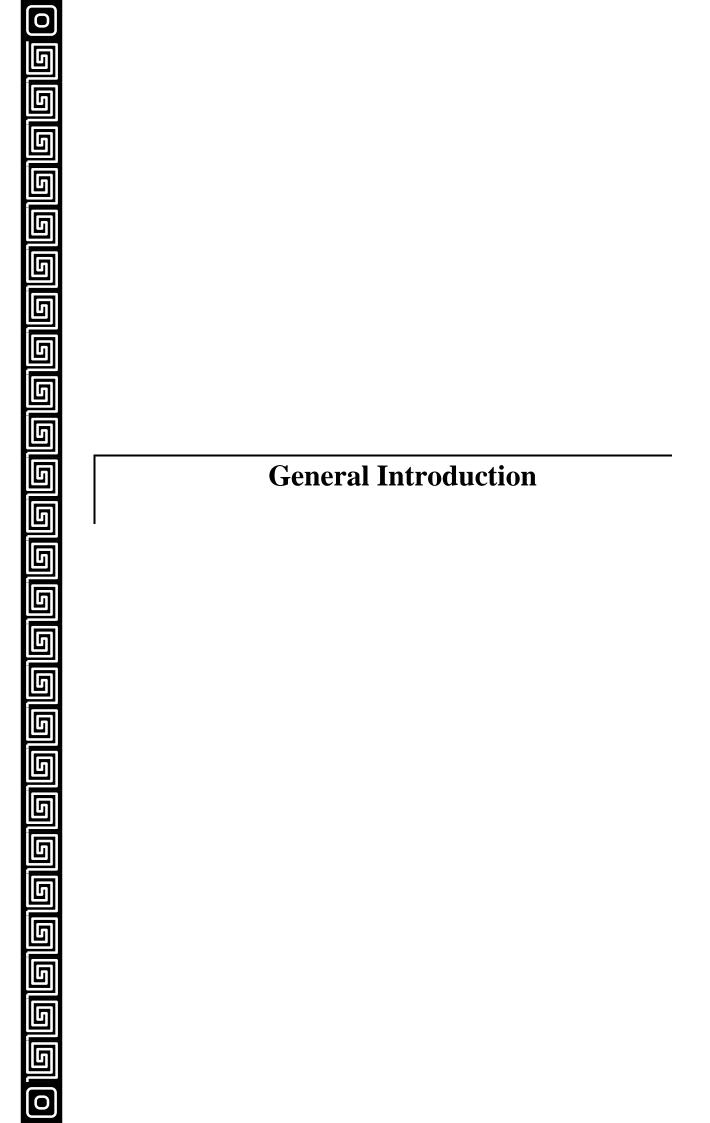
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General Introduction

A limited amount of African American literature had been produced or published before the Eighteenth century. Some black names are associated with poetry among whom Jupiter Hammons, Phillis Weatley and Ann Plato are the most anthologized. By the early 1800's, pieces of African American literature began to appear in various forms with slave narratives being the dominant one. Some of these early works were written by abolitionist white writers who encouraged uneducated slaves to tell them their life stories. Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, by Harriet Jacobs is a case in point. Works of nonfiction and pamphlets such as *The Confession of Nat Turner* (1831), and the dramatic work by William Wells Brown, *The Escape or Leap for Freedom* (1858) preceded by his novel Clotel or the President's Daughter (1853) in which he alludes to future US President Thomas Jefferson as a former slave holder fathering a slave woman, along with the first African American novel published in the USA entitled Our Nig, or Sketches from the Life of a Free Black (1859) by Harriet E Wilson formed the main early body of African American literature before Emancipation. These and other black writers such as Frederick Douglas and David Walker, manifested their call for freedom and equality through essays and speeches from the podium.

From its earlier manifestations, African American tradition voiced its concerns not only through texts which included poems, nonfiction, drama, pamphlets and fiction, but also through a powerful oral tradition that focused on the quest for freedom and human dignity which served as a foundation for many of the outstanding literary productions today.

The end of the Civil War and the Reconstruction Act of 1867 constituted a new phase in the history and condition of the black people. For the first time, education, although segregated, became a right for all African Americans. Despite this legal reality, African Americans were obliged to work for survival, and only a minority of them received a rudimentary education. Despite the achievement of some progress on the economic and political levels around the 1880's, further obstacles hindered the social advancement of the black people. The Ku Klux Klan, a racist organization, eroded all hope for freedom and equality. Moreover, violence through lynchings and the legalised segregation enabled by the Jim Crow Laws were sources of more fear and suffering among the newly freed blacks. Consequently, the African American literature written between 1865 and 1920 voiced the disillusionment, fears and frustrations caused by the country's failure to keep its promise of freedom and equality after the Civil War. This discontent is expressed in biographies and autobiographies such as Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglas, an American Slave (1845) and Booker T Washington's Up from Slavery (1901).

Black women writers such as Anna Julia Cooper, Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Josephine D Henderson Heard, Lucy A Delaney, and Angelina Weld Grimke wrote exslave narratives, novels, essays, poetry and drama. Other male writers emerged on the African American literary scene distinguishing themselves by well-crafted short stories, novels and poetry, these included Charles W Chesnutt author of *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) and Paul Laurence Dunbar whose novel *The Uncalled* (1898) was well received. James Weldon Johnson, author of *The Autobiography of an Ex Colored-Man* (1892) published novels as well as sermons in verse. Despite growing interest in writing literature, the works produced by these writers were generally ignored by white critics.

The Harlem Renaissance is a crucial part in the history of African-American literature. Two major events are associated with its beginning: The Great Migration, which started in 1915, and the end of World War I in 1918. The Great Migration was characterized by a flux of hundreds of thousands of African Americans moving from the rural South to the urban North in search of better economic opportunities, jobs and the promise of a better life in such large cities as Chicago, Detroit, New York and Philadelphia. African Americans were also enrolled as soldiers in the American army to take part in World War I for the sake of freedom and democracy. Their experiences in Europe contributed to increase their awareness of American racial prejudice against them. Further disillusionment was experienced by the soldiers returning home only to face racism and poverty. As a result, they felt that the best weapon against racism was to take pride in and preserve their identity.

Coined by Alain Locke, a black philosopher and writer, the Harlem Renaissance, which literally means rebirth, was in fact, the first opportunity African Americans had to give birth to and celebrate the uniqueness of their culture. Aspects of their literary trends include a break with the restraints of the Victorian age and an eagerness to join the boldness of the Roaring Twenties with Harlem being the artistic and cultural centre where the new generation of educated black writers met and exchanged ideas. On those occasions some critics argued that African American literature should "uplift" the race, suggesting that its people should appear in a positive light. The younger among them felt that a "realistic" view of African American life was preferable for the sake of art.

New York City provided these African American intellectuals with publishing facilities during the Harlem Renaissance enabling them to emerge on the American literary scene. In addition to these publishing companies, several agencies had magazines

that sponsored writing contests and published works by young black writers. Two major periodicals were *The Crisis* published by the National Association for the Advancement of the Coloured People (NAACP) edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, and *Opportunity* published by the Union League and edited by Charles S Johnson. Other independent magazines such as *The Messenger*, a militant socialist journal opened its pages to African American writers. Some famous figures of the Harlem Renaissance such as Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Turman, Langston Hughes, John P Davis, Aaron Douglas and Bruce Nugget tried to launch their own literary magazine, *Fire! Fire!* but this latter lasted only one issue in November 1926.

With the Harlem Renaissance, many young African American writers came to prominence with such names as Claude Mc Kay, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, Nella Larsen, and Langston Hughes. Many others, including James Weldon Johnson, Dorothy West, Sterling Brown were recognized for their poetical works, short stories and drama. Meanwhile, W.E.B Du Bois re-entered the literary scene by continuing the work he had begun at the beginning of the century by producing books and essays on the position of African Americans in the USA and the struggle they should carry to achieve equality. With his major achievement *The Souls of Black Folks* early in the century, he voiced his deep concern with the condition of the black people in America pointing to the legacy of slavery and racism which left them in a perpetual crisis with their sense of self:

Herein lie buried many things which if read with patience may show the strange meaning of being black here in the dawning of the Twentieth Century. This meaning is not without interest to you, Gentle Reader; for the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the colour-line. (5)

As a conclusion to this important period in the life of African American literature, the Harlem Renaissance oscillated between conservative writers who supported the idea of "uplifting the race" by a positive treatment of the issue of the black people, and the more radical writers who insisted on a 'realistic' portrayal of their fellows. Both were able to express their views hence offering American and the world a view that their culture was a worthy literary theme, a "beautiful" culture; a topic that come to life again during the Black Panther movement of the mid 1960's and early 1970's.

The Great Depression was also a marking period in the history of African-American literature. With the 1929 stock market crash leading to an unprecedented world economic crisis, the already precarious condition of the African Americans worsened. They were the last hired and the first fired. 1932 was marked by the election of President Franklin D Roosevelt promising the USA a New Deal. The Federal Writer's Project, supervised by the Works Progress Administration, was partly attributed to President Roosevelt's New Deal. Famous African American writers of that era such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Arna Bontemps were involved in The Federal Writer's Project, earning a living while continuing to write.

This period was also marked by the emergence of new African American voices including Richard Wright, Robert Hayden, Frank Yerby and Margaret Walker. With his protest novel *Native Son* (1940), Richard Wright established himself as a major writer whose novel denounced the conditions under which the African Americans in the urban North. The opening scene of this novel stressed the promiscuous conditions of the poor Bigger Thomas family sharing a single room in the slums of Southside Chicago. Novelists Chester Himes, author of *If He Hollers*, *Let Him Go* (1945) and Ann Petry,

author of *The Street*, (1945) concerned themselves with the naturalistic themes of how environment affects the individual.

With the end of World War II, returning African American soldiers who had fought fascism in Europe faced disillusionment with denial of their rights supposedly guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. They were lured into believing that they should and could assimilate into the dominant culture. Similarly, a number of African American literary critics believed that black writers should merge into American literature and opt for a denial that the African American experience in this country had any influence on their work. Poets such as Naomi Long Madgett, Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks did not share this option and continued to write poetry that reflected their concern with the African American community.

In 1952, Ralph Ellison published his outstanding novel *Invisible Man*, which won him the National Book Award. Unlike the works of his predecessor, Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* was not a traditional protest novel. Although dealing with the black condition, the novel, whose protagonist is a young anonymous black man spoke for the universal concerns of humanity. Refusing to fall into the trap of reducing the black novel to answering white propaganda with black counterpropaganda, Ellison wanted to raise the quality of the aesthetics of his work to attain the highest ranks of modern fiction-writing claiming that, "the narrative is the meaning" (McPherson 46). With this statement, Ellison refused to establish a dissociation of form from meaning. While *Invisible Man* was popular with both whites and blacks, its popularity decreased in the 1960's with the rise of a more radical generation of blacks who considered that Ellison did not speak for them and that he was too much of an Uncle Tom, a submissive character

in Harriet Beecher's Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, that served the interests of the whites.

Ellison refused to go in the direction of the radicalism of Malcom X and his followers. For him, the core of America lay in the genuine integration of the two races. On one occasion, he declared to his fellow black writer James Allan Mc Pherson. "I don't recognize any white culture; I recognize no American culture which is not the partial creation of black people. I recognize no American style in literature, in dance, in music, even in assembly-line processes, which does not bear the mark of the American Negro." (McPherson 47)

A distinguished literary figure, James Baldwin; author of the novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) supported black writers' abilities to express a uniquely African American perspective and a universal concern for individual identity. Baldwin and other writers believed that works by black writers did not have to fit within the literary mainstream to be valued as worthy artistic achievements.

In 1955, following the year long bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, a new type of civil rights movement started. This was led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to mobilise African Americans to protest the denial of their rights as U.S. citizens. The African American literature produced between the late 1950's and the beginning of the 1960's responded the call for the fight for civil rights. Authors such as Gwendolyn Brooks, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1950 for *Annie Allen*, Robert Hayden, Melvin Tolson, Margaret Danner, Langston Hughes, Mary Elizabeth Vroman and Sterling Brown expressed their awareness of that fight in their poetry. Others of their contemporaries such

as Lorraine Hansberry, Mari Evans, William Melvin Kelley and Ernest Gaines voiced their views in drama, short stories and novels.

Militant demonstrations and calls for action continued under the leadership of Martin Luther King and Malcom X, resulting in some victorious battles notably with the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968 prohibiting discrimination in schools, accommodations and employment. The Voting Act of 1965 outlawed discrimination in voting because of colour, religion or national origin. This era was also marked by a new African American voice chanting "Black is beautiful" and "Black power" heard throughout the country. This was the first time since the Harlem Renaissance that a movement took pride in its racial identity which artists celebrated in the songs, stories and customs of their African ancestors.

While violence erupted in many of the urban ghettos during this period, African American poets felt that they could use their poetry as a political weapon. Poets, such as, Amiri Baraka (Le Roi Jones), Niki Giovanni, Haki Madhubuti (Don L. Lee), Sondra Sanchez, June Jordan, Dudley Randle, Mari Evans and Lucille Clifto devoted their poetry not for their individual concerns, but to rather speak in a dramatic voice for all African-Americans. The Black Power Movement had a great impact on novelists such as Margaret Walker author of *Jubilee* (1966) and William Melvin Kelley's *dem* (1967). Outstanding autobiographies and biographies appeared, including *Autobiography of Malcom X* (1964), by Malcom X and Alex Haley, *Soul on Ice* (1968), by Eldridge Cleaver and *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) by Maya Angelou. Playwrights carried over the new awareness to the stage with such plays as Adrienne Kennedy's *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1963), Amiri Baraka's *Dutchman* (1964), Douglas Turner Ward's *Day of Absence*

(1965), Charles Gordon's *No Place to Be Somebody* (1967) and Alice Childress's *Wine in the Wilderness* (1969).

Short story writers Paule Marshall and Ernest Gaines expressed the feeling of black pride. Amiri Baraka and Larry Neale published *Pride, an Anthology of African American Writing* in 1968. In the foreword, the editors declared that a new day had arrived for African American art. The anthology symbolized the birth of the Black Arts movement. Larry Neale insisted that this movement was opposed to any view or doctrine that separated African American artists from their community, that African American art was intimately related to the black community's quest for self-determination. Conservative African American critics argued against this view. Despite differences in viewpoints, both found ground for free expression, enabling the Black Arts movement enrolling more and more members and fostering artistic production.

The early and mid-1970's were marked by a decline in intensity of the civil rights movement with shift in its quest from equal rights for African Americans as a whole to a quest for individual rights. Despite some political and economic gains achieved thanks to the militant actions of the civil rights and Black Power movements, poverty, unemployment and discrimination still plagued black people across the United States.

African-American literature of the 1970's shifted from a focus on black power concerns with the local African Americans to writing about the political and economic conditions of coloured people throughout the world. The themes that dominated the literary scene of that period included satire of the American culture through such novels as *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) and *Flight to Canada* (976) by Ishmael Reeds. Knowledge of their history was also a prominent theme for black writers as reflected in August Wilson's

dramas *Fences* (1987) which won a Pulitzer Prize, and *Piano Lesson* (1900). Charles Johnson was rewarded by the National Book Award for *Middle Passage* (1900).

The era was also illustrated by a growing interest in women's issue which began to gain prominence. Literature by black women addresses such concerns as the interconnectedness of family, home and community, along with women's struggle to survive in the United States. Their works put forward the specific experience of African-American women as shown in such novels as *The Colour Purple* (1982) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) by Alice Walker, whose fiction represents black women as a powerful figure. She distinguished herself by her positive philosophy about black and female. Her literary achievement was rich and varied which in addition to her novels *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) *Meridian* (1976), *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) include poetry and short fiction. Walker, who became a major figure in feminism, is also known for coining the term Womanism.

A Nobel Prize winner, Toni Morrison is one of the most widely acclaimed and studied American writers. She went beyond the demarcations of the established literary conventions of fiction writing. Her literary productions dazzled writers from the whole world and she became a chief figure in African-American literature. Her experimental innovative style revitalized her novels and captivated readers of different ideological and cultural backgrounds. Both on the thematic and esthetic levels, Morrison succeeded to transcend the supremacy of mainstream literature. Morrison is not exclusively recognised for her fiction, but also for her non-fiction and literary criticism, which addressed multiple issues concerning both black men and women. Moreover, she enlivened the black heritage though her vivid language and oral tradition which were among her strategies for reviving black people' racial pride. Black oral tradition has always been a substantial

source of inspiration for Morrison. She excelled in challenging the literature of the canon by creating a new literary scope for African-American writers who have been blurred for long decades.

In many of her interviews, Morrison labelled her literature as 'village literature' and she explains how she attempted to preserve African-American heritage in her novels. Her provocative novels dared raise fundamental political and social interrogations. However, what strongly puzzled critics and scholars was the ambiguity that marks her narrative discourse which embodies an antithetical approach aimed at opposing the hegemonic one which also monopolised the American literary scene for long years. Morrison's 'village literature' credited her a great reputation even among the most racist white academia that could not deny the outstanding aesthetic qualities of her fiction despite their discontent with the fact that she prioritises the questions of African-Americans in her works. In her review with Toni Morrison's *Sula* for the New York Times Book Review in 1973, Sara Blackburn asserts:

Toni Morrison is far too talented to remain only a marvellous recorder of the black side of provincial American life. If she is to maintain the large and serious audience she deserves, she is going to have to address a riskier contemporary reality than this beautiful but nevertheless distanced novel. And if she does this, it seems to me that she might easily transcend that early and unintentionally limiting classification "black woman writer" and take her place among the most serious, important and talented American novelists working now. (3)

Morrison, however, devoted the greatest portion of her works to the Africa-American woman and the multiple forms of oppression she was subjected to. Black women being jeopardised by racism, sexism and poverty remained the most victimised section of the black community and a central target for Morrison's fiction. Even though she centred her plots around female characters, Morrison did not exclude black males from her concern and lent them some space for she aimed at a multi-faceted presentation of the unique condition of African-Americans in racist America. The large variety of characters Morrison created in her fiction allowed the reader to perceive and gradually grasp the complex context of black people who actually fluctuate between self-assertion and self-denial.

In her literature, Morrison portrays the perpetual dilemma of self-consciousness that black characters try desperately to resolve. Some characters find solace and pride in their racial identity, others just find in their blackness a source of shame and self-loathing. However, Morrison has always displayed the crucial role the community plays in accompanying those distorted members of the black society to heal their wounded spirits from the historical legacy of slavery and racism. It is important to stress at this stage that the existential dilemmas Morrison exposes in her fiction are rather of a universal dimension and can by no means be restricted to black characters. Anyone could identify himself within the realm of life challenges Morrison portrays in her fiction, for the journey of self-validation is an inclusive experience and not an exclusive one. This is mainly the reason behind the universal appreciation Morrison has continued to gain up to the present time. In this regard Mailyn Mobley McKenzie, in her essay *Spaces for Readers: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, comments:

Morrison's novels so far challenge the reader to move from familiar to unfamiliar interpretations of life and living. Rendering the novel through a lens of complex narrative aesthetics, she invites readers into the cultural politics of race, gender, class, age, and even

religion to entertain new readings of the text of their own lives, the nation, and the global community. (231)

Morrison has considerable literary productions; ten novels that granted her many prestigious awards: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Soloman* (1977). Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) was recognized as a huge success for which she received the American Book Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. In 1993, Morrison won the Noble Prize in Literature that was awarded for the first time to an African-American writer. Later in 2012, she received the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Her other fictional works include *Tar Baby* (1981), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999), *Love* (2003), *A Mercy* (2008) and *Home* (2012). Morrison's non-fictional works include *The Black Book* (1974), *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), and *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* (2004) and her short story *Recitatif* which was published in (1983).

Morrison's counter-discourse relied on a set of techniques and strategies that transcended the hegemonic conventional paradigms. She has always expressed her objection to the categorisation of novels into particular genres; she believes that a single novel can encompass many types all together. Her novel *Beloved*, for instance, can be read as both a historical, a neo-slave narrative and a magical realism novel. Morrison's post-modernistic techniques were and still are at the core of literary criticism. Ambiguity, paradox, discontinuity, fragmentation, chaos, indeterminacy, multiple perspectives and non-linearity which constitute the chief components of post-modernistic repertoire are all manifested in Morrison's fiction. Plurality and decentralisation are key aspects of Morrison's fiction as well. The narrative voice is decentred and perspective is given to many characters which allows the reader deeper insights.

Morrison adopted the post-modern discursive technique of polyphony to undermine the author's 'univocation' to subvert conventional narrative modes. She sometimes disintegrates the authority of the omniscient narrator who has the possibility to perceive the internal side of characters by providing a panoply of perspectives that might contradict his assumptions and judgements. Hence, this incoherence in the perspective becomes a real challenge for the reader who expect immediate and absolute understanding of reality. This is pretty palpable in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* where Morrison adopted a multiple perspective; the fist-person narrative through the voice of Claudia as both a little girl and as an adult, the omniscient narrator who provides the background of the different characters of the novel and then perspective shifts to Pauline, Cholly and Soaphead.

In *Beloved*, Morrison relied on the intertwined fragmented voices and memories of the three main characters Sethe, Denver and Beloved to display the complex traumatic repercussions of slavery inflicted on different generations of the black community. In a post-modernistic spirit, Morrison's ends are not limited to providing answers and closures but rather to exploring the complexities of African-American existence in America. Very often the circular plots of Morrison's novel all along their open-endings make of the end just a new beginning.

Morrison is not solely acknowledged for her creative works of fiction and Drama; she was also a groundbreaking figure in literary criticism. Her essay *Unspeakable Things Unspoken*: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature and her book Playing in the Dark Whiteness and the Literary Imagination are widely acclaimed. Unspeakable Things Unspoken is actually a metaphor on the issue of the African-American question that remained buried in oblivion for centuries in the literature of the canon which put in

quarantine the dark and shameful history of American subjugation of the African-American community.

In Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination, Morrison provided a significant definition to the essential concerns of African-American literature such as individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation; acute and ambiguous moral problematics; the thematics of innocence coupled with an obsession with figurations of death and hell. She also examined in her book the American Literature of the canon and introduced the term 'Africanism' which she defines as "a term for the denotive and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people." (5) Hence, Morrison called for a criticism that takes into account the peculiarity of the African-American context, its culture and history when she asserts in her essay Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation:

my general disappointment in some of the criticism that my work has received has nothing to do with approval. It has something to do with the vocabulary used in order to describe these things. I don't like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their accomplishment within the culture out of which I write. (342)

Morrison also reclaimed a criticism that questions the representation and depiction of blacks in the mainstream literature. Morrison aspired for a criticism that approaches the black features in contemporary African-American literature. Hence, Morrison has a

considerable contribution in literary criticism that aimed mainly at bringing blacks from alterity to centrality by revising the canon during the 1980's and 1990

Entitled Paradox and Ambiguity at Work in the Female Representations in Toni Morrison's Fiction, this research examines a representative set of the author's novels which are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1974) and *Beloved* (1987) to deal with the issue of her complex representation of the black female characters. The subject explores Morrison's employment of the devices of paradox and ambiguity as a characteristic feature underlying her narrative strategy in her treatment of the black women's question.

My selection of the above-mentioned novels stems from my belief that they offer a comprehensive portrayal of the condition of black womanhood in its diversity due to the wide spectrum of the female characters that populate her novels. Her plots, which include grandmothers, mothers and daughters aim at addressing the black woman issue from the distinctive perspectives of characters of differing generations and social condition. Morrison's purpose in this context, is undoubtedly to extend her representation of black women to the widest possible section of this community and thus avoid the easy categorisations that reproduce their stereotypical depictions by white rhetoric.

By giving voice to each of her characters, Morrison aims at displaying the complexity of their condition as well as their expectations from an existence in a white hegemonic society that has robbed them of their basic rights and blurred their identity. As such, the research seeks to put forward the argument that Morrison's use of ambiguity and paradox, serves among other things, to insist on differences and even contradictions with regard to the black women's quest for self-definition and life prospects. Divergences in personal experiences of her characters as well as their attitudes toward white and black

communities serve to unveil the author's uneasiness to convey a uniform portrayal of the black women's issue. Hence, while exposing the multiple dilemmas of her female characters through the tragic plots of her novels at different phases of African American history, Morrison opposes a refusal to the reader who expects a definite lifting of the ambiguous veil that covers the portrayal of her characters. Her inclination for non-resolvable oppositions illustrates her use of a narrative discourse that seeks to offer a plural view of the black women's conditions and concerns that transcends the ready-made assumptions regarding their being and place in American society.

Morrison's adoption of a narrative discourse that relies on a display of contrary but complimentary characters in a variety of contexts and situations is meant to deconstruct the stereotypical images of black women shaped by whites. By proceeding in this manner, Morrison constructed an ingenious narrative counter-discourse by which she succeeded to convey a varied delineation of the black women in their different, individual, family and social roles distinct from their perception and their rendering by white rhetoric.

This study seeks to elucidate Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity as central components of her feminist discourse which finds full expression in her portrayal of black female characters in her fiction. Her adoption of what Ralph Ellison calls "the Puzzle of the One-and-the Many" shapes her approach to the complex questions of race and gender relationships, oppressive economic and social conditions and the precarious status of black women in the American society. A glance at most of the female characters in her novels and the parts they fulfil in her fiction justify the claim that by adopting a two-edged attitude in her characterisation, Morrison exhibits paradox and ambiguity. This strategy of "double focus" seems to serve her feminist options notably by the cautious avoidance of categorisation.

Hence, her use of binary oppositions represented by the presence in her novels of 'allegedly' opposite female characters (Pecola and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*), (Sula and Nel in *Sula*) (Sethe and Denver in *Beloved*) fulfils her effort to offer a multilayered vision in which opposites are brought into fusion. Paradox and ambiguity reside precisely in Morrison's strategy, of first, leading her reader to assume a binary opposition between female characters i.e Virgin/Whore, Self/Other, Good/Evil, before complicating the matter by fusion instead of opposition. Consequently, the reader is led to believe that either the split characters are fused to complement each other, or that they represent the same person.

Despite the fact that Morrison's works have been extensively dealt with and actually received much critical attention, her use of paradox and ambiguity in her female representations, however, remains an area that needs more exploration for little has been said about it. Thus, this study scrutinizes Morrison's reliance on the devices of paradox and ambiguity and seeks to argue their effect in her narrative discourse as well as their impact on her delineation of the black female characters in the three selected novels; *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973) and *Beloved* (1987).

To sustain this argument, the following questions are raised:

- 1. Are the traditional devices of ambiguity and paradox dressed in Morrison's post-modernistic mould?
- 2. How does Morrison's adoption of the devices of paradox and ambiguity affect her narrative discourse in terms of her representation of the black female experience in her novels?

- 3. To what extent does her abandonment of the traditional linear and chronological narrative techniques in favour of the post-modernistic narrative techniques namely circularity, indeterminacy, multiple perspectives, disruption of diction and syntax, fragmentation and stream of consciousness fail or succeed in constructing a new narrative framework which enables a more genuine representation of black womanhood?
- 4. To what extent has the white hegemonic discourse and white standards of beauty affected black females' sense of self and their journey for self-affirmation in *The Bluest Eye*? How has 'double consciousness' as defined by W.E.B Du Bois impacted the perception of their identity?
- 5. How does Morrison use the theme of friendship between two adolescent girls to raise questions concerning submission to societal gender roles or challenge of the conventional codes and community beliefs to assert non-conformity and individuality in *Sula*? How do the relationships between daughters, mothers and grandmothers affect the protagonists' personalities in a frustrating context of a dual perception of themselves as part and apart from the white society.
- 6. Did Morrison's reliance on the complex discursive techniques of post-modernism favour a more insightful revisitation of the legacy of slavery? How does Morrison's depiction of the expression of mothers' love of their children illustrate the cruel paradox generated by the horror of slavery in *Beloved?* How does Morrison manifest the dynamics of trauma and their repercussions on female characters' psyches and relationships in *Beloved*?

The thesis is guided by a theoretical framework relying on black feminism, post-colonialism, psychoanalysis and post-modernism. The adoption of these literary theories stems from my conviction of their relevance to the main argument of my thesis.

'Feminism', to use a general expression, is concerned with the multifaceted forms of women's oppression. Feminists target all the ills that are faced by women and which they struggle to abolish. These include injustice in job opportunities for women, sexual exploitation of women, inferior status in society and all forms of discriminatory attitudes towards women. Feminism could not be reduced to a single movement; it is rather an ideology produced by a wide spectrum of feminists who struggled to be the voice of women and to speak out against such oppressions.

However, is spite of its adherence to the principles of struggle for the defence of women's rights, black feminism believes that white feminism, although not ignoring the issue of racism against blacks, does not have a first-hand experience with it. This is what actually led to the construction of a black feminist theory that proposes to focus on the issue of black women not solely from the point of view of gender but equally from a racial perspective. It argues that white and black feminists have two separate voices to fight for. Black feminists sustain that they struggle from within their racial community made up of black women and black men, whereas white feminists carry out their fight within their feminist's community made up of women and mostly white women.

Moreover, black feminism argues that black women have experienced oppression throughout history and that this was exerted by white men and women. Though in many of her interviews, Morrison appears to contradict herself concerning her position towards black feminism, many critics still perceive her as a black woman who writes with the

peculiar experiences of black women in mind. In her interview with MacKay, Morrison clarified:

I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving/loving way. They are writing to repossess, rename, re-own. (420)

Morrison's fiction thematises the question of black women and highlights their particular condition by being doubly jeopardised by both gender and race oppressions. Black females' question has always been a central concern in Morrison's fiction which presents a large cast of female characters of various categories of age that range from little girls in *The Bluest Eye* to mother and grandmothers in *Sula* and *Beloved*. Her fiction endeavours to voice the 'unspeakable' in the black females' experience to find a space within their communities and within the white hegemonic society. Morrison centred the plots of her novels on black females' journey toward self-affirmation with all the challenges they meet all along their ways. She aims at shaking the hegemonic discourse that imposed negative stereotypical perceptions on black womanhood and motherhood that affected their consciousness for long decades by establishing a counter-discourse that challenges and deconstructs this canonised depiction of black women. Issues related to gender roles, quest for identity in a racist and patriarchal environment, and motherhood under slavery are at the core of Morrison's fiction which makes the black feminist perspective relevant for the investigation of her works.

Moreover, approaching Morrison's works from a post-colonial perspective is insightful to examine Morrison's endeavour to rewrite the black American history and to

revisit, more particularly, the distorted black women's history that remained buried for long. Morrison's fiction repositions the question of black females' history and brings it from the periphery to the centre. The revisitation of the dehumanising experience of slavery is of a paramount importance in Morrison's fiction which reclaims the past to give a voice for the silenced. In a postcolonial spirit, reclaiming the past is not limited to a linear recording of a set of historical events but rather a whole process of retrieving the repressed memories of the oppressed. Morrison's fiction drops the veil on all forms of damage that slavery and other forms of oppression inflicted on her community.

In *Beloved*, Morrison divulges the atrocity of sexual assaults black females experienced on slave ships in a counter-narrative that voices their mutilated bodies and souls. By giving voice to the different characters in *Beloved*, Morrison disrupts the colonial discourse of the white hegemony by allowing each character to speak out his own version of his history as a slave. So, in this regard, the adoption of a postcolonial perspective to Morrison's works brings deeper insights on the condition of black women as a racial minority under multiple forms of oppression

Furthermore, approaching the selected novels for this study from a psychoanalytical perspective allowed an examination of the psychological consequences women experienced under racial and patriarchal discrimination. Sexual exploitation, rape and incest and their repercussions are among the central themes of Morrison's works. Her novels are populated with many characters who suffer from psychological troubles and emotional devastation like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Shadrak and Plum in *Sula* and Hale in *Beloved*. Morrison's works highlight the different aspects of traumatic anxieties experienced by members of the black community because of the legacy of slavery and its brutality; this is portrayed in *Beloved* through three generations of one family. Sethe's

own memories are a constant source of pain, torture and frustration that haunt her present. Besides, Sethe resorts to infanticide to spare her daughter the horrors of slavery. In *The Bluest Eye*, Pauline paradoxically generates motherly feelings towards the white girl of her employer and denies her own black daughter. The 'double consciousness' experienced by black people makes them live in perpetual psychological tensions and struggles that remain a hindrance in their way for a coherent sense of selfhood in a society that dehumanised them for long decades.

In addition, the post-modernistic aspects of Morrison fiction have attracted many literary critics as it is claimed by Catherine Rainwater: "Morrison's circular patterns are postmodern because they are never completed and thus deny traditional narrative closure (101). Her unconventional and experimental techniques are widely explored in regard to her use of multiple perspectives, polyphony, non-linear plots, fragmentation and parody. I have chosen, however, to focus on two other aspects of post-modernism which are paradox and ambiguity as major components of Morrison strategies to construct a counter-discourse that challenges the hegemonic one in the representation of black women and their struggle for self-validation. Hilfer sustains:

Critical interpretations of Morrison's work must take into account her "indeterminacy," her consciousness of the moral ambiguity and inherent irresoluteness of the human condition. Her characters demand "both" condemnation "and" admiration, both respect and fear. So it is that Cholly Breedlove rapes his daughter Pecola in a gesture of love and rage; Eva Peace burns to death her own son in an ironic act of compassion; Margaret Street brutally abuses the child she adores; Sethe murders her "beloved" daughter. (

Morrison's works, however, cannot be approached from a unilateral perspective, the indeterminacy and ambivalence that underly her narrative discourse on both the thematic and aesthetic levels resist any reductionist interpretations. In regard to *Beloved*, Kimberly Chabot Davis comments:

It is precisely the ambivalences this novel that make it "beloved" by so many critical groups, but these indeterminacies themselves seem to resist the many and varied critics who tried to claim Morrison for their very own. I believe that it is more important to explore what her representations have to offer to all of us, simultaneously. (258)

This thesis consists four chapters. The first chapter presents a review of the use of paradox and ambiguity as literary devices from antiquity. Besides, it provides a set of definitions of the two devices in addition to pertinent examples of their use in the different phases of literary history.

The second chapter is devoted to the exploration of Morrison's portrayal of black female characters in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. The chapter examines issues related to the concept of black female identity in the mainstream society. It also examines Morrison's reliance on paradox and ambiguity in presenting the issue of black womanhood in all its complexity. A substantial part of the chapter treats the question of motherhood in the novel and offers a thorough exploration of the ambiguities and the paradoxes that feature black motherhood.

The third chapter tackles *Sula*. It deals with the representation of a large spectrum of female characters of different categories of age. It highlights Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity as a strategy to create a counter-discourse that shakes the

established cultural codes of gender roles. This strategy is extended to the question of motherhood which remains a central concern in all of Morrison's fiction. The ambivalent and ambiguous nature of motherly love in the novel is examined from different perspectives especially from Eva who sees her act of murder as an expression of extreme love.

The last chapter examines *Beloved*, one of the most challenging works of Toni Morrison. It explores the novel from different perspectives and investigates the different techniques Morrison used to convey her complex perception of black women's history. The chapter scrutinizes the writer's use of paradox and ambiguity in addition to other post-modernistic techniques to bring into question the canon's version of black American history and black women's issues in particular.



CHAPTER ONE: Review of the Use of Ambiguity and Paradox as Age-old Devices Used in Literature

Introduction

This thesis contends to explore ways in which Toni Morrison makes use of ambiguity and paradox in her fiction. Ambiguity and paradox are not just occasional features of a literary text. They are deliberately adopted by writers as devices designed to fulfil certain functions and achieve a desired effect upon text and reader. Thus, these devices interfere with the reader's experience of the literary text as well as with the making of the meaning. Ambiguity and paradox are in fact age-old devices which have contributed to make the literary text evolve, hence, opening horizons for newer literary perspectives and evolving meanings. In dealing with Toni Morrison's fiction, I propose to explore ways in which this writer inspired by the literary tradition that made use of these devices extended the use of these to several levels of the text bringing her own innovations in terms of female point of view, characterisations, feminist and gender discourse. It is, therefore; useful to have a backward glance at the use of these devices and how they made their presence a significant feature of the literary text prompting a diversity of experiences in the fields of poetry, drama and fiction.

1. Ambiguity

1.1 Ambiguity: An Age-old Issue

The issue of ambiguity, it must be stressed, is an age-old issue which has been dealt with by writers, philosophers, linguists, literary critics and other categories of thinkers. Each of these has attempted in his own way to raise questions and provide arguments to sustain his theory concerning this notion. Considered as a primary characteristic of language and an essential element with regard to its communicative functions, ambiguity became a topic of great interest for all those who concerned themselves in one way or another with the resources and performances of language in a multitude of areas of human communication. Whether regarded as an obstacle in communication that should be ignored or problem that needs to be solved, ambiguity was now a real topic for concern and interest that received a multiform attention.

For the purpose of this research, I have selected to deal with ambiguity in literature and more specifically with its specific use in Morrison's fiction. We have felt, however, the necessity to begin by a review of some essential definitions of ambiguity, and consider also some of the fundamental landmarks in the treatment of this notion starting from antiquity notably with the Greek Aristotle and then moving to the Christian era with Augustine in an effort to elucidate the background to the more recent developments of the treatment of ambiguity in the field of literature and literary criticism.

The literature concerning ambiguity, expectedly, is wide and varied and this is understandable given the amount of people with different skills, who, throughout the ages, invested themselves with the task of dealing with aspects of language and literature

with the aim of furthering knowledge about this notion of ambiguity. Let us consider some definitions of ambiguity as stated in the literature to illustrate some of the most pertinent views and concerns regarding ambiguity. It is useful at this stage to quote a contemporary definition of ambiguity as stated by Susanne Winkler to check it against older views in order to highlight the diversity of interpretations of this term and subsequent continuities or discontinuities in approaches and treatments of this issue:

Ambiguity refers to the state of having or expressing more than one possible meaning or something open to more than one possible meaning. It refers to the state in which a word or a statement, any linguistic entity, can be understood in more than a way. It is a state when it is difficult to locate a precise meaning or provide an explanation since it involves many different meanings. Ambiguity is unclearness by virtue of having more than one meaning. With respect to interpretation, ambiguity is doubtfulness or uncertainty. It refers to something of doubtful meaning. A word, a phrase, a sentence, or other linguistic objects are called ambiguous if they can be reasonably interpreted in more than one way. (122)

Susanne Winkler's definition of ambiguity centers on the multiplicity of meanings conveyed by a single linguistic entity. This multiplicity expands the field of interpretation in proportion to the variety of meanings stemming from this linguistic entity. A longstanding debate, dating back to the Greeks and notably Aristotle, grapples with whether these myriad meanings and interpretations should be seen as a source of confusion that requires clarification or as a source of richness that serves a positive function, resisting restrictive expression.

More recent perspectives on ambiguity emerged with The New Critics, led by William Empson, who emphasized the role of literary ambiguities in imbuing texts with underlying meanings. Empson's influential work, "Seven Types of Ambiguity," forms the core of this theory. Other theorists emphasized the active role of the reader in confronting literary ambiguity and decoding meaning. For these scholars, discussing literary ambiguity necessitates a focus on close reading and, by extension, the reader.

From this viewpoint, ambiguity is not merely a marginal feature of literary texts; it is inherent to them. The reader, shaped by their literary experiences and responses to texts, becomes a significant link in the chain involved in the construction of meaning.

Criticism of ambiguity as a flaw in language includes its association with vagueness and multiplicity of meaning that result in confusion. Ambiguity has, since Aristotle, been blamed for leading to a confusion of ideas in the mind of the reader as it prevents him from reaching a precise meaning behind a linguistic utterance. As cited by Drazen (2001), Aristotle considers that: "Ambiguity arises because the number of items that form vocabulary of any human language is much smaller than the number of realities that the vocabulary items are supposed to depict to make human language meaningful and functional" (4)

Clearly, Aristotle's belief that ambiguity arises from the discrepancy between the availability of linguistic items and the limitless number of objects in reality is rather simplistic and not really satisfactory particularly with regard to the absence of argument concerning abstract ideas. Seen as a hindrance to the achievement of meaningfulness and clarity in understanding, ambiguity has for long been a target of teachers and other rhetoricians who perceived it as a form of linguistic imperfection. This is made clear by

Atherton (1993) who states "ancient theorists, critics, and teachers of style and composition tended to see ambiguities as stylistic infelicities making an author's meaning obscure or indeterminate; and they were commonly identified by logicians and philosophers as sources of innocent or fraudulently induced intellectual error" (24).

So, writers in different domains and disciplines, no matter how they expressed their concern with ambiguity, showed an awareness of the properties of language and the diversity of its uses. They realised that a single word cannot just reveal a single meaning. Ambiguity, according to their views can be said to be inherent to the nature of language, and therefore, it should be regarded as a rule rather than the exception. Perhaps it is useful at this stage to look at how Aristotle explains the prevalence of ambiguity.

1.2 Aristotle on Ambiguity

Aristotle sustains that the world of things being unlimited, it cannot be accounted for by the amount of words in language that is limited. Henceforth, words, to meet requirements of the multitude of things in reality, take more than one meaning, this process makes ambiguity inevitable:

Since we cannot introduce the realities themselves into our discussions, but have to use words and symbols for them, we suppose that what follows in the words will follow in the realities too, like people reckoning with counters. But it is not the same; for whereas words and the quantity of sentences are limited, realities are unlimited in number. It is, therefore, inevitable for the same sentence and the one word to mean more than one thing. As, therefore, those who are not good at using counters get deceived by those who can understand them, just so in the case of

sentences; those without experience of the power of words reason fallaciously both when speaking themselves and when listening to others. (Robinson 28)

Despite the limitations to the validity of Aristotle's theory of the apprehension of reality by language particularly his assumption about limitations of the number of words to account for a denser reality, there remains interesting views and contributions in his works which helped prompt further discussions and treatments of the issue of ambiguity, and the prevailing role it plays in language and literature.

In his work *De Interpretatione*, Aristotle introduces two key words to explain the use of ambiguity in literature. He draws a distinction between "proposition" and "poetry". Aristotle considers that the notion of ambiguity is inapplicable if we are dealing with "proposition". For him, this latter is concerned with the affirmation or denial of the meaning of a statement (De Interpretatione 33). Contrary to "proposition", "poetry" involves ambiguity, and thus opens up the field for a multiplicity of interpretations. According to this view, ambiguity is important to the field of literature or what Aristotle refers to as the study of "rhetoric" or "poetry". Relying on the dichotomy of "proposition" and "poetry", Aristotle extends this duality to "history" and "poetry" in his work *Poetics* (Poetics 16).

Aristotle draws a distinctive line between the historian and the poet whose works fulfil different functions. The difference between the two cannot be restricted to their use of language only; the historian writing in prose and the poet in verse. For Aristotle, the historian deals with "what happened" while the poet is concerned with "what may happen":

It is clear from what has been said that the function of the poet is not to say what has happened, but to say the kind of thing that may happen, ie. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity. The historian and the poet are not distinguished by their use of verse or prose; it would be possible to turn the works of Herodotus into verse, and it would still be history in verse as much as in prose. The distinction is this: the one says what has happened, the other the kind of thing that may happen. (Robinson 16)

On these grounds Aristotle contends that the past has been written and excludes interpretations particularly as this is based on facts, dates and names which exclude interpretative attitudes. However, Aristotle notes a further distinction between the historian whose role, he sees, is to stick to facts and write about past events, and the literary historian who draws from history particular moments or events, which he embellishes for the sake of aesthetic motives and engagement of the reader. In this respect, the kind of approach of the literary historian or the poet functions differently from that of the historian. The poet may relate events outside historical facts introducing supposition of motives, of emotions or what Aristotle regards as elements of tragedy. According to this theory, poetry unlike history, deals with what might have happened otherwise, and can subsequently enable the intrusion of elements of ambiguity.

1.3 Ambiguity, Mimesis and the Power of Interpretation

Aristotle relates the notion of ambiguity to the power of interpretation. For him, invoking the idea of interpretation involves the possibility of ambiguity. Literature, which draws on myths, folktales as well as history, relies a great deal on interpretation, which in turn, enables the possibility of ambiguity. In emphasising the distinction

between history and literature, Aristotle contends that in history we learn through facts and chronologies about past events which are recorded by the historian with no space for ambiguity. With literature, however, matters are different. Stories, allegories which may have their roots in imitation are not restrictive in interpretation, and thus widen the field of understanding. Ambiguity on these grounds fulfils a positive function by enabling the exploration of the resources of language for the achievement of the aesthetic effects that contribute to the story-making process.

Literature, seen from this perspective, is not confined to a strict outline on which it must operate. Contrary to Aristotle's perception of history as being a record of events, chronologies, data, of things past, the literary arts which he names poetry, rhetoric and tragedy, may rely on mimesis or imitation which he considers as a positive part of the dramatic experience. Literary imitation enables the poet to interpret the object of imitation and thus permits ambiguity.

Aristotle examines the distinctive feature of history and poetry, and points to the fact that the realm of poetry is not confined to what happened, that is to historic facts. He explains that poetry explores the possibilities of what may have happened, and so widens its creative space and takes the reader on a journey to the realm of the possible. On another scale, Aristotle makes further distinction between history and poetry. He argues that form alone cannot turn history into poetry, and that meter and verse are not sufficient in themselves to make a poem. Confluence between the two can, however, be achieved by the creation of stories around historical events, thus evoking historical poetry. Similarly, history can enter the mould of poetry and exist as historical literature. As has been argued here, Aristotle admits confluence between history and poetry but insists on

their separateness and their distinctive functions. Their correlation, he seems to sustain, is achieved essentially through the way language is used, and the rhetorical choices made by the historian and the poet. It is the art of poetry which relies on the multiple properties of words which opens the way for multiple interpretations, and therefore, for ambiguity.

1.4 Plato and Socrates: The Naive Stage of Ambiguity

Richard Robinson claims that "there is a certain early stage of human beliefs and assumptions which may conveniently be called the naïve stage. A man who is in this stage habitually assumes that the same word means the same thing every time it is used. He is therefore not in the habit of distinguishing various meanings of the words he uses" (Robinson 140). Robinson asserts that this assumption of one word equals one meaning was shared by the Greeks who were reluctant to accept a plurality of meanings for the same word probably fearing that this would lead to ambiguity which ends up in confusion. Robinson regards this as the naïve stage of the conception of ambiguity and places Plato and Socrates within this stage claiming that:

The early and middle dialogues of Plato provide an illustration of these naïve assumptions about ambiguity. The early dialogues frequently represent Socrates as seeking for definitions of terms. Now, before we seek to define a term, we should make sure it has only one sense, or at least which of its senses we are trying to define. But Socrates never does this in the Platonic dialogues. In every case he puts the question and proceeds to look for an answer with the most perfect confidence that the word means the same thing every time it is used. Making use of this maieutic method, Socrates refutes a definition of a term that would convey several or even opposed meanings as he writes: "Since you call all these things by one name, and

say that although they are opposite to one another each of them is figure, what is this "figure", as you call it, that belongs as much to the curved as to the straight?" (Meno, 74 D) (qtd. in Robinson 140)

Socrates' procedure fulfils his aim of refusing proposed definitions on the grounds of their covering more than one sense. Hence the naïve character of such conception and rejection of ambiguity stems from the absence of realisation that as Richard Robinson points out "if a term has two senses, a case of one of its senses naturally would not fall under a definition of the other sense" (Robinson 140).

In his early and middle dialogues Plato was skeptical of ambiguity as well as of those who juggled with words. In the *Ethydemus*, he dealt with the issue of ambiguity and came to the conclusion that it would not add much to its users and disregarded it as puerile: "even if a man knew many such things, or all there are, he would be able to play jokes on men by means of the difference of words, tripping them up and persons about to sit down and rejoice to see them fall over backwards" (Euths 278B) (qtd. in Robinson 141).

Such accounts of ambiguity do indeed reveal their naïve character as Richard Robinson explains, and any contemporary dictionary assigns more than a single sense to a word clearly reinforcing the idea of wealth of language acquired through various forms of human progress including such language prowess as ambiguity.

1.5 Augustine on Ambiguity

Augustine is another classical figure who concerned himself with the issue of literary ambiguity which he regards as a virtue. His approach has some similarity with Aristotle in so far as the distinction between poetry and history is concerned. Augustine,

however, extends this distinction to learning, arguing that language in its various uses of words can impress and influence the reader. Significantly, therefore, Augustine's approach to ambiguity has the merit of associating the reader as a contributor to the making of the meaning and interpretation and not restricting this to the writer alone. In his work entitled *De Dialectica* which he wrote around the year 387, Augustine prompted a brief discussion of a number of topics related to language. These include ambiguity and etymology. Concerning the issue of ambiguity, Augustine tackles it by resorting to a contrastive method by which he opposes ambiguity to obscurity as he explains in the following statement:

When little appears, obscurity is similar to ambiguity, as when someone who is walking on a road comes upon a junction with two, three, or even more forks of the road, but can see none of them on account of the thickness of fog. Thus, he is kept from proceeding by obscurity. (...) When the sky clears enough for good visibility, the direction of all the roads is apparent, but which is to be taken is still in doubt, not because of any obscurity but solely because of ambiguity. (Hubert 315)

Taken on a literary level this notion of obscurity would result in diminishing the impact of a text. Similarly, the literal language of prose would narrow the field of interpretation and would subsequently disable ambiguity. Figurative language fulfils just the opposite of literal or denotative language. By relying on the virtue of allegory and metaphor, figurative language enables ambiguity to operate by widening the gate of interpretation. Ambiguity, seen from Augustine's perspective enriches the text by providing it with greater outlets for interpretation.

Unlike direct-prose language, the language of literature and poetry is not dryly concerned with accuracy as would, for example, be the language of dates, names or events in history. The literary narrative aims at allowing the reader to experience a story on levels different from those offered by pure literal understanding. Allegory, metaphor and other literary devices require from the reader his participation for the construction of meaning through the exploration of the outlets of ambiguity. In this respect, multiplicity of interpretations resulting from ambiguity is regarded as enriching experience for both text and reader.

Augustine's interest in ambiguity and his valuation of this device stems from a sensitive approach to the various uses of language. Relying on a dichotomic vision that focuses the properties and uses of language in different subject areas, Augustine extends his dualistic approach to a discussion of the relationship between idea and thing in view of further explanations of meaning and significance. He sustains that a thing projects something else to mind. This is the signifying form from which meaning is derived. He concludes that a thing can also be viewed as an entity of its own not simply as a signifying item. By projecting a sign, the thing turns out to be less important than the sign because its meaning is limited. As a sign, however, the thing acquires more meaning. Augustine expands his argument of the relationship between words and things and what they come to signify, and reaches the important conclusion that we derive significance both from thing and sign or code.

Having stated from the start that the issue of ambiguity in literature is an age-old one, we have attempted to deal with the most representative authors from antiquity through the Middle Ages and the renaissance eras who have devoted a great deal of their

work on the notion of ambiguity and the wealth of arguments and views that it offered a rich resource from which modern authors and critics continue to draw and innovate. A twentieth century most representative of those writers and critics is William Empson whom we have selected to illustrate one of the most sophisticated modern views of ambiguity. Though other authors are mentioned in this review along with Empson, our selection is by no means exhaustive, as the canvas of interest for ambiguity continues to fill the gaps of literature and criticism.

1.6 William Empson and Modern Views of Ambiguity

As many other critics, linguists and philosophers, William Empson invested himself deeply in the issue of ambiguity which resulted, essentially, in his publication of a book untitled *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930). Empson's treatment of ambiguity remains one of the most prominent inputs in recent times in the sphere of poetic language study and analysis. He was recognised as a critic who promulgated a fundamentally new perception of ambiguity. His book was hereby highly influential and was acknowledged as one of the most crucial productions of the twentieth century. This book was conceded as the first groundwork for the school of literary theory known as New Criticism, and its publication has actually given rise to different echoes and responses within the literary scene. Elder Olson states:

"Mr. William Empson is among the principal exponents of New Criticism, and it might almost be said that where he is mentioned, it is mentioned, and where it is, he is. Nor in this extraordinary; in certain respect it can be said that he has produced it, and it, him. His prestige, briefly, is enormous; his theories, never too vigorously assailed, have gained wider acceptance with the years, and his

particular interpretations of texts are regarded as pretty nearly exhaustive and definitive. The recent republication of one of his principal works, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, as a "classic of modern criticism," affords us an occasion to examine the critical method of Mr. Empson and, in that connection, of the New Criticism as well. (231)

William Empson was obviously not the first literary critic who dealt with the notion of ambiguity, but his valuable contribution was particularly his taxonomy of ambiguity in the literary language and his systematic handling of it.

Empson is recognised as a positive critic who, eventually, brought positive prospects about ambiguity as a virtue in the poetic language. He put into question all the earlier assumptions and outlooks about linguistic ambiguity which consider it a problematic concern, since it impedes the reader from reaching the precise meaning of words or utterances. For Empson and his tutor I.A Richards, ambiguity and poetry cannot be dissociated from each other. They both sustain that what makes poetry distinct from other writings is precisely its use of ambiguity; in his article *William Empson*, *Contemporary Criticism and Poetic Diction*, Elder Olson asserts,

For Empson, as for his master I. A. Richards, poetry is simply an aspect or condition of language; it is therefore definable in terms of its medium; it is language differentiated from other language by a certain attribute. Richards first proposed that this distinguishing feature was ambiguity, and occupied himself with exhibiting the complexities of response which ambiguity engenders; Empson has followed by enumerating seven kinds of ambiguity. (223)

Empson's treatment of ambiguity was captivating for many literary scholars and theorists; he endeavoured to demonstrate how ambiguous words can rather make the reading experience more thrilling since it incites the reader to take active participation in the making of the meaning. Ambiguity, in this respect, does not stand as a hindrance or an obstruction for the reader; but it rather functions as a stimulator for his cognitive aptitudes, and subsequently, it enlarges the scope of his imagination by bringing to his mind all meanings and associations in relation to the ambiguous word. Accordingly, for Empson, uncertainty about the exact meaning of a word in a poem is not always a fault or a flaw; it can quite be enrichment for this poem.

In his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930), Empson offers a foundational definition for ambiguity as: "indecision as to what you mean, an intention to mean several things, a probability that one or other or both of two things has been meant, and the fact that a statement has several meanings" (5). So, the decision is concerned with what meaning to choose taking into consideration certain parameters as: the background or the context in which the word or expression is set, the tone the poem carries, in addition to the poet's inherent motive for writing the poem in hand. Hence, for Empson, ambiguity should not be regarded as the impediment behind the reader's failure to attain clarity and affirmation of the exact meaning of a word; it should be instead recognised as a literary device that helps out the poet create and achieve diverse effects in the poem.

Empson believes that the beauty of poetry does not lie in sociological motives or psychological dimensions but rather in the literary text itself. He assumes that the reader discerns the beauty of the poem once he notices its ambiguities (the ambiguities that are made up by the different literary and poetic combinations and devices) long before

delving deep into the complex meaning that the poem may hold. Hence, for Empson, the reader should experience ambiguity while approaching poetry to find his way toward discovering beauty of expression in it, and therefore appreciate it. Accordingly, it can be assumed that for him ambiguity can be a crossing point for the reader to reach the excitement of encountering and living in the poem. He argues: "Literature, in so far as it is a living matter, demands a sense, not so much of what is really there, as of what is necessary to carry a particular situation 'off'. It does not even satisfy the understanding to stop living in order to understand" (Empson 245).

Thus, it seems obvious for Empson that what makes literature live long is this intended and intentional ambiguity that is found in it. According to him, since literature is concerned with lively matters, its language should not be dried by rigid exact meanings. If the reader longs exclusively for understanding the exact and clear-cut sense of words in a poem, he will inevitably lose the pleasure of living the stirring experience of reading a poem and feeling it thriving with each new interpretation. Empson advocates the idea that the reader should not sacrifice the pleasure of reading and living in the text for the sake of understanding words in their fixed denotative meanings.

The literary text unlike the scientific one aims at presenting issues in relation to the different aspects of life, so, it allows the reader to bring his own experience and perception to the text. Hence, any attempt to treat the literary text as a scientific one i.e., to seek absolute clarity and exactness will put an end to its liveliness. He states in his book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* that: "the machinations of ambiguity are among the very roots of poetry" (Empson 3) and goes further to claim that the multiplicity of meanings that the

use of ambiguity engenders can hereby serve as a way to convey the complexity of life with all its socio-cultural dimensions and experiences.

According to Empson, ambiguity is not restricted to diversity on the semantic level only, but it is extended to the level of syntactical structures as well. He suggests that ambiguity varies from the simple possibility of double meaning of a word to a more complex concept of ambiguity that can be extended to two completely contradictory meanings of a word. Elder Olson states that he extracted the following quotes from the analytical table of contents of William Empson's book *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (pages V-Vi) in which he defines his seven types of ambiguity:

in the "First-type ambiguities arise when a detail is effective in several ways at once ... In second-type ambiguities two or more alternative meanings are fully resolved into one. ... The condition for the third type ambiguity is that two apparently unconnected meanings are given simultaneously. ... In the fourth type the alternative meanings combine to make clear a complicated state of mind in the author. ... The fifth type is a fortunate confusion, as when the author is discovering his idea in the act of writing ... or not holding it in mind all at once. ... In the sixth type what is said is contradictory or irrelevant and the reader is forced to invent interpretations. ... The seventh type is that of full contradiction, marking a division in the author's mind. (223)

Many other critics and scholars uphold Empson's belief that ambiguity is not always a linguistic defect. Geoffrey N. Leech, for instance, asserts "If an ambiguity comes to our attention in some ordinary functional use of language, we generally consider it a distraction from the message and a defect of style. But if it occurs in a literary text, we

tend to give the writer the benefit of the doubt, and assume that a peaceful coexistence of alternative meanings is intended" (Leech 204). So, Leech explicitly substantiates the argument that use of ambiguity in the literary and poetic language, contrary to its use in other linguistic forms like the scientific language for example may contribute positively in enriching the poem. Alike Soon Peng Su asserts, "Positive value is given to ambiguity in literature because the process of producing a literary piece, involving numerous rewritings and revisions, reduces the likelihood of the occurrence of accidental ambiguities. This leads to the assumption on the part of literary critics that ambiguity in literature, and poetry especially, is deliberate and contributes to the larger design of the work" (Peng 6).

Hence, Su sustains that the language of poetry which tends to be carefully chosen and elaborately structured is less likely to contain arbitrary and accidental forms of ambiguity. So, in this respect, the use of ambiguity in poetry seems more likely to be conscious and intentional and contributes inevitably in making the poem multi-sided and rich. Many scholars extend their argument to state that ambiguity and multiplicity of meanings are part of the very nature of the poetic language; they even believe that we should adopt this preconception when attempting to approach a literary work. Winifred Nowottny contends,

The Language Poets use, writes of a real connection between art and ambiguity, in that the ambiguity inherent in the medium itself serves as a bridgehead between 'things as they are' and the significance that may be imputed to them. The ambiguity of the medium enables the poet to meet that double demand that we make of the

language of poetry; that it should deal both with the phenomenal world and with the world of values. (Nowottny 162)

Seven Types of Ambiguity was highly criticised because it endeavoured to bring a new line of treatment to the language of poetry (particularly the use of ambiguity) that is quite different from the other approaches that focused more on sound devices and their effects on the reader's response. Though very subtle to those sound devices, Empson's diagnosis of the literary language was highly rational relying on argument and logic, and this is what was disturbing for many scholars on the literary criticism scene. Nevertheless, the book was praised by many critics like A.T. Jones who asserts in the book *The twentieth-century mind: history, ideas and literature in Britain*: "the success of Empson's book lies in the fact that the proved that vagueness and imprecision are poetry's chief strength, and it is the honest way to record the complexities of experience". (Cox et Dyson 466).

There are some other critics who join Empson in his positive view of ambiguity and who do not consider it a linguistic defect. Let's refer to some of them:

Jacob Korb

Kor formulates a comparison between different artists to make his point regarding the use of language by poets who draw upon the resources of language to convey meaning through creative combinations of words. Thus, he sustains that:

In poetry, as in every art the limitations of the medium provide the artist with his most exciting opportunities. Just as a sculptor may shape hardstone into soft looking curves of a body, or a painter may produce the effect of depth on a flat canvas, so a

poet works with language to overcome its natural deficiencies by taking advantage of the resources it offers. He does this, not by using a special vocabulary of unusually high-powered words, but busing more or less ordinary words in special ways. (Korg 32)

According to Korg, it is language which has natural deficiencies and limitations that ambiguity may cover up. He argues that creating an outstanding poem does not rely on the quality of diction only; choosing unusual or uncommon words cannot be sufficient and effective in any way. Using words in special ways and original structures, however, is what actually makes the originality of the poem. Hence, seen from this perspective, ambiguity cannot be viewed as a flaw of language; on the contrary, it is recognised as an effective way to stimulate the reader' mind to build several ideas, associations and multiple interpretations for the same linguistic entity; either a word, a phrase, a sentence or simply an expression. Many critics share his view in regard to the utility of ambiguity in the poetic and literary language; professors Lisa Otty and Michael Robert contended that, "ambiguity is to a large extent defined as an object-inherent quality, but its function is to induce a cognitive/emotive process in the reader which is in excess of that quality" (Otty et Roberts 43).

While it is believed that having multiple meanings for one word will make it difficult for the poet to choose the one that suits better his context, Korg rather sees in that an advantage and not an obstacle:

Practically speaking, the wide area of meaning attached to most words is an advantage, for if we had to have a different word for every possible meaning, we would need tremendous vocabularies, and no one word of them would be used very

often.... The comparatively vague dictionary meaning of a word is focused more sharply by its context. The significance of a word depends on its environment. (33)

Korg does not share the classical view that claims the dictionary meaning to be the most precise one, and that whenever the reader does not consider the direct denotative meaning, he will automatically fall into ambiguity, and subsequently into vagueness and confusion. He rather perceives the issue the opposite way round; he believes that the dictionary meaning is vague, and that it is the multiplicity of connotative meanings that rather makes the word's significance. Consequently, Korg does not consider the dictionary meaning of a word really effective; accordingly, the word should not be isolated from its context, environment and the different ideas associated with it.

Korg believes that making use of irony; one of the most important elements of ambiguity can add a third meaning to the two contradictory meanings initially suggested by the ironical statement:

Another way in which a poet may use connotation to augment the ordinary resources of language is by making his words carry an undertone that expresses a feeling contradictory to their denotation. Hence, by saying two contradictory things at once, the poem really expresses, through irony, a third meaning. (Korg 39)

Korg recognizes the value of ambiguity in the poetic language and believes it to be one of the most important devices that enrich the language. Besides, he sustains that ambiguity enlarges the scope of multi-layered interpretations of the poem: "it is a particularly subtle device for enriching the expressive power of language, a clear way of

saying two things at once" (44). He also claims that the poet may veil his attitude toward his subject matter by allowing a multiplicity of reading for his poem.

Percival Gurrey

,Percival Gurrey seems to join Korg in his perception of ambiguity. He suggests that ambiguity rather resolves the problem of vagueness in poetry. Many poems tend to make use of ambiguity as a literary device that helps them achieve certain aims. Subsequently, ambiguity can be very convenient when it is meant to point out to certain implications. In his book *The Appreciation of Poetry*, Percival Gurrey claims that implications or connotations have significance in poetry; they "give precision and reality to general ideas and to amorphous states of mind" (34). So according to his view, and contrary to many other critical stands, ambiguity does not incite vagueness and obscurity, but rather procures precision and accuracy to the poem. Hence, making use of ambiguity and avoiding the rigidity of pure denotative meanings makes the poem alive and vivid each time it is encountered.

Some poets make use of ambiguity intentionally as a way of writing because they intend to widen the scope of interpretation of their poems. Such poets may use ambiguous references or allusions purposefully to encourage their readers to use their imagination and their cognitive skills as well. Subsequently, the use of ambiguity in poetry may help the reader encounter new insights and ideas. This idea seems to find its roots in Aristotle's treatment of ambiguity when used in poetry or what he calls rhetoric; he claimed that poetry, contrary to other disciplines like history, is preoccupied with the possible and not the real. Thus, the reader when encountering ambiguity in a poem will not feel fulfilled with one meaning, but will engage in a journey of quest for the possible interpretations

of the poem. So, in this respect, the reader will not limit himself with the surface meaning of the poem but will rather delve deep into it, and attempt to find the different links and overtones for a profounder interpretation of the poem.

Samuel Foster Damon

Samuel Foster Damon is a recognised poet and critic who deeply read the works of William Blake and explored the use of ambiguity in his poetry. Damon proposes interesting assumptions on the use of ambiguity by William Blake. He praises his use of ambiguity because he believes that poetry cannot be valuable if it addresses itself to passive readers. Blake, being interested in exploring the human soul and reaching truth about it, could not be simplistic in his treatment of such complex issue. This made him use a language that carries heavy intellectual might.

He sustains that "Blake's reader cannot accept passively what Blake writes, as he cannot understand it. He must dig, participate actively; thus, Blake's thought is kept living and his ideas fresh" (Damon 3). Blake makes extensive use of ambiguity in his poetry which results in the creation of many questionings and interrogations in the reader's mind that cannot be answered through superficial readings. Interesting interpretation of his poetry can only be attained through a profound and a close reading of his texts. Scholars who examined Blake's works could not overlook his proficient use of ambiguity as a poetic device that, subsequently, became a distinctive feature of his poetry. Northrop Frye made his statement about Blake's poetry in his book *Fearful Symmetry* (1949) and put it this way, "If we understand that to Blake there are no puns or ambiguities or accidents in the range of the meaning of 'word,' but a single and comprehensible form,

we have wound up all of his golden string and are standing in front of his gage" (N. Frye 428).

Frye sustains that the reader who tends to overlook ambiguity as an enriching literary device in Blake's poetry will devaluate the outstanding ideas and associations Blake wishes or envisages to convey. Ambiguity, in this respect, becomes a clue to Blake's deep and complex meanings and ideas and not an obstacle for the reader; if the reader does not behave with Blake's vocabularies as ambiguous words that bear multi-layered meanings, he would not end his reading experience in pleasure and fulfilment. Hence, Blake's use of ambiguity in his works serves rather for clarity, coherence and vividness contrary to the view that considers it a source of uncertainty, vagueness and confusion. Ambiguity, more importantly, plays a crucial role in making Blake's prophetic works live longer as it allows readers from different eras to participate in the making of meaning of his works and revive them with each new interpretation. Thus, it can safely be claimed that if Blake's works are not perceived with ambiguity lenses, they will lose their genuine might and complex ideas.

Many critics believe that the ambiguity that characterises Blake's poetry is what actually intensifies its unity. Gleckner joins Damon in his appreciation of ambiguity in Blake's works notably *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* and states that, "ambiguity contributes to the 'intensive richness' of the Blake poetry" (7).

Gleckner has also an interesting view about the virtues of ambiguity in Blake's poetry. Contrary to many other critics' stands, he sustains that ambiguity is the only means by which a reader can decode Blake's symbolic language. For him, Blake employs ambiguity deliberately as a poetic device that allows him grant new meanings to words

and symbols to make his works thriving with each new encounter. Any attempt to fix the meaning of his words and symbols will simply end up the reading experience in confusion and frustration.

Gleckner is not the only critic who shares Damon's; Brownowski, too, shares their appreciation of the virtues of ambiguity in Blake's poetry and prophetic books:

We mistake the language, and we mistake the meanings, of Blake's prophetic books if we forget the reason which made Blake choose and change the language. Blake chose his prophetic symbols because he found them apt to what he was saying; but he changed their meanings, as the reasons or their aptness changed. Nothing has hindered the understand-Ing of Blake's prophetic books so much as the wish to fix their symbols singly and steadily. These symbols shift only within a well-marked framework; nevertheless, they do shift, and they shift in order to remain apt to whatever actual Blake then had in mind ... This proliferation of meanings, unfolding from one stem, is an orator's trick. (Brownowski 9)

Hence, ambiguity, in this respect, will not stand as a hindrance for understanding Blake's poetry but rather as a clue to his labyrinthine works. Ambiguity seems to make Blake's reader enthusiastic to delve deep in the net of his highly symbolic and complex language.

So, it can be concluded at this stage that the assessment of the use of ambiguity in literature will depend on an important factor; using ambiguity purposefully in a poem is welcomed since it would enrich its meaning, diversify its effects and keep it alive i.e. new readings with each new encounter. However, an unconscious, an unintentional or

accidental use of ambiguity will automatically stand as an obstacle in communication, and hence, will be perceived as a linguistic defect. Accordingly, ambiguity is praised when figuring out in poetical language and not scientific language. The scientific language gains its value when it is precise and exact, the literary language, however, derives its aesthetic qualities from the use of certain elements of ambiguity as puns, innuendos, allusions and irony. Certain poets make use of elements of ambiguity in an attempt to widen the scope of the meanings and diversify the effects they intend to convey through their poems.

Jeanne Smith Muzzilo

Jeanne Smith Muzzillo made an interesting investigation on the notion of ambiguity and the cognitive requirements of making meaning from the different literary devices. She argues that ambiguity is not an accidental feature in the literary language. She claims instead, that since literature mirrors reality and portrays it with all the complexity it carries. It follows that the writer of fiction will inevitably make use of a language that allows him convey complex ideas and conceptions in his writings. Subsequently, if we admit that "Reality" can by no means be superficial; then making use of a literal language to represent it through literary works would actually not be a good choice.

According to Muzzillo, for a literary text to be convincing it should not be far from reality. Even in science fiction, a literary genre that remains relatively far from reality, readers often encounter human-like characters that share some features with real human beings despite all their supernatural traits. Thus, even readers of science fictional works can identify themselves with the characters of the work. She puts it this way:

Why doesn't the fiction writer simply transmit meaning in literal language? After all, with such high stakes of human understanding and emotional connection, would not the best insurance be brevity and simple language? The problem with this approach is that fiction is most convincing when it mirrors reality. Even the most unusual forms maintain some grounding element. For example, science fiction actually includes science; fantasy may gift characters with super-human traits, but readers will always find some common human traits with which to identify. If the best fiction mirrors reality, then it must not oversimplify; reality is complex. This is where figurative language enters. Each writerly choice has its own composition, applications, and results. One such result is ambiguity. (Muzzillo 453)

Muzzilo contends that the fiction writer, to fulfil his objective of writing a "convincing" literature, should subsequently appeal for the different language devices, like ambiguity that would allow him make a persuasive portrayal of reality through his fiction. So, the fiction writer should not be simplistic in his treatment of reality in his literary works.

Muzzillo's treatment of ambiguity is recognisably deep because she raises interesting inquiries on the nature and function of ambiguity. She wonders if ambiguity is limited to the possibility of semantic diversity in the meaning of words; or if it is related to the writer's own ambivalent attitude towards his subject matter, or if it simply occurs in the reader's understanding of the word or sentence. She provides her own definition of ambiguity claiming that "In a stricter sense, ambiguity is the purposeful use of a word that carries two or more meanings, the use of two or more words which are near-duplicates in meaning, or the use of words whose meanings will certainly alter depending

on the surrounding discourse." (453) Muzzillo, to give a more comprehensive definition of ambiguity, stated rather what ambiguity is not:

As elusive as the definition of ambiguity is, at least certain lures can and must be avoided. Ambiguity is not error; it is not vagueness; it is not a simple lack of comprehension. Ambiguity is not a lie; it is not imaginary. In regard to rhetorical devices, ambiguity is not accidental. The reader is not passively acquiring information. She is placed in a position that requires her to arrive at possible meanings, judge the possibilities, and select her next course of action- embrace one option or wait for further enlightenment. (454)

It can be deduced from her statement that ambiguity is not a blunder that accidently occurs in literature; it is not vagueness or indeterminacy either. It constitutes by no means an obstacle in comprehension for the reader; but rather encourages and drives him for an active reading of literature. However, ambiguity can be a real obstacle for readers who are not predisposed to take active participation in the reading of the literary text; ambiguity at this stage, will automatically leave readers in confusion and would make them lose taste in reading literature.

Muzzillo tends to focus more on the merits of ambiguity as a device in literary text; as to the negative aspects of ambiguity as vagueness, confusion and frustration they must have been already experienced once at least by readers:

In addition to participatory cognition, ambiguous devices create affective outcomes. Senses are heightened; readers acquire new ways of understanding their own emotional reactions. They are snapped out of their lethargy; they are fanciful

once again. Ambiguity offers an invaluable escape, one of mankind's favorite motives for reading. (467)

So, according to Muzzillo, ambiguity in literary works can make the reading experience really pleasurable for the reader will engage both his cognitive powers and his emotional responses in the making of the meaning. Reading, in this respect, will be a journey full of emotional excitement. The reader's senses will be intensely stimulated which will motivate him to delve deep to understand them. Ambiguity encourages the readers to construct their own original or even exotic ideas that would carry their spirits far away from all what is monotonous. Subsequently, reading becomes a highly entertaining, challenging, exciting and fruitful experience.

2. Paradox

2.1 Paradox, a Device from Antiquity

The importance that is given to the use of language in contemporary assessments of works of literature stems from criteria that value innovation, language play and other creative devices. The use of ambiguity and paradox in innovative ways has come to play a significant role in extending meanings and thus revealing the inexhaustible possibilities of the resources of language. Just as I have proceeded with the issue of ambiguity in the preceding pages I will endeavour to deal with paradox in its literary usage and the interest ascribed to it both by writers and literary critics in the following review of literature. This background information is designed to highlight significant qualities associated with the use of paradox in literature. I will also examine how paradox entered the field of literary criticism notably with New

Critic Cleanth Brooks and his unconventional treatment of this notion. This examination of the multiple layers of meaning embodied by the term paradox is intended to constitute a platform against which to asses Morrison's use of it in her fiction. It is also the purpose of this work to bring orth the argument of how Morrison's use of the association of ambiguity and paradox in her novels is meant to reflect the tangled nature of the conflicts to which her black characters are confronted in the American racialised society. And in her major novels, it is her black female characters that exhibit the multiple forms of paradox notably in their relationship with males and other members of their community. Morrison knew from the start of her career as a writer that dealing with such issues which involve the evocation of race would necessarily generate paradoxes and contradictions. The choices, she made for the themes and plots of her fiction as well as the prominent features of her narrative techniques shed light on her treatment of these issues.

2.2 Reviewing Definitions of Paradox in Literature

The use of paradox in literature is an age-old practice that writers throughout various eras have exhibited in their works in a variety of ways and in order to fulfil certain functions or achieve a particular effect. Literature being full of ambiguity, contradictions and paradox, it is important to review the meanings associated with these terms for a clear conduct of the argument. It seems useful at this stage to mention some sample definitions of paradox for the sake of achieving a comprehensive understanding of this term in its literary use. It is necessary from the start to mention that the notion of paradox can be applied to several categories of knowledge and subsequently appear multifaceted or even ambiguous.

The Encyclopaedia Britannica gives the following definition: "**Paradox**, apparently self-contradictory statement, the underlying meaning of which is revealed only by careful scrutiny. The purpose of a <u>paradox</u> is to arrest attention and provoke fresh thought" ("Paradox (literature)." Encyclopædia Britannica).

Despite its shortness, this definition points to essential elements associated with the meaning as well as the function of paradox. First, it contains or expresses contradiction. It also hides a meaning which is to be unveiled by the reader. A more elaborate definition of paradox is given by Wikipedia:

In literature, the paradox is an anomalous juxtaposition of incongruous ideas for the sake of striking exposition or unexpected insight. It functions as a method of literary composition and analysis that involves examining apparently contradictory statements and drawing conclusions either to reconcile them or to explain their presence. ("Paradox (literature)." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.)

Paradoxes in literature are usually classified according to the function they fulfil in a text. Paradox is called *rhetorical* when it is used as a narrative technique that relies on verbal expression to bring into contrast two opposed or contradictory statements. It is expected to create a response or achieve a particular effect on the reader. This kind of paradox functions as a figure of speech that is meant to emphasise seemingly contradictory statements. Paradox can also be *situational* when it reflects contradictory attitudes of persons who perform two things that seem to be opposite to each other. Paradox also occurs in literature when a writer creates a situation towards which a character holds a dual or contradictory attitude by alternating between two opposed

extreme poles. A character being optimistic and pessimistic for example could represent the paradox of a split personality. Eminent African-American writers such as Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and Toni Morrison exhibit each in his own way such forms of paradox in their fiction.

Before dealing with paradox in its modern use and manifestations in Toni Morrison's fiction, it is useful to have a retrospective glance at the age-old interest manifested for this device since the Greeks. In fact, the term paradox itself derives from the Greek word paradoxon which according to the New World Encyclopedia comes from the Greek *para* ("contrary to") and *doxa* ("opinion") ("Paradox." New World Encyclopedia). From that, the term came to be used for something that was contrary to, or contradicted common sense. Today the term is usually used for something that is an apparently true statement or group of statements that leads to a contradiction or a situation which defies intuition. A paradox was originally something that was contrary to received or common opinion. Despite the many ways by which it has been defined and the subtleties authors used to assert its meaning and function, paradox is essentially remembered for the clashing ideas it exhibits in a statement.

2.3 Aristotle's Treatment of Paradox

Aristotle is one of the earliest classic writers who devoted a great deal of interest to the subject of paradox in its manifold manifestations both literary and scientific. His treatment of the literary features of paradox is included in his writing on Rhetoric. Aristotle considered paradox as a constituent of Rhetoric which he regarded as a way of knowing. He argued that while *Rhetoric* dealt with "common knowledge" and "accepted

opinions", paradox, which expresses none of these, is a concept best suited for study in Rhetoric (Cooper 1355). In other words, as Mark Paul Moore puts it:

Paradox is a rhetorical figure that defies the traditional basis of rhetorical action. It forces the reader and listener to consider something other than, or contrary to commonly held beliefs, attitudes and values: it forces an audience to contemplate a "new" knowledge and a different reality. (15)

Aristotle's perception of paradox is rooted in his discourse on Rhetoric which establishes a relationship between rhetoric and paradox. He contends that as an outcome, this combination of rhetoric and paradox offers a challenging opportunity to consider similar and distinct properties of this "container and thing contained." (This phrase is taken from Kenneth Burke, who used the analogy to describe the relationship between the scene and the act in his dramatistic pentad (Fergusson 327).

Considered as a way of knowing by Aristotle, paradox held an important place in Greek discourse. Historically the term was used to describe the unusual and the enigmatic (Mark Paul Moore). But gradually paradox came to encompass other aspects of Greek thought which came to be hosted under the term paradoxology. Hence according to Gomperz:

In ancient Greek science, paradoxology involved the study of "paradoxes of nature," such as earthquakes, eclipses and other unexplainable phenomena. Furthermore, paradoxology ranked "second only to cosmogony" (the study of how the world has come to be what it is) among the "topics of speculation". (Gomperz 164)

It was Aristotle who, among the Greeks, carried out a systematic study of paradox. He sustained that because paradox deals with probable truth, it cannot be proven through science (Hyde 219). In addition, Aristotle, considering that there was little advantage in the use of paradox; he tackled this issue from different angles, one of which was exposing the fallacies of paradox in rhetorical arguments. To illustrate this view Aristotle made use of an approach that involved a paradox based on the contradiction of an opponent's wishes and professed opinions:

They declare, for example, that a noble death ought to be preferred to a pleasurable life and honourable poverty to discreditable wealth; but their wishes are the opposite of their words. He, therefore, whose statements agree with his wishes, must be led to express the opinions usually professed, and he whose statements agree with the latter must be led to state the opinions usually hidden; for in both cases, they must necessarily fall into a paradox... (On Sophistical Refutations 173a)

From Aristotle's perspective paradox is rhetorical. However, while rhetoric focuses on probable truth, paradox widens the scope of probability. As a result, paradox introduces a notion of "potential truth expressed in apparent contradiction" (Moore 16). In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle offers an illustration on the use of paradox by a would-be public speaker by stating: "if you say what is right, men will hate you; if you say what is wrong, the gods will hate you." However, "If you say what is right, the gods will love you; if you say what is wrong; men will love you" (Cope et Sandys 1399a).

In general, Aristotle viewed paradox as a rhetorical device that proved to be inconsistent with reality or truth. On this basis, paradoxes represented a fallacy in

reasoning and argumentation. Despite this though, Aristotle found some useful features to paradox, notably to defeat an opponent rhetorically by placing him in a paradoxical conclusion and thus gaining victory in arguments. Such method consists in trapping the opponent with a paradox by emphasising the contradictions. Despite the fact that Aristotle considered paradox essentially as a fallacy, he sustained the view that it can be used in argumentation to reveal its contradictions. On such grounds, it helps establish that knowledge, contrary to paradox, cannot admit contradictions. Paradox is thus far removed from the scientific approach which is grounded in the principle of the absence of contradiction.

Aristotle's attitude toward the issue of paradox follows a two-way path. On the one hand, it sees paradox as a fallacy particularly with regard to scientific knowledge which is based on the rejection of contradiction. At the same time Aristotle grants paradox with the ability to provide a "potential truth expressed in apparent contradiction" (Moore 16). On the other hand, Aristotle argued that by combining contradictory tendencies paradox provided a means to resolve controversy and subsequently lays ground for the achievement of a way of knowing. Mark Paul Moore sums up Aristotle's attitude in such terms:

the use of paradox can be thought of as a process for creating, describing and resolving arguments, controversies and contradictions. In addition, paradox expresses a way of knowing by offering "new" insights that reach beyond common sense and existing belief. (17)

Before moving to other representations of paradox, it should be stressed that Aristotle's treatment of this subject received ample interest and discussion in his works and so paved the way for Medieval, Renaissance and even more recent approaches to the conception and use of paradox. His greatest contribution to the subject of paradox and which won him a lasting influence was his depicting in this figure the various interpretations and uses it offered. Aristotle, did indeed, devote much concern to the notion of paradox characterising it as a fallacy in argumentation, but also as a way of knowing. He saw it as a non-scientific object or rather as a device that functions best in the field of rhetoric. Being non-scientific, paradox, Aristotle believed, cannot be disproved scientifically. For Paul Mark Moore, "Perhaps a better way to characterize Aristotle's use of paradox would be as a way of 'disproving,' admitting, of course, that knowledge is certainly created in this process also" (19).

In dealing with paradox, Aristotle contributed to establish that beyond scientific knowledge there exists other ways of approaching reality, and rhetoric, which includes paradox, represents one of these forms of the way of knowing distinct from the scientific method.

2.4 Cicero and the Stoic Paradoxes

If Aristotle was the chief figure in Greece who wrote significantly on the topic of paradox and paved the way for much of the contemporary interest in this issue, it was Cicero, as a Roman classic, who showed concern with the Stoics and devoted himself to the study of their paradoxes. The outcome was a collection of six essays on Stoicism entitled *Paradoxa Stoicorum*, or *Stoic Paradoxes* (46 BC). Cicero's work, it must be

noted, is noteworthy because it claims that the Stoics called "paradoxes" all things that are "remarkable" and "contrary" to everybody's opinion. Cicero's purpose in this work was to attempt an explanation of six famous stoic sayings that appear to contradict common knowledge. Cicero dedicated his work to Brutus (Cicero).

Stoics were actually well known for word play and their use of phrases that sounded paradoxical because they were contrary to everyone's opinion. According to Cicero stoic paradoxes reflected their philosophy and were essentially explained within their inner circles. Cicero believed however, that Stoics were not just performing word play with paradox. He felt that their paradoxes needed to be approached with more depth and expressed in a more suitable rhetorical Latin for the forum. As a result, he set himself to the task of addressing the six precepts that constituted the backbone of the stoic doctrine and which can be stated as follows:

- 1)That virtue is the only good
- 2) That a man who is virtuous does not lack anything for a happy life.
- a. That all bad actions are equal, and so are all the good actions. (There is no hierarchy of good and bad)
 - 3) That every fool is a madman
 - 4) That a madman alone is free, everyone else being a slave
 - 5) That the wise man alone is rich

While he was recasting Stoic arguments into rhetorical Latin with the claim of reproducing their paradoxes with accuracy, Cicero was clarifying the stoic ideas of moral goodness, the value of virtue, good and bad conduct, the sources of real wealth and the transcendent precepts of wisdom (Cicero).On the whole, Cicero's work helped explain that paradoxes were fundamental to Stoic philosophy. As can be seen by the issues raised in the six paradoxes, they were used to express moral subjects that were opposed to common belief as for example the one that refers to wisdom (only the wise man, even when poor, is really rich, etc...).

In addition to addressing moral issues, Stoic paradoxes fulfilled rhetorical functions in a genre known as *paradoxical encomium*, where an orator would perform praise for something or someone unworthy of praise. Paola Ugolini noted that,

the form was considered as a way for a speaker to showcase his skills, to impress the audience with a eulogy of a subject considered impossible to ever describe in positive terms. A well-known paradoxical encomium was Gorgias' Encomium of Helen (paradoxical since it praised the woman considered responsible for the Trojan war). (1)

2.5 Paradox in the Renaissance

Quite apart from the classical tradition represented here essentially by reference to the Greek Aristotle and the Roman Cicero, paradox continued to evolve and capture the interest of writers and philosophers throughout the ages. The renaissance period renewed with this tradition now borrowing from the classics or imitating them and now innovating and widening the scope of the meaning and use of literary paradox. As a matter of fact, paradox has never ceased to exert some form of fascination upon a wide range of thinkers and writers who, each in his own way, made use of this device to achieve his desired effect. The Encyclopedia of Ideas makes it clear that:

Paradoxes have been considered chiefly to occur in periods in which competing value-systems strengthen philosophical pluralism and relativism: certainly, the literary paradox occurs in periods marked by considerable disturbance of intellectual patterns. The Renaissance is partly for this reason rich in parodoxy, although another reason for the form's popularity in the period is simply the humanist recovery of classical literary models, among them paradox. (Paradox)

While paradox during the renaissance period was used essentially for social conditioning and in controversial topics (Hyde 4) it continued to evolve as a figure of speech designed as a way of knowing. Just as Aristotle emphasised the contradictory tendencies of paradox, the renaissance, in general, has stood for "the defence of contraries".

The renaissance period, undoubtedly, is noteworthy for its rediscovery of the classical culture and its keen interest in its artistic forms. The popularity of paradoxes during the Renaissance led Rosalie Colie to identify the reason of their success as being the intense intellectual activity that characterised this era. Paradoxes proved to be a convenient way to expose contradictory ideas and systems of thought. The paradoxical mode, as a prevailing vogue at that period, came to be regarded as an efficient instrument to explore complex ideas and challenge held assumptions and beliefs. In this context, rhetorical paradoxes gained popularity particularly because of their display of wit and erudition and the subsequent delight they procured to the audiences. Moreover, as Colie observes, paradoxes always exploit competing value systems, thus opposing orthodoxy. In so doing, they become an indirect criticism of any absolutism (10).

The Renaissance is well known for the abundant use of paradox, a situation that led the scholar Colie to use the term epidemic to describe it. Her interest in Renaissance paradox culminated with her famous book which she entitled *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance tradition of paradox* (1966). In the introduction to her book Colie introduces her own perception of paradox:

The term "paradox" covers several meanings legitimately separate in category—though, as this book attempts to demonstrate, one of the paradoxical qualities of paradox is that all its categories may ultimately be seen to be related. To begin with the simplest type of paradox, the term was applied to the "rhetorical paradox," or the formal defense, organized along the lines of traditional *encomia*, of an unexpected, unworthy, or indefensible subject. The rhetorical paradox was an ancient form designed as *epideixis*, to show off the skill of an orator and to arouse the admiration of an audience. (Colie xix-2)

Colie's comment reflects the inherent attributes of paradox as being its contradictory statements as well as the rhetorical function it fulfils. In this, she shares the Aristotelian view of paradox. Her major work on paradox, *Paradoxia Epidemica* remains a reference in the study of the genre particularly as the book is mostly devoted to reviewing the perception and use of paradox by Renaissance authors. Reviewing her work Margaret Greaves writes:

Paradoxia Epidemica explores a traditional mode of language beginning as a game of words and logic, becomes the very metaphysical thought and experience. Dr. Colie analyzes paradox current in Renaissance Europe-rhetorical, theological,

logical, and epistemological-and studies particular literary relation to them. Beginning with Rabelais and his world passes to Sidney's exploitation of the self-contradictions of and the paradoxes inherent in love, earthly and divine, in moves from figures of speech to figures. (271)

Dealing with the Renaissance paradox from the point of view of its techniques and function A. E. Malloch claims that though the genre has long been recognised it has received scant attention with regard to the techniques and function that were employed. He thus, set himself to the task of revealing the relevance of these aspects for a better appreciation of paradox. He made this clear contending that: no one has yet described the characteristic techniques of the paradox, or tried to explain why such an apparently perverse literary form should have rivalled the epigram, perhaps even the sonnet, in popularity (195).

2.6 John Donne and the Renaissance Paradox

Introducing the Renaissance poet John Donne whom he described as a "pro pounder of paradoxes" he turns to him to highlight the notion of deceptiveness associated with the term paradox. To illustrate this Malloch cites a letter with some paradoxes which Donne sent to a friend informing him that they are intended to deceive time rather than truth. The mention of the notion of deceit being part of the function of paradox is significant. For Donne as Malloch puts it: "The office of the paradoxes themselves is not to deceive, but by a show of deceit to force the reader to uncover the truth. The true nature of the paradox is revealed when the reader overturns it, just as the true nature of the swaggerer appears only when he is resisted" (Malloch 194). As can be seen from this statement,

Aristotle's influence upon Donne as upon other renaissance writers is very clear. It is particularly expressed by his original attributing of a dual character to paradox making it at once an expression of fallacy in argumentation as well as a way of knowing.

In a way the status of paradox along these lines is itself paradoxical for it creates a confusing deceit which is also meant to enlighten. In addition to this Donne sustains that paradoxes have no real natures of their own, that they are nothings. "They exist", as Malloch points out: "only within the antithetical action of the reader, and if he allows them (i. e., allows them an existence), he is making another paradox, viz., That Nothing Is" (Malloch 194). Thus, for Donne the paradox may be said to seem to represent an equivocal statement whose existence lasts only the time of the fabricated antithesis.

Donne's interest for the paradox pervades his career both as a prose writer and as poet. A glance at the extravagant titles he gave to his paradoxes confirms this: A Paradoxe Proving That Baldnesse Is Much Better Than Bushie Haire; That Only Cowards Dare Dye; That Old Men Are More Fantastique Than Yonge; A Defence of Women's Inconstancy, etc.

Donne's claim regarding the function of paradox is based on the assumption that its aim is not to deceive the truth but to make use of deceptiveness for the sake of forcing the audience to discover new qualities formerly hidden into things or relationship between things. This is precisely what Malloch describes as "The ludic tone of the paradox" which "creates the detachment from the personal, as the author does not actually believe in what he says. Rather, his aim is to employ "falsehood as the cause of knowledge" (Malloch 196).

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Profilic Poet of the Renaissance, Donne is famous for his unparalleled production of

metaphysical poetry in which he made extensive use of paradox. His poetry, which relied

greatly on extended metaphors and conceits, brought about numerous comparisons of

dissimilar things. A case in point is well known poem entitled "Sonnet X" or "death will

one day die". In this poem Donne confronts the speaker with the most feared character

of Death whom he personifies. Against all expectations, the speaker addresses Death

with a confident tone suggesting that Death should not be feared but that in the end he is

defeated:

"Death, be not proud, though some have called thee

Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so"

Relying on the device of apostrophe which consists in addressing a subject that

cannot respond, Donne gives voice only to his speaker who will do all the talking and

remonstrance to a silent Death. The use of such a device serves Donne's purpose of

establishing the superiority of the speaker over the silenced character of Death who is

made to appear powerless. In addition to the paradox that is established with the opening

lines of the sonnet by empowering the speaker over the mute enemy the speaker attempts

to humble Death by a denial of its attributes of might and dread:

For those whom thou think's thou dost overthrow

Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.

Throughout the verses of the sonnet the speaker pursues the logic of his claim by

stripping Death of its formidable traits by telling him that his power to overthrow lives is

only illusory. And in an almost arrogant tone he challenges death claiming that he cannot

kill him. Surely, to make sense, such claim has to be examined against the background

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of Donne's ideologies or more specifically against the Christian theology of eternity and

its faith in life after death. According to this religious precept all that death can achieve

is simply physical death, that of the body only, as there is life after death. The sonnet

extends the argument of the inability of Death to perform a full extinction of life by

claiming that this corresponds to the very end of Death himself which is destined to die:

One short sleep past, we wake eternally

And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.

2.7 Paradox in Shakespeare

Paradox is regarded as a characteristic device of Shakespearian drama. His plays

abound in the use of multiple forms of paradox which constitute a major mode of

expression. Entitling his latest book Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox, Peter G

Platt devoted his work to an insightful analysis of the numerous ways of the use of

paradox in Shakespeare's plays. In her review to Platt's book, Jennifer Clement noted

"that Shakespeare tended to use paradox "to unsettle the assumptions of his characters,

his audiences and his readers" and that "Shakespearean paradox encourages productive

doubt, self-questioning and change" (238).

Given the abundant use of paradox in Shakespeare's plays one is tempted to assert

that it constitutes a method by which the dramatist offers an almost kaleidoscopic vision

of the world as an account of its complexity. Far from providing answers or solutions to

the problems raised in the plots of his drama, Shakespeare resorts to the use of paradox

to highlight the necessity to view things from more than a one-sided perspective to

achieve a better appreciation of the issue under examination.

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2.7.1 Paradox in Macbeth

A glance at the play of *Macbeth* may serve as a good illustration of the way Shakespeare deals with paradox. As early as Act I scene 1 Shakespeare introduces a paradox that will pervade the whole play. It is uttered by the witches in their encounter with Macbeth when they say "Fair is foul, foul is fair". This phrase provides a first hint at the fact that things are not quite as they appear to be and that they might embody their contraries. It may also be considered as a reminder to the audience to look deeper into things in order to understand the thoughts and motives of the characters. In addition, this phrase suggests that things, events or characters that may seem good may turn out to be the opposite. Seen from this perspective the character of Macbeth may project a double image, or even a dual response in the audience. Hence as James Hirsh explains:

In responding to the character of Macbeth, for example, a playgoer is faced with a challenge. Macbeth commits ghastly crimes, but he also suffers acutely because he is strongly pulled in one direction by his ambition and in another by his conscience. Viewed from one perspective, Macbeth is pitiable; viewed from another, he is detestable. Neither of these perspectives cancels out the other, nor can they be combined into a single self-consistent perspective. They coexist as a paradox. (Hirsh 225)

Other instances of paradox in *Macbeth* can be illustrated by the riddling prophecies the witches make to Macbeth and Banquo. To Macbeth they foretell that he is going to become a king hence submitting him to accept the fate predicted him and act towards the realisation of this goal. Linked with the witches' initial statement of "foul is fair and fair is foul", the prediction made to Macbeth and mirroring him a future glory foreshadows

also his deception and inevitable destruction. That things turn out to be their opposite is most certainly the message that could be derived from the paradoxical words of the witches.

Moreover, this meeting of the natural with the supernatural establishes the paradox which will reverse Macbeth's role from a defender of Duncan to his murderer. The address the witches make to Banquo contains three enigmatic predictions as he is told he will be "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater/ Not so happy but happier/Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none/" (Shakespeare et Orgel, Macbeth 1.3).

Shakespeare introduces the witches' prophecy by a paradox which consists in the juxtaposition of opposite terms (lesser/greater, not so happy/happier,) which are meant to add mystery to the enigmatic character of the predictions. Most interpretations of the witches' claims assert that though Banquo is lesser in royal rank than Macbeth, he will be greater because he will be the father of future kings. As to why Banquo will not be happy, it is suggested, that this might point to an allusion to his death before the royal banquet. The most intriguing aspect of the prophecy concerning Banquo's fathering a line of future kings is that he, unlike Macbeth, is not destined to be a king. How would he, therefore, father kings when he is absent from a line of royal descent?

Another paradox worth mentioning concerns the impact of the witches' premonitions on Macbeth and Banquo and their individual responses to them. The issue is addressed by Macbeth in the following terms:

This supernatural soliciting / cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill, / Why hath it given me earnest of success, / Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor: / If good,

why do I yield to that suggestion / whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, / Against the use of nature? Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings. (Shakespeare et Orgel, Macbeth 1.3.130-138).

The paradox of this statement lies in the double meaning it projects in the mind of Macbeth. On the one hand he contends that from the moment he was awarded the royal title of Thane of Cawdor, the prophecy "cannot be ill" came true and is thus perceived as good. However, the second part of the statement "cannot be good", contradicts the first hence suggesting that Macbeth is giving way to the evil temptation of murdering his king. Despite experiencing fear and horror at the criminal thoughts that invade his mind Macbeth cannot resist the evil temptation and with the help of Lady Macbeth submits his will to the witches' prophecy. Banquo, however, reacts differently to the witches' prediction; first by doubting their intention and later resisting the evil temptation and praying to heaven for help. Shakespeare establishes the contrast between the two characters by having Macbeth subdued by the temptation and soliciting the forces of darkness to realise the prediction while Banquo opposes a resistance to the evil creatures and relies on divine intervention to get him out of this abyss.

2.7.2 Paradox in Hamlet

Paradox is a prominent feature in Shakespeare's drama. It is articulated in a variety of ways but it rests essentially on the ambiguous nature of language which the dramatist explores. Puns, word-play and equivocations are made to contribute to the creation of paradox in his plays. The play of *Hamlet* cannot be omitted as a characteristic tragedy in which Shakespeare exhibits numerous paradoxes. In it, the dramatist exhibits paradox through the manipulation of speech and the exposure of the audience to conflicting

arguments and attitudes. To take a sequence from the play of *Hamlet* to illustrate paradox, let us refer to the second scene of Act I in which the new king Claudius, addressing Hamlet, starts by saying "But now, my cousin Hamlet and my son", asserting his new kinship to Hamlet from a former uncle to cousin and father. Claudius, now new king of Denmark and husband of his brother's widow, wants prince Hamlet to consider him as his new father. Hamlet, still mourning the death of his father, and deeply disappointed by the hasty remarriage of his mother replies by a paradox to Claudius' newly asserted kinship to him: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 1.2).

While acknowledging the new bonds that tie him to Claudius as a nephew and stepson, Hamlet ironically refutes this intrusive kinship through the word play of *kin* and *kind* meaning rudely I am no kin to you neither in nature nor affection. Thompson and Taylor saw a connection between Hamlet's line and a contemporary proverb which states: "the nearer in kin the less in kindness" (Thompson et Taylor 389) as a case in point which foreshadows Hamlet's dislike of Claudius and his rebuttal of the claims of the new kinship made by his uncle.

Claudius's marriage to his brother's widow only two months after king Hamlet's death needed justification to gain approval from the court and remove eventual suspicion. Addressing the court concerning his marriage Claudius declared:" with mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage" (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 1.2 12). With this statement Shakespeare is making one of the most striking paradoxes in his play. This is achieved through the displacing of the words *mirth* and *dirge* from their appropriate contexts and having them fulfil a contradictory function. The word *mirth*, meaning great merriment

or glee, and having a positive connotation is used to describe funeral, while *dirge* meaning a hymn of mourning a dead person is used to describe the marriage. Clearly, through the use of paradox Shakespeare invites the audience to spot the unusual meanings which he achieves through astute word and context combinations.

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in it" (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 2.2), this is how Polonius describes Hamlet's puzzling behaviour. This is another case of Shakespeare's use of paradox to describe Hamlet's tormented mind after the death of his father, the hasty marriage of his mother to Claudius and his growing suspicion as to the real cause of his father's death. Confronted to all these ills Hamlet decided to pretend madness so as to be able to say things without fear of blame, and use this method to gather whatever evidence may enlighten his darkened soul as to what caused his father's death.

Gertrude and Claudius having noticed that Hamlet was behaving strangely asked Polonius to keep a close eye on him and report to them whatever events in his conduct would enlighten them on what is the cause behind his "weird" behaviour. Polonius who had been following and observing Hamlet felt that he was speaking nonsense particularly in the reading room scene: "Words, Words, Words", this was how Hamlet replied to Polonius's question "What do you read, my lord? (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 1.2).

Hamlet's answer is deliberately loaded with ambiguity to let Polonius confused about whether he is in control of his mental faculties or showing signs of insanity. By repeating the same word, Hamlet may be suggesting that the words of which Polonius was asking the meaning are meaningless. At the same time his answer may be interpreted as a witty way of showing to Polonius that he is not mad but quite aware of what he wants to find out about him. Moreover, in the same scene Hamlet, aware of the spying role

assigned to Polonius, continued to feign madness to deride him calling him "a fishmonger" and asking him if he had a daughter. When Polonius replied by the affirmative, Hamlet showed him disrespect in response to what he felt was his dishonesty towards him.

Playing a more offending role toward the old man Hamlet implied that he should watch out his daughter Ophelia who might be made pregnant. Overwhelmed by the ambiguous nature of Hamlet's replies Polonius declared: "How pregnant sometimes his replies are. A happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of" (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 2.1). With this statement, Polonius meant that Hamlet has his way with words as is sometimes the case with the mad people who show greater talent in this than sane people.

"I must be cruel only to be kind" (Shakespeare et Spencer, Hamlet 3.4), these lines were spoken by Hamlet to his mother after he realised that he killed unknowingly Polonius who was spying on him behind the arras. In this scene Hamlet is displaying his disappointment at his mother's hasty marriage to his uncle Claudius, now the new king of Denmark. With this paradoxical statement which relies on the contrastive words cruel" and "kind" Hamlet attempts to rationalise his killing of Polonius who proved to be dishonest to the young prince. Hamlet regards his act as bringing justice on the corrupt. He then applies the same logic to make hints to his mother regarding her seducing by Claudius. Hamlet, thus, feels that being cruel to his mother by darkening the nature of her marriage to Claudius, he was kind to her by trying to free her from the grip of the new king.

The paradox has thus served to embody in one line Hamlet's perception of the succession of events that have cropped up after his father's death. To conclude, let us quote David Chandler who wrote: "The essence of Shakespeare's tragedies is the expression of one of the greatest paradoxes of life. We might call it the paradox of disappointment" (Chandler 178).

The treatment of the issue of the use of paradox in literature in the context of this work stems from our belief that thinkers and philosophers have, since antiquity, devoted a great interest to the use of a device that fulfils a contradictory function and which was termed paradox. In our review, we have selected figures from different periods, starting from antiquity and moving through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance era and the Elizabethan age to illustrate the variety of ways in which the notion of literary paradox has been tackled by such great names as Aristotle, Cicero in antiquity, John Donne as a metaphysical poet who paved the way for writers of the Renaissance.

Shakespeare's work is filled with examples of the use of paradox. As to the modern period, we have taken option for the New Critic Cleanth Brooks who with such works as *The Well-Wrough Urn* and seminal essays "The Language of Paradox" launched a rich critical debate over the function of paradox in literature, and poetry in particular, which continued to fill in the literary and critical scenes for decades following the advent of the New Criticism whose roots can be traced back to the 1940's with John Crowe Ransom's publication of *The New Criticism* (1941), a book of critical essays whose contents include essential notions concerning the ontological uniqueness of poetry as distinct from prose particularly in its use of language (Brooks).

2.8 Cleanth Brooks: In Defence of Paradox in Poetry

With the advent of New Criticism in America in the early 1950's, it was Brooks more than any of the New Critics that set himself to the task in his critical works of advocating the crucial role of paradox as a mode of understanding and interpreting poetry. In his best-known contributions to the New Criticism, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry, (1947), Modern Poetry and the Tradition, (1939)* Brooks dealt extensively with paradox whom he regarded as the inseparable ally of poetry. In The *Well-Wrought Urn,* he entitled a chapter *The Language of Paradox* in which he contended that paradox is central to poetry. Starting from the assumption that conventional language cannot account adequately for the complex meanings and perceptions conveyed in poetry, he sustains that the language of paradox is the only way to transcend the limitations of referential language. He makes this clear when he claims that "there is a sense in which paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry" (Brooks 3).

On these grounds we can assume that Brooks saw paradox as the linguistic device that best conveys the issues that are not accessible to the strict sphere of discursive reason. Hence, he explains that much of a poet has to say has to be said by means of paradox whose language is "emotional", profound" and" divinely irrational" (2). According to this view, the poet having specific messages to convey in his poems, he has to rely on resources other than those available in conventional language. For Brooks, paradox is an indispensable tool for poetic expression because of its ability to compensate for what referential language cannot express in the same way or with the same purpose. This is perhaps why Brooks noted that contrary to the set patterns of conventional language, the language of poetry which embodies contradictions is best expressed by way of paradox.

His argument is rooted in the belief that contradictions are inherent in poetry, and in the absence of these, some of the best poetry available today would not exist.

In addition to his belief in the relevance of paradox for the language of poetry, Brooks shared with the New Critics a distrust of the scientific language. Just like his predecessor and forerunner of New Criticism J.C. Ransom who depicted a dichotomy between poetry and science, Brooks selected irony and paradox as motifs for his critical preoccupations. Ransom led a multileveled attack on what he regarded as the hegemonic character of science whose abstract language he opposed to the concrete language of poetry. In his major works, *The World's Body (1938)*, and *The New Criticism (1941)*, Ransom set the tone of his critical practice which articulated a complex dualism between poetry and science. In this respect he wrote: "I suggest that the differentia of poetry as a discourse is an ontological one. It treats an order of existence, a grade of objectivity which cannot be treated in scientific discourse" (281).

Sharing a common outlook with Ransom with regard to the opposition between poetry and science, Brooks settled on a vision in which paradox was elevated to the very core of poetic expression. Considering scientific language to be essentially analytical, he declared: "It is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox." (Brooks 2). From such a statement it is quite obvious that Brooks' insistence on the inseparability of paradox from poetry follows the new critical rationale that has sought since the beginning of the movement to get away from the Cartesian discourse of rationality. Poetry, it was felt, would best prosper within the cradle of a language based on his announcement about the importance of paradox.

CHAPTER ONE: Review of the Use of Ambiguity and Paradox as Ageold Devices Used in Literature -81-

The selection by Brooks of Wordsworth's well-known sonnet *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* in which the poet captures the sight of the city of London at the early morning hour is a good example of the critic's analytical method which seeks to emphasise the prevalence of paradox in the structure of the poem. Right from the start Brooks refutes the interpretations that revolve around accounting for the poet's fascination with the harmonious balance of natural and man-made structures which give the city its magnificent beauty. Thus, he maintains that "the attempt to make a case for the poem in terms of the brilliance of its images also quickly breaks down" (Brooks 3). For Brooks, despite the fact that *Composed Upon Westminster Bridge* is "one of Wordsworth's most successful poems... most students have the greatest difficulty to account for it on the grounds of nobility of sentiment soon breaks down" (3).

It is clear from such statement that the difficulty to account for the poem arises from the failure to identify the contradictions embodied by the use of paradoxes. By selecting the early morning hours upon Westminster Bridge as the setting of the poem, the poet emphasised the death-like silence prevailing at that time as expressed in these verses:

The beauty of the morning, silent, bare,

Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!

Dear God! The very houses seem asleep;

And all that mighty heart is lying still!

Brooks, determined to make his point on paradox in the poem, makes the following comment: "It is only when the poet sees the city under the semblance of death that he can see it as actually alive—quick with the on life which he can accept, the organic life of nature" (3). With such statement the paradox is plainly established through the interplay

of the semblance of death to account for life and the closing metaphor of the mighty heart, as a symbol of life, lying still, suggesting, a death like image. Brooks points to further paradoxes in his reading of Wordsworth's poem; he contends that the poem offers a situational paradox created by the speaker. Though the city of London, as an urban setting, represents a man-made creation, and in this regard stands as an opposite to nature, the speaker of the poem does not view it as an artificial landscape. He suggests instead, that since man is a part of nature, and London is his creation, it partakes of man's nature. It is this assumption that enables the speaker to describe the beauty of the city of London with attributes more suitable for the description of a natural setting.

This approach, which involves the existence of opposites or contraries emphasises the centrality of paradox in poetry, contends also that literary language which enables the interplay of connotation and denotation, enjoys qualities absent from the referential language of science. For Brooks, paradoxes are not only "appropriate and inevitable" to poetry, but they spring from the nature of the poet's language, which to trust Brooks, he "constructs as he goes". It follows from such contention that in a certain way the poet enjoys some freedom, within limits, of making his own rules to convey his meaning. With such approach Brooks endows the poet with a great deal of power in the use of language and the making of meaning. This, however, can be felt to be done at the expense of the reader who is excluded from the production of meaning.

However interesting Brooks theory may be, it remains fairly restrictive in its interpretations by confining them to the unique purpose of demonstrating paradox at work in the poem. No less important features, outside the 'paradoxical' approach also deserve equal attention particularly those that associate the reader in the production of meaning

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and that insist not just on the truth conveyed by the poem but on the pleasure, it affords the audience.

Conclusion

As stated in the introductory chapter of the thesis, the purpose of this work was to explore ways in which Toni Morrison makes use of paradox and ambiguity in her fiction particularly with regard to her multifaceted portrayal of black female characters. Before dealing with how Toni Morrison, inspired by the literary traditions that made use of these devices brought her own innovations in terms of point of view, characterization of black women, feminist and gender discourse, deconstruction of stereotypes, I have felt it necessary to start with a review of the literature devoted to these notions. To this goal, I have selected to deal with a coverage of a fairly large literary era along with a review of some essential definitions of ambiguity and paradox throughout different ages.

This starts with some fundamental landmarks from antiquity, notably with Greeks Aristotle and Plato, through the Christian period with Augustin, and running through later periods that include the Renaissance, the Elizabethan age with John Donne and Shakespeare, up to the modern era with such figures as Cleanth Brooks and William Empson.

Thanks to this approach, Morrison's use of ambiguity and paradox is not examined in isolation from the rich literary tradition that made varied uses of these devices in literature. Accordingly; from this standpoint, the research work has attempted to delve into these devices by Morrison and how post-modern innovations add to the wealth of these inexhaustible devices and their functions in literature.

CHAPTER TWO: The Bluest Eye

"The death of self-esteem can occur quickly, easily in children, before their ego has "legs," so to speak. Couple the vulnerability of youth with indifferent parents ,dismissive adults, and a world, which, in its language, laws, and images, reenforces despair, and the journey to destruction is sealed."

~ Toni Morrison, The Bluest Eye

Introduction

The Bluest Eye (1970) is Morrison's first novel. It explores the concepts of identity, race and gender within the particular condition of the African-American community. The novel portrays the journey of a black little girl towards self-destruction because of her internalisation of white standards of beauty. Feelings of self-loathing, inferiority-complex and rejection from family and community caused the novel's protagonist Pecola Breedlove severe psychological troubles after being subjected to all form of moral and physical abuse.

This chapter attempts to scrutinize Morrison' representation of female characters with the dilemmas and identity-crisis they experience in the white hegemonic society. It equally examines Morrison's narrative discourse, which relies on paradox and ambiguity to deconstruct and resist superficial and reductive perceptions of black women. The chapter also aims at displaying Morrison's endeavour to challenge easy categorization and stereotypical assumptions about black womanhood and motherhood.

1. Black Female Protagonists and the Narrative of Ambiguity

Far from the plots that feature male protagonists overcoming somehow heroically the moral and social obstacles that they encounter; the novels of Toni Morrison stand in sharp opposition to the traditional treatment of the genre. Instead of the traditional male protagonist who comes to terms with the conflicts and emerges as a unified and accomplished self, Morrison chooses to deal with Afro-American female protagonists caught in tensions resulting from the double oppression of gender and race. As a result of their confrontation with the intricate issues of identity and the sense of belonging, Morrison's protagonists experience a duality which justifies the claim of paradox and ambiguity as a crucial question in her fiction. This duality stems essentially from the disturbing experience of feeling at once part and apart from the society where they live.

In depicting the experiences of her protagonist, Morrison relies on strategies that fulfil her aim of exhibiting paradox and ambiguity. These include the use of contrastive parallelism which consists in decentring the position of the protagonist by creating a second and antithetical character that fulfils an opposite function or holds a contrary rhetoric. As a result of this strategy, the protagonist is perceived only in opposition to another self.

Morrison's ingenious use of ambiguity and paradox pervades her text on various thematic and formal levels. In fact, it is not restricted to the simple adoption of dual characterisation. It rather expands to other features of the narrative, notably making use of figurative language and providing a multiplicity of point of view.

2. Feminism and Ambiguity

To the question of "Why distance oneself from feminism?" which she was asked in a 1998 interview, Morrison replied:

"In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can't take positions that are closed. Everything I've ever done, in the writing world, has been to expand articulation, rather than to close it, to open doors, sometimes, not even closing the book – leaving the endings open for reinterpretation, revisitation, a little ambiguity" (The Salon Interview).

This interview's main concern was to bring Morrison to reveal her stand towards feminism and introduces the term ambiguity. The term, as used by Morrison, is endowed with positive connotations. She makes it clear that she holds a position towards feminism that rejects sheer dogmatism and radical stands when dealing with race, gender issues and age. These latter, she believes, are intricate questions that cannot be reduced to easy categorisation.

Ambiguity, as perceived by Morrison, is a shield that prevents her writing as well as her own feminist stand from being aligned on narrow radical feminist positions. Although committed to the woman's question, Morrison sees things beyond the horizons of most feminist writers; for her the black female should above all be visible and have a voice. In fact, Morrison's choice of little girls as the protagonists of her novels is meant to lift the veil on this frail section of the black community and focus on their preoccupations and concerns which include: women's position in society, the issues of self-assertion, identity, selfhood, visibility and voice.

In the same interview she dissociates herself from the stereotypical oppositions of man vs. woman; patriarchal vs. matriarchal. She does not perceive man as the opponent of woman and she does not long for matriarchy to substitute patriarchy; she rather favours open perspectives. She said: "I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things" (The Salon Interview).

Similarly, Morrison avoids restricting the violence caused to her black female characters to the white society only. She involves members of the black community in the victimisation of women and particularly young girls who represent the most vulnerable section of the black society. In addition to this, Morrison widens the scope of reaction of her female protagonists to all forms of frustration that they experience.

3. The Bluest Eye: Urge of Whiteness and Self-hatred

From the start of her literary career with *The Bluest Eye* Morrison tackled issues regarding race and black female stereotyping with such themes as incest, prostitution, domestic violence, child molestation and racism. In her first novel Morrison chooses as protagonist Pecola Breedlove, a young black girl growing up in her hometown of Lorain, Ohio, who longs to have blue eyes. Morrison explores the theme of what Langston Hughes once called "the urge of whiteness within the race" (Hughes 83) to denounce the incorporation of this ideal imposed by the standards of beauty of the white man's culture in the U S A. Through the disintegration of Pecola which climaxes in her insanity at the end of the novel, Morrison seems to be overtly warning against the damaging effects caused by centuries of unconscious internalisation of white ethics of beauty (light skin, light hair, blue eyes) and resulting in self-hatred. Of the major points that seem of great

concern to Morrison in *The Bluest Eye* are the insipid forms of cultural enslavement which perpetuate the subjugation of blacks.

Pecola's violent family environment, particularly the tumultuous relationship between her father and mother are underscored to point out to the false ideals of whiteness and beauty- a refuge the girl desperately longs for to escape from the violence of home life. Despite a temporary relief she gets at a host family, following the burning of her home by her father, the tragic fate of this girl follows her and culminates in incest and pregnancy.

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison gathers the most troubling elements of the ills of society to account for the complex questions of America's racist history, black stereotyping, female victimisation and the economic and psychological constraints on the black community at large. She does this through a depiction of multiple facets of black life, contrasting situations and experiences in which different echoes of black female voices are heard now expressing pain and suffering and now affirming positive stands.

Opposite to the tragic destiny of the protagonist Pecola, Morrison introduces other female characters who have grown up in a healthier and loving family environment. This is illustrated by Claudia, the narrator of the story who, with her sister Frieda, expresses genuine love and support for Pecola. They could represent the feeling of sorority so much articulated in feminist theories. At the same time the contrasting personalities and destinies of these characters point to the fact that Morrison is cautious in avoiding generalisations of predicament to all her female characters. In fact, she endows her female characters with a wide range of responses as exemplified by Claudia and Frieda

who display confidence and self-determination. Contrary to Pecola's obsession with blue eyes, Claudia resents the blue eyes of her dolls.

Though giving the impression of relying on binary oppositions in her female representations, Morrison's attitude towards her female characters is in fact far more intricate than appears on a surface reading. Rather than offering a clear-cut conclusion, Morrison maintains a certain ambiguity with regard to her perception of the reconstruction of the black female identity. As far as the internalising of the white ethics of beauty is concerned Morrison clearly rejects white social constructions of beauty, suggesting instead that black women should strive to get rid of the deeply anchored feeing of low self-esteem. Black women should rebuild identity on the basis of their own free will and a recovery of the black female body away from the oppressive gaze imposed by others. Morrison substantiates these views in her novels by the creation of antagonistic characters in so far as each of them represents a scale of values and attitudes contrary to his antithetical self.

Thus, Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* epitomises the female black victim who receives blows from both societies. Anne T. Salvatore points to the multiple forms of violence that Pecola undergoes:

The neighbourhood children taunt her, mulattos brutalize her, a child predator exploits her ignorance, an adult white store-keeper objectivizes her by refusing to admit her existence. Worse yet, her mother prefers the sheltered white child of an employer to Pecola's needy presence, and her father enacts the ultimate cruelty by raping his own daughter. (Salvatore 155)

Morrison's tragic portrayal of the Breedlove family disintegration with the focus on Pecola as the central victim serves to emphasise the multidimensional forms of oppression and frustration. In this respect, Pecola is both victim of race and of gender. Her negative perception of self, engendered by the sense of feeling ugly, prompted her to adopt the white standards of beauty which fatally led her to self-destruction. In addition to self-depreciation and self-loathing caused by racial motives, Pecola's suffering is accentuated by gender oppression culminating in incestuous rape by her father Cholly.

4. Pairing Female Characters to Achieve Paradox

For the most part Morrison's novels depict 'paired characters that fulfil opposed roles. By adopting the strategy of pairing characters, Morrison is able to accomplish paradox by decentring focus on the protagonist and offering another and contrary alternative embodied by the second character. The female protagonist usually stands as an anti-heroine because of her failure to achieve fulfilment of an authentic identity or growth towards knowledge. The other or secondary character, though identical to the protagonist in gender and race, receives a more positive portrayal or at least a less ironic treatment. This narrative strategy of 'double focus' seems to serve her feminist options, notably by the cautious avoidance of categorisation. Hence, her use of binary oppositions represented by the presence in her novels of 'allegedly' opposite female characters (Pecola and Claudia in *The Bluest Eye*), (Sula and Nel in *Sula*) and (Sethe and Denver in *Beloved*) fulfils her effort to offer a multi-layered vision in which opposites are brought into fusion. Paradox and ambiguity reside precisely in Morrison's strategy of first, leading her reader to assume a binary opposition between female characters i.e., Virgin/Whore, Self/Other, Good/Evil, before complicating the matter by fusion instead

of opposition. Consequently, the reader is led to believe that either the split characters are fused to complement each other, or that they represent the same person.

5. The Double Focus: A Narrative Strategy

By proceeding in this manner, Morrison widens the scope of her vision particularly with regard to the role and status of the female characters of her novels. By depicting her characters in the tricky situations of having to cope with the pressures engendered by race, gender and social status, Morrison is able to portray their different responses to such aspects of their dilemmas. Thus, the point of view is made not easily discernible as the author keeps balancing her view by shifting focus from the experience and response of the protagonist to those of her alternate character who is made to perceive and respond to things differently.

A dimension of the ambiguity present in Morrison's fiction stems precisely from this "double focus" on antagonistic characters. As a result, it makes it difficult for the reader to decide on whose side does the author want him to be. Should the reader consider them as distinct, separate and opposite entities or simply as two split parts of the same entity? To deal with her female characters in this way serves equally to illustrate the depth of contradictions which characterise their split selves, or otherwise; the state of being torn between the world in which they have their racial roots and the one they aspire to reach.

6. The Bluest Eye: Racialised Beauty and the Construction of Black Female Identity

The issue of western standards of beauty and their impact on the construction of black femininity are core questions in her earliest novel *The Bluest Eye* (1969) and which I will endeavour to tackle from the vantage point of feminism, psychoanalytical criticism and post-colonial criticism. While the theme of *The Bluest Eye* draws, as the title indicates, its greatest significance from the thorny question of female beauty, the question is not dealt with in isolation. In fact, Morrison depicts her characters within a context in which the interplay of racial and socio-economic tensions plays an important part in enhancing the tragic character of the plot. Racial oppression, extreme poverty and family violence culminating in incest are all made to bring into contrast the world of Pecola Breedlove and the white ideal world represented by Dick and Jane. It seems clear, therefore, that the inclusion by Morrison of other ills and frustrations that revolve around the theme of female beauty in *The Bluest Eye* participates in revealing the intricacy of the situation of the protagonist.

Pecola, an eleven-year-old black girl strongly aspires to have blue eyes to overcome the dilemma of seeing herself and being considered by other characters as ugly. Beyond the apparent simplicity of this childish dream, Morrison is in fact exploring far more complex questions related to the construction of black female identity and femininity in a society where as Paul C. Taylor argues: "a white dominated culture has *racialised* beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white [people] are more likely to have" (Taylor 17). Therefore, in the process of trying to achieve beauty, as Taylor further

argues, "the experience of a black woman ...differs from the experiences of ... Jewish and Irish women" (20).

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison brings to the fore the multifaceted dilemma of a young black girl who experiences racial and gender tensions in a predominantly white society in the 1930's America. Pecola's racial tensions are revealed through her incorporation of the white standards of beauty which are manifested through the absurdity of her yearning to have blue eyes. Pecola's dream stems from her admiration of the blue eyes of the child TV star Shirley Temple. She believes that the attainment of the beauty of Shirley Temple opens the way to success and fulfilment. Morrison puts it this way:

It had occurred to Pecola some time ago that if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sighs- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say, beautiful, she herself would be different... If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 46)

In dealing with the issue of women's beauty, Morrison has been very selective in the creation of her protagonists. Her choice of little girls to tackle such issues of race and gender not only shows her concern for this fragile category of the black society, but appears most appropriate in relating their tragic predicament. As young girls, neither Pecola nor Claudia has yet constructed their persona. We can assume that they are in the stage of the forming of their identity with all the tensions accompanying the process of their growth. Both characters are made to exhibit different desires and frustrations and illustrate through their vulnerability their precarious position as young black females in the white majority culture. The issue of beauty in *The Bluest Eye* is dealt with from different angles. Pecola embodies the idealisation of the image of white standards of

beauty and the destructive effect on self-esteem following her adoration of Shirley Temple. Instances of Pecola's fascination with white beauty represented by white skin and blue eyes abound in the novel. Here is another significant scene which exhibits Pecola's admiration for the criteria of beauty she longs for:

Each pale-yellow wrapper has a picture on it. A picture of little Mary Jane for whom the candy is named. Smiling white face... blond hair in gentle disarray, blue eyes looking at her out of a world of clean comfort. The eyes are petulant, mischievous. To Pecola they are simply pretty. She eats the candy and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy, and somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane. (38)

Pecola's internalisation of the standards of white beauty is rooted in a childish illusion culturally and socially imposed by the hegemonic white discourse. This corresponds to what Langston Hughes calls "the urge of whiteness within the race" or else "the desire to run away from the race toward whiteness" (7).

Pecola's dilemma is that she struggles with a split personality as she is torn between her impossible dream to achieve white beauty and her resignation to accept her condition as an 'ugly' black girl. As a result of this inner conflict, she succumbs to self-hatred and finds it legitimate that people hate her for her ugliness. With Pecola, Morrison conveys the tragic picture of a character who, to evoke Richard Wright; "hated by the whites, [the black man] came to hate in himself what the whites hated in him." Throughout the whole novel Morrison exposes symbolic instances of Pecola's attempts at fleeing from her racial self. When offered some food by Frieda, Pecola exhibits a significant reaction that tells a lot about her:

Would you like some graham crackers?

I don't care.

Frieda brought her four graham crackers on a saucer and some milk in a blue-and-white Shirley Temple cup. She was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple's dimpled face. Frieda and she had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was. (19)

Pecola's fascination with Shirley Temple is further emphasised by her irresistible attraction to the white and blue colours of the cup symbolically suggesting two basic standards of white beauty, white skin and blue eyes. Not only does Pecola adhere to the criteria of racialised beauty, but she also unconsciously enacts her urge to whiteness in a scene where her excessive drink of milk is made to manifest this craving. Furious about the quantity of milk drunk by Pecola using the Shirley Temple cup Claudia's mother yells: "Three quarts of milk. That's what was *in* that icebox yesterday. Three whole quarts. Now, they ain't none. Not a drop. I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want, but three quarts of milk!" (20).

Though this scene manifestly reveals Pecola's craving for whiteness, Morrison maintains some ambiguity at to what is exactly suggested by this insistence on Pecola's excessive milk consumption. On one interpretative level, we may assume that this was caused by her desire to prolong her gazing at the picture of Shirley Temple whom she adores.

On another level and in psychoanalytical terms, we can suggest that Pecola was fulfilling her urge to whiteness by drinking the 'whiteness' of the milk. Given the fact that Pecola is a child, the drinking of milk might be regarded as a child's innocent belief

that this might induce whiteness of skin in her and turn her into a Shirley Temple. Morrison's mention of this particular scene in *The Bluest Eye* is also a reminder of the foolishness of the assimilationist drive of some sections of the mulatto population in America whose motto was "lighter and lighter each generation", pointing to the hope of achieving whiteness through inter-racial marriages. Milk, on these grounds, is for Pecola what inter-racial marriage between whites and blacks was for the assimilationist mulatto. Pecola's phantasm, her obsession with western beauty as epitomised by her idol Shirley Temple, and the feeling that this dream is unattainable, all point to her inevitable destruction.

The sum of frustrations that she experienced within her own family, her passive acceptance of her rejection by the others, her fatalistic surrender to self-loathing makes of Pecola a tragic character doomed to annihilation. Quite early in the novel Morrison hinted at her passive character when Claudia described her to her sister Frieda: "When we discovered that she did not want to dominate us, we liked her. She laughed when I clowned for her and accepted gracefully the food gifts my sister gave her" (19).

7. Pecola and the Paradox of Sight and Blindness

Pecola's desperate craving for blue eyes holds a special significance in Morrison's text. Quite apart from hoping to achieve beauty to satisfy the deepest need of her ego and to be seen in a new and sparkling light that would dazzle all who approach her, Pecola wants to gain a new sight and see the world differently and to wipe out the deep wound that caused her not only to feel ugly and rejected but to suffer from mistreatment by the boys, her family and society at large. Her wish to have blue eyes, not just for the sake of beauty but to see and be seen in a new light, that is, to be admired and to see the world

from the privileged white man's perspective suggests that she should symbolically achieve blindness, the blindness of her black sight. Only through the blue eyes, she imagines, she could have access to a world so far inaccessible. The blue eyes, for her, function as the key that will open to her the doors of self-affirmation. Thus, by repressing her black sight, that is figuratively blinding herself, she believes she would negate her ugliness; the blue eyes will deliver her from the painful and oppressive gaze of the others. Literary critic Fick observes that there is much more to her wish than the need for a cosmetic change, suggesting that it reflects her more profound need to change the world by changing the way she beholds it (Fick 12).

What Pecola seems to be undergoing is a dissociation of self as a result of a multifaceted damage due to racial, social and family victimisation. Consequently, her condition creates a trauma in which she sees her salvation in the unattainable dream of having blue eyes. This trauma, it must be noted, experienced by a vulnerable young girl, is also rooted in the tragic memory of the history of the blacks in America or what Caruth has described "as a wound inflicted upon the mind" (3). It can be inferred that Pecola, who embodies all the psychological disorders resulting from family and social oppression, longed for blue eyes, to blind herself to the old black sight and all what brings back the painful memories of trauma. The interrelatedness of how Pecola is seen, and how she wishes to see herself and the others through her delving in the impossible dream of acquiring blue eyes at the expense of her sight establishes the tragic paradox.

8. Claudia as the Antithetical Self of Pecola

Pursuing her double focus narrative strategy, Morrison deals with the character of Claudia in a way that emphasises the dichotomy. Claudia functions as the

counterpoise of Pecola, particularly, by affirming the need for autonomy. Claudia, like other black female characters is subjected to the dilemmas of gender and race but she reacts differently from Pecola. Issues of self-assertion, identity and selfhood are articulated by Claudia through flashbacks and stream of consciousness, a technique which contributes to give the text the plurality of meanings and inconclusiveness desired. Hence, Morrison's text not only creates ambiguity through the juxtaposition of opposed protagonists, but generates a multitude of interpretative options and thus mutually exclusive responses. This is clearly established by Morrison through the selection of her female characters, of the parts that they play in the plot of the novel, of the issues they raise and their stand toward the crucial preoccupations of oppression of gender and race. A glance at the character of Claudia and her interaction with Pecola will hopefully illustrate this.

Claudia seems to be the only character who responded differently and who resisted against the mass culture's standards of beauty. Instances of her resistance were expressed in her feeling of hatred toward the white actress Shirley Temple and then in her refusal and dismembering of the blue-eyed baby doll. From an adult perspective she is now able to explain the obscure reasons for her childhood rooted feelings of hatred toward Shirley Temple who was then the most popular child star of the American cultural scene of the 1930's. She declares:

Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 19)

Digging in her childhood memories for some good reason of her rejection of Shirley Temple, she confesses through this backward glance that what prompted this hatred was seeing her dancing with Bojangles, the best known African-American dancer and actor of the first half of the twentieth century. She seems to have a special feeling toward this black star:

I couldn't join them in their adoration because I hated Shirley. Not because she was cute, but because she danced with Bojangles who was *my* friend, *my* uncle, *my* daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with me. Instead, he was enjoying, sharing, giving a lovely dance thing with one of those little girls whose socks never slid down under their heels. So, I said, "I like Jane Withers". (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 19)

Claudia's tone expresses a feeling of a strong envy toward Shirley Temple, but contrary to Pecola she does not envy her for her beauty and cuteness but rather for the privilege she is granted thanks to her whiteness. Claudia believes that Bojangles' place should rather be with her and not with Shirley. As a black entertainer, Bojangles should share his lovely dances with a black girl and not with Shirley Temple who was the icon of the beautiful white girl. This is perhaps a logical thinking for a little innocent child since she mentioned that she was young at the time and that she has not yet developed her persona. She finds it more logical and perhaps more legitimate to see black stars performing together rather than having white partners.

Claudia's reaction seems to carry a dualistic response towards the white culture's standards of beauty. Claudia, at first glance, may appear to embody the character of the strong girl who could easily identify herself with her race and who accepted her blackness

with pride refusing to adhere to the dominant culture's norms. She may be perceived as a rebellious character who resists popular beauty icons contrary to Pecola who hates her blackness and admits her ugliness. However, a racist tone is felt also in her words; she seems to reproduce the colonizer by developing the same racist attitude towards the other (all the Shirley Temples of the world). She could not accept or bear to see a black iconic star sharing love and complicity with a white child star. Claudia's attitude carries a certain ambiguity and paradox. On the one hand she accepts her blackness and refuses to be brainwashed with the white culture's standards of beauty, but on the other hand she betrays strange feelings of hatred toward white people. She does not seem to have solved her identity crisis and reached a certain self-affirmation safely without being affected psychologically and morally.

Claudia was even more challenging when she asserted that she rather prefers Jane Withers who was a competing star for Shirley Temple at the time though less popular. But what is really significant about the mention of Jane Withers is the fact that she is a dark-haired brunette actress rather than a blonde one. So, she does not stand for the prototype of the beautiful blonde blue-eyed girl; she was rather lacking the golden curls and dimples. This may explain Claudia's attraction and love for her. Even in her film with Shirley Temple, Jane Withers seems to preserve her particularity and distinctiveness by being natural and spontaneous. She declares in interviews that she was one of the fans of Shirley Temple but never attempted to imitate her: In fact, she considers she is just her opposite. Jane Withers represented the nasty little girls in her performances with Shirley Temple and played the role of the trouble-maker for her. So, Claudia may unconsciously love her for that because she, in a way, satisfies her feeling of hatred toward Temple.

However, though receiving a more positive portrayal compared to Pecola, Claudia still seems to suffer an identity crisis. Her dilemma with the dominant culture and its symbols of beauty (the white icon Shirley Temple) has not ended in self-validation; she could not reach it without denying the other after all. While Pecola's love for Shirley Temple fed her self-hatred, Claudia's love for herself fed her hatred toward Shirley. Thus, to perceive Pecola and Claudia as antagonistic characters who have opposite attitudes towards the dominant culture's standards of beauty would rather be a simplistic conclusion. A superficial reading of the two characters of Pecola and Claudia might end in an easy and immediate categorization perceiving Pecola as pathetic figure obsessed by Shirley Temple and Claudia as a rebel who stands against "racialized" beauty refusing to adhere to the dominant culture's code. Such an easy categorisation seems pretty questionable.

9. Pecola vs. Claudia: From Opposition to Fusion

Looking at things from another perspective may lead one to question this categorization of Pecola and Claudia. Rather than perceiving them as binary oppositions, Morrison displays ambiguity in her treatment of the two characters. She makes the matter more complicated by fusing them. They may be perceived rather as one disfigured character, a young fragile black girl suffering from two levels of frustration; a first level that is linked with her perception of being ugly and her subsequent craving for blue eyes, and a second one that concerns status and the material privileges and entitlement granted for whites and denied for blacks. Pecola thought that if she had blue eyes, she will see the world differently and the world will see and more importantly treat her differently, while Claudia hated and envied Shirley Temple for the advantages and opportunities she

is granted, and which she as a black girl lacks. Pecola and Claudia represent two facets of the same damaged little black girl suffering multiple forms of frustration.

Pecola thinks because she is black, she is ugly and invisible and Claudia thinks she lacks voice and privilege because she is not white and blue-eyed. Though Morrison seems to present her female characters as opposites, delving deeply in them may rather end in ambiguity and paradox. On such intricate narrative strategies Silvia Chirila makes the following comment:

Narrative identity is shaped in Toni Morrison's work through the interplay of binaries: white/black/ male/female/ individual/collective/ centre/margin, civilization/wilderness, continuity/fragmentariness... etc.). However, this occurs in a process in which mere dichotomy is subverted in favour of ambivalence, hybridity, or hyphenation. In Toni Morrison's novels dualistic, polarized structures often become synergistic and binary logic is disrupted through multiplicity, inconsistency and paradox, while tension between opposing ideologies, perspectives, or (self-) images can be catalytic, leading to a redefinition of values and to a revision of meaning. (10)

10.Unified Self and Double Consciousness

Morrison's fiction has challenged the traditional Western notion of a unified self. Whether in *The Bluest Eye*, in *Sula* or in *Beloved*, Morrison penetrates and explores the abyss of the human soul in a postmodernist fashion exhibiting the dilemma of multiple conflicting selves. She portrays characters, namely black females in their search for freedom and identity. Following them in their respective quest for identity, she departs from the traditional view of the struggle for the achievement of a unified self to develop

a new understanding of selfhood. Her approach involves a focus on the double conflict that characterises black females whose antagonistic selves are revealed through their contradictory responses to issues of selfhood. This is exemplified by their dual sense of belonging and the feeling of being at once part and apart from the white cultural and economic environment in America.

In her depiction of the two major female characters of *The Bluest Eye* Morrison proceeds by embodying each of them with different perceptions, outlooks and fortunes. Pecola, whose story is narrated by Claudia, stands for the ironic anti-heroine. Her submissive condition accounts for the multiple forms of victimisation that turned her into a passive being whose false dream of having blue eyes ended up in insanity. The accumulation of the dehumanising ills engendered by racial, social and family violence, were too much to bear for a vulnerable eleven-year-old child making her breakdown inevitable. Joanne Frye, summed up the damaging impact that foreshadowed her future dark days:

The Breedloves' severe poverty, their storefront existence, the harshness of the parents' arguments and physical abuse of each other, and the whole family's sense of being "relentlessly and aggressively ugly" undermine any positive expectations that readers might have for Pecola despite her apparent good fortune of being temporarily cared for by the MacTeer family when her father had "burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head and everybody, as a result, was outdoors. (17)

It is following this tragic event that Morrison chose to have Pecola enter the world of Claudia and Frieda. This is significant particularly as the choice of this moment serves to highlight the contrasting living styles and prospects of these female black characters.

As children Claudia and her sister Frieda are not bothered with their difference, they are contended with their blackness: "We felt comfortable in our skins, enjoyed the news that our senses released to us, admired our dirt, cultivated our scars and could not comprehend this unworthiness" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 57).

Morrison's early portrayal of Claudia emphasises her resistance to the white standard of beauty and projects the image of a self-confident girl who does not hesitate to voice openly her likes and dislikes. Moreover, when exposed to situations that create tensions, Claudia shows a rebellious character and contrary to Pecola she does not repress her anger.

Morrison introduces the episode of the dolls in the novel to illustrate the contrasting responses of her protagonists towards these white symbols of beauty. Various kinds of dolls are displayed, the Raggedy Ann dolls with round faces and mops of hair, but the blue-eyed blonde baby dolls are the ones adult prefer to offer to the children thinking they are their favourite. Pecola's fondness of white dolls serves to highlight her internalisation of the racial hierarchy that privileges the superiority of the dominant culture. Her obsession with white beauty is further illustrated by her fascination with the image of Mary Jane, the blue-eyed blonde girl on the candy wrapper. Pecola spends her little money on candies just for the sake of admiring Mary Jane. Unlike Pecola, Claudia refuses to succumb to the attraction of the dolls and vehemently rejects the Raggedy Ann dolls and most of all the glamorised idol Shirley Temple. She confesses that she has always hated Shirley Temple and the blue-eyed blonde doll that she was offered as a Christmas gift putting the blame on adults for assuming that this choice would please all girls: "from the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish" (20).

Is Claudia just that little girl disturbed by the blue-eyed baby doll or is she actually questioning the legitimacy of the adults to choose for her and thus deny her voice? There is certainly some form of ambiguity in Claudia's attitude which is further emphasised by her refusal to play the role of the mother of the baby doll that was expected of little girls:

I was bemused by the thing itself and by the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was only interested in humans my own age and size and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother. (20)

This situation constitutes a source of confusion for Claudia who wonders why everybody else finds such dolls pretty and lovable. She wants to unveil this mystery by pulling apart the doll in an attempt to discover where "beauty" is located:

I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the dearness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl child treasured. (20)

This naïve but nonetheless angry act of dismembering the doll to the core culminated somehow ironically in the discovery of a "mere metal roundness". Claudia, Morrison seems to be suggesting, has not yet realised that beauty is a matter of cultural norms and that these are dictated by the majority or dominant culture.

Morrison is addressing the multi-layered issues of female beauty through the reactions of her female characters towards the prevailing standards of beauty projected

by the dolls, Mary Jane and Shirley Temple. Claudia's dismembering of the doll could be interpreted as a rejection of the criteria of beauty defined by a consumer culture and promoted by movies, cultural icons, consumption goods and wrappings. Madone M. Miner provides a good illustration of this issue:

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) reveals the crippling effect of white standards of female beauty on a young black girl, Pecola Breedlove. The movies are the primary vehicle for transmitting these images for public consumption. The boarder in Frieda and Claudia Mac Tear's home, Mr Henry, for example, means to compliment the two girls by comparing them to Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers immediately after meeting them. Pecola's mother, Pauline also knows her movie stars, having spent much of her first pregnancy in the movie theatre. (Miner 180)

To deal with the intricate matters of race, gender and selfhood, Morrison chose narrative strategies that reveal ambiguity and paradox at work in her text. These are displayed in the characters attitudes and perspectives as well as in the themes and forms of her fiction. Monica H. Zelloe pointed to some of the major features of Morrison's narrative strategies that are characteristic of post- modernistic trends: "Contrastive parallelism, antithetical character development, subtle intricacies, multi- perspective points of view, and ambiguous figurative language are used in order to say one thing and mean the other" (120).

In *The Bluest Eye* Morrison displays her narrative strategy by laying focus on the notion of doubleness by defining a character in opposition to the other as is the case with Pecola and Claudia. Such a technique which Morrison uses to emphasise the condition of the split self is also most suitable for the exercise of the rhetorical role of ambiguity

and paradox in the narration. As a result, the traditional place of the protagonist is decentred and gives way to polarities with the idea of the unified self, abandoned in favour of beings that lack oneness. In this case, both Pecola and Claudia illustrate these beings and stand as the two separate aspects of the same being, and this is precisely what is meant by the paradox of the separate and the fused.

Morrison's use of what is known as of the self/other dichotomy and which structures much of her fiction is reminiscent of W.E.B Dubois's notion of the 'double consciousness' which he developed in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois describes "double consciousness" as follows:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. (Du Bois 13)

11. The MacTeers: Pregnancy, Motherhood and Baby Dolls

The position of Claudia vis-à-vis Pecola' baby is actually significant. She expresses a high interest towards Pecola's coming baby in sharp contrast to her refusal of the blue-eyed, blond-haired and pink skinned baby dolls. When she was gifted the Blue-eyed baby doll on Christmas, she expressed a feeling of disappointment and confusion and went far to say:

I was bemused by the thing itself and by the way it looked. What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was only interested in humans of my own age and size and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother. (Morrison 20)

While Claudia blames adults for causing her confusion by giving her a baby doll and assuming that she will undoubtedly like it and will certainly enjoy playing the role of the mother to this doll as it was the case for all little girls, she shows a strong determination to rescue Pecola and help her have her baby safe and sound. While, she refuses to pretend to be a mother for the blue-eyed baby doll, she is excited to see Pecola's baby and to help her take care him. It is as if Claudia is now ready to be a mother along with Pecola to this coming baby contrary to what she asserted few months ago when she received the baby doll. Her feelings towards Pecola's coming baby confirms once again that she can identify herself easily and with no confusion with babies of her own race, contrary to what she experienced with the blue-eyed baby doll. Claudia not yet corrupted by the dominant culture's standards of beauty starts to imagine how beautiful Pecola's baby will be:

It was in a dark, wet place, its head covered with great O's of wool, the black face holding, like nickels, two clean black eyes, the flared nose, kissing-thick lips, and the living, breathing silk of black skin. No synthetic yellow bangs suspended over marble-blue eyes, no pinched nose and bowline mouth. More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live--just to counteract the universal love of white baby dolls, Shirley Temples, and Maureen Peals. (190)

The love and compassion the Mac Teers show toward Pecola challenges the stereotypical images associated with blacks as savages, uncivilized and inhuman. Morrison, once again, through the multiplicity of her characters and their reactions, shows that humanity and civilization have no relation with the skin colour of the person but with his nature.

Paradoxically, it is Claudia who is astonished about the community's reaction towards Pecola's pregnancy. She questions the adults' response towards Pecola and how they condemned her and offered her no help. Pecola was put in quarantine from all the other children and was forced to leave school because of her pregnancy. Claudia cannot understand the adults' reaction: "But we listened for the one who would say, "Poor little girl," or, "Poor baby," but there was only head-wagging where those words should have been. We looked for eyes creased with concern, but saw only veils" (190). Morrison displays those contradictory reactions to fulfil her objective of portraying the paradoxical and ambivalent nature of her characters.

12. The MacTeer Sisters: In Defence of Pecola

Despite their facing of various forms of powerlessness due to their condition as children, as females but mainly as blacks, neither Claudia nor Frieda surrender to the multiple pressures and oppositions they encounter in their life. Though Morrison relates their exposure to sexual molestation by such adult characters as Henry, the Mac Teers boarder, and Sopehead Church, she also gives a contrary image to that of Pecola. Both Claudia and Frieda show resistance and a strong will to defend themselves. Claudia makes this clear when she says: "We had defended ourselves since memory against everything and everybody" (149). Frieda's fighting spirit is displayed when she bravely comes to the rescue of Pecola and manages to disperse a group of boys who were taunting

the poor girl in the schoolyard. Frieda shows boldness when she intimidates one of the boys Woodrow Cain and threatens to reveal information that she has overheard about him and that he is a bed wetter.

It seems clear from such examples that while Morrison dramatizes her female protagonists' oppressive experience, she also endows some of them with a positive role particularly with their manifestation of anger which produces resistance. It is obviously the realisation of Pecola's inability to manifest anger and resistance which drove Frieda and Claudia through a feeling of sorority to take her defence and support her in the most difficult moments of her tragic girlhood. Morrison's depiction of the MacTeer sisters as the antithesis of Pecola serves to demonstrate that despite experiencing oppression, Claudia and Frieda symbolise hope, that sooner or later opposing forces will inevitably rise from the racial nightmare and would give birth to the new African American dignified womanhood. Anne T. Salvatore paid particular interest to the protagonists of *The Bluest Eye* observing that:

Despite the ironic protagonists' status as unknowing and more or less powerless victims enduring the horror of physical abuse, including rape and incest, exploitation, alienation, and endless emotional turmoil, African American women can achieve true knowledge, that, while sometimes horrifying, carries with it an ethical authority and definitive selfhood, at least potentially fulfilling and satisfying typically with the help of the community. (Salvatore 157)

The most challenging action of the MacTeer sisters is when they take option to save Pecola's unborn baby despite the incestuous character of her pregnancy and its shameful implications on the black community. Morrison overcomes this dilemma by playing on the girls confused knowledge about the relationship of marriage and pregnancy as well as the enormity of incest. This is how Morrison relates the attitude of the MacTeer sisters:

We didn't think of the fact that Pecola was not married; lots of girls had babies who were not married. And we didn't dwell on the fact that the baby's father was Pecola's father too; the process of having a baby by any male was incomprehensible to us—at least she knew her father. We thought of this overwhelming hatred for the unborn baby. (148)

Morrison presents Claudia and Frieda as the young black girls who oppose the adult world in their determination to save Pecola and the unborn baby from a community that is "disgusted, amused, shocked, outraged, [and] even excited by the story" (190) over the issue of Pecola's incestuous rape. By aligning such contradictory words, Morrison is attempting to account for the different responses of the adult community toward Pecola's condition and exhibiting another illustration of ambiguity and paradox in the contrasting perception of events. Being at odds with the position of those who can only express hatred, the Mac Teers sisters are, as Ruth Rosemberg puts it:

Defiantly alone in their protective impulses toward the unborn baby, they assume a maternal role toward it which is far beyond their capacity to fulfil. Their touching effort to make a miracle on its behalf and the celebration of its blackness which no one in their "unyielding community shares enhance the book's poignancy. (436)

The MacTeers endeavour to save Pecola's unborn baby is given a ritualistic form consisting in planting flower seeds in the back yard and awaiting their bloom as a sign that things will be fine and the child will live. Unfortunately, as Morrison puts it in the prologue "there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941", thus announcing the death of the

baby just after birth. From that moment onwards the reader is exposed to the mental degradation of Pecola and her tragic fall into the abyss of insanity. The Mac Teers' hope to see Pecola and her baby emerging safely from their tragic circumstances having vanished, they felt that:

The damage done was total. She spent her days, her tendril, sap green days walking up and down, up and down, her head jerking to the beat of a drummer so distant only she could hear. Elbows bent, hands on shoulders, she flailed her arms like a bird in an eternal, grotesquely effort to fly. Beating the air, a winged but grounded bird, intent on the blue void it could not reach-could not see- but which filled the valleys of her mind. (204)

13. The Three Prostitutes and the Gender Paradox

Just as in her other novels, Morrison deals with a large spectrum of female characters in *The Bluest Eye* covering a multitude of conditions such as race, age, social status and cultural representations. Though the novel focuses largely on the fate of the protagonist, the young black girl Pecola and on her wild dream to have blue eyes, it reveals the dilemma of this character through her interaction with other females and their impact upon her. These include her mother Pauline with whom she has a stormy relationship, Maureen, a snobby and rich mulatto girl who disdains dark blacks, the MacTeer sisters, Claudia and Frieda who show kindness and compassion towards her and the three prostitutes who live above her apartment and who are affectionate with her.

Morrison's inclusion of the three prostitutes in the plot of *The Bluest Eye* not only serves to widen the scope of her black female representations but it enables the writer to introduce the issue of the intersection of race and gender by emphasising its detrimental

impact of the female condition. Just like other black female characters in the novel who experience the multifaceted forms of racial oppression and struggle to find a way out from the constraints of subjugation and exclusion, the three prostitutes, despite being regarded marginal figures in society, fulfil a positive function in the novel. Payel Pal made the following comment: "Morrison depicts China, Poland and Miss Marie, the three prostitutes in the novel, as strong women who defiantly overturn the threat of social powerlessness that the political system seeks to impose upon them" (Pal et Neelakantan 4).

Significantly, Morrison uses the description of the three prostitutes to introduce another paradox. On the one hand they are felt to convey a degrading image of black women, but on the other they appear as strong personalities who seek to gain some power over men. They are considered ugly and repulsive by the community, yet their kind treatment of Pecola suggests their humane qualities. Despite their vulnerable condition due to their taboo living situation, these warm hearted but tough women exploit their sexuality to affirm their independence from men's dominance. But by adopting an attitude that relies exclusively of the exploitation of their femininity and sexuality, the three prostitutes reveal their toughness by drinking, and aggressive manners imitating men.

As a result, whatever empowering image of themselves they sought to project to the community, this is achieved at the expense of their dignity, and ends up turning them into the very male figures that they have come to despise, hence, establishing a gender paradox. Through the character of Miss Marie, Morrison introduces a subtle ironic allusion to the Second World War setting by calling her the Maginot line, which is a system of defences that France built along its border with Germany in the 1930's to

prevent an invasion. However, despite being a set of strong fortifications, it became a symbol of failed strategy as Hitler's army went around it through a wilderness area neighbouring Belgium that the French wrongly assumed that it would be impenetrable. Given this nickname by her townspeople, Marie, as Jennifer Gillan explains, that "While the names China and Poland signify on the European and Asian fronts of World War II, Maginot Line refers literally to the failed French border fortifications and metaphorically to focus on the wrong front." Feeling impotent against the continuing exclusion from society, black townswomen unreasonably focus their anger and discontent on others, such as the Maginot Line (284).

Morrison's reference to the Maginot Line as the wrong front alludes to the attitude of the black female townspeople whose condemnation of the prostitutes is a blame that does not go to the heart of the matter to identify the real causes that have led these women to practice this job. Morrison seems to present them as scapegoats of a system that privileges racial, gender and economic exclusion. Gillan makes an interesting comment regarding this:

The townswomen concentrate on vilifying the prostitutes for denigrating black womanhood, but do not acknowledge the economic inequalities that foster prostitution in the first place; the prostitutes focus on hating the townswomen, but exempt from their scorn the churchwomen who seem most to embody the ideology of true womanhood that, in actuality, excludes black women. (285)

In her approach to the three prostitutes Morrison deconstructs the stereotypical image of these marginal figures. As flatmates, these women keep on giggling and teasing each other and it is this homely atmosphere that attracts Pecola who enjoys being among

them though she does not always understand their humour. She feels, as Morrison puts it, that "they don't despise her" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 43) and that being with these women, it is as if she receives the maternal affection that she does not get from her mother.

Feeling at ease with them, Pecola participates in her own way in the conversations they have and asks questions about love, beauty and sex, topics that constitutes the core of their discussions and a source of entertainment for her. Pecola perceives these prostitutes as a charmed and happy family, a perception that stands in complete opposition with the way the female townspeople regard them. It is this cheerful atmosphere that winkles Pecola out of her monotonous life, particularly with such teasing as in the scene when Marie says that she has not seen a boy since 1927, because after that people started getting bom old. "You mean that's when you got old," China said. "I ain't never got old. Just fat" "Same thing." "You think 'cause you skinny, folks think you young? You'd make a haint buy a girdle." "And you look like the north side of a southbound mule." "All I know is, them bandy little legs of yours is every bit as old as mine." "Don't worry 'bout my bandy legs. That's the first thing they push aside (44-45). Commenting the unexpectedly lively atmosphere that prevails among this trio Bayerman states that all three prostitutes are not only happy in their life but they help others to transcend the private obsessions of other characters (Bayerman 60).

Morrison did not portray these women as weak souls who have come to practice this job out of the need for survival caused by extreme poverty. Her prostitutes, do not fit into the stereotypical image of the woman who fell in this job by accident or by submission to pimps that exploit them. Morrison describes them as the "three merry gargoyles" and "long-time" prostitutes but not of the "inadequate" kind who cannot make it on their own and turn to drug[s]...and pimps to help complete their scheme of self-destruction,

avoiding suicide only to punish some absent father or to sustain the misery of some silent mother" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 56). In fact, they do not subordinate their happiness to the romantic drive of encountering the 'charming prince' that will make their dreams come true. Indeed, none of them awaits the arrival of a potential husband to remove them from this condition.

On the contrary, Morrison shows that they hate men, and that they have fully accepted their lifestyle. As to their relation with men "they took delight in cheating them" (48). Morrison cites an instance of the aggressive attitude they show toward a man, clearly indicating a reversal of the traditional gender roles in which males were the aggressors: "On one occasion the town well knew, they lured a Jew up the stairs, pounced on him, all three, held him up by the heels, shook everything out of his pants pockets, and threw him out of the window" (48).

Pecola, who regards these prostitutes as mother figures, learns from them that choosing a partner depends on superficial love and affection from a man being "rich and good-lookin" and not from inner loveliness (53). For them, their relationship with their clients is a financial transaction, an equation, that is, where men seek pleasure from their sexual desire of the prostitutes and the prostitutes seek payment from the men's sexual desire of them.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* offers a panoply of black female characters who through their differences in age, social status, and the part they play in the plot of the novel enable a multitude of representations of the African American woman. Though she focuses on the pathetic condition of the black woman, Morrison does not restrict her vision to a lament on their suffering and oppression. The way she deals with the black woman

question relies on more than a single point of view as she attempts to embrace this issue from different angles involving a large canvas of female characters. Such an approach reflects her will to avoid generalisations and seeks to illustrate differences in perception of selves and perspectives and diversity among black women.

Hence, with the role assigned to each of her characters, Morrison seeks to project a wide vision of the black women, one that challenges their reducing to stereotypes and other biased clichés. Her inclusion of the three prostitutes is significant not for the modest part they play in the novel but rather for the image of the 'liberated' women they convey through their challenge of the restrictive norms set by the patriarchal society and by their refusal to submit to the feminine norms and behaviours as dictated by society and that would make them "docile and subservient to male whims and desires" (Abrams 90).

Approached from a feminist perspective, Morrison's portrayal of the three prostitutes presents these women as independent and powerful, an image that stands in total contradiction with the conventional gender roles of women; their newly gained confidence and self-worth seem to derive from the contention that their occupation has, in some paradoxical sense, liberated them from the oppressive norms of society.

14. Rape in *The Bluest Eye* and the Myth of the Black Rapist

Just like many other writers Morrison applies the strategy of connecting rape to other forms of female oppression. But rape in *The Bluest Eye* takes on a more serious bend as it is committed by father against daughter and is thus doubled by incest. What makes it even more abject is the age of the victim. Pecola was just eleven years old when she faced the atrocity. Morrison's use of the common trope of rape in her novel while sharing a great deal with postcolonial writing in assimilating rape with other forms of oppression

reintroduces memories of the myth of the black rapist as well as the paradoxes that ensue it. Her inclusion in the plot of *The Bluest Eye* of the issue of rape involving a black man prolongs a debate over a complex matter that since emancipation continues to engage concerns in the tumultuous race relations in America. This myth, which, was manifested during emancipation, was rooted in the white Southern propaganda stereotyping of the black men as primitive, uncivilised, brutal and sexually pathological.

The purpose of such propaganda was in effect to oppose black enfranchisement which would have given these people rights and privileges in property, education and other spheres of power so far accessible to the whites only. Stereotypes of the black rapist originated in the panic that struck Southerners after the abolition of slavery with fear to see their former slaves involved in interracial relationships and stepping over the colour line. The obsessive concern of the American South with keeping the white race pure involved the protection of white womanhood from the alleged beastly nature of the black men. As a result, stereotypes about black men have become a recurring theme in American literature depicting them as barbaric, violent and unfit to raise their status to equate the white man.

The reproduction of the myth of the black rapist served to fulfil racial control using rape as a threat to overthrow the Southern social order based on the white man's supremacy. Hence as Richardson put it: "The myth of the black male rapist was "a public and ritualized manifestation of growing white panic about a shifting social order in the South that promised blacks education, property, political participation, and social inclusion" (59).

American literature is filled with examples of Southern writers who, each in his/her own way constructed images of the American Negro which, with varying intensity,

underscored them as reprehensible creatures undeserving treatment as free humans. Finkenstaedt noted the dehumanizing attitude of certain writers who, claiming to "know the black "reduced . . . [them] to an abstraction" (162) and presumably a threat to the Southern social order of the ante-bellum South.

14.1Richard Wright's *Native Son*: Inversing the Metaphor of Rape

Richard Wright is among the first twentieth century African American writers to have dealt with the stereotypical image of the black man as a rapist of the Jim Crow era. It is in his seminal and most controversial novel *Native Son* that he introduces the issue of rape as part of the plot in which two females are involved, the white daughter of a wealthy capitalist in Chicago and Bessie Mears, Bigger's Negro girlfriend. Hired as a chauffeur to drive Mary to the university, Bigger is confronted from the beginning to a situation which he does not understand. Mary epitomizes the unconventional white woman who attempts to treat Bigger as an equal by stepping above the racial and gender barriers and ignoring such taboos, something that is utterly alien to Bigger and which he resents deeply having been raised to fear and mistrust the whites.

On his first day of work Bigger is asked to drive Mary to meet her communist boyfriend Jan. The couple forced the embarrassed Bigger to take them to a restaurant for dinner in the black area of South side of Chicago. Once there, they stayed late and all of them got drunk. On their way back Jan steps out for his apartment and Bigger drives Mary back home. Upon their arrival she is too drunk to make it to her bedroom on her own, and so he carries her upstairs and puts her in her bed. The scene involves Bigger's experiencing two conflicting feelings, being sexually aroused by his taboo proximity to

the white girl and the fear of being seen in her room and risking the most feared charge with a rape of which he is innocent.

At that very moment Mary's blind mother, Mrs. Dalton, enters the bedroom. Though Mrs. Dalton cannot see him, her ghostlike presence terrifies him. He fears that Mary's mumbling will reveal his presence, and struck with panic, he covers her face with a pillow and accidentally smothers her to death. The episode involves Bigger's trying to conceal his murder by burning Mary's body in the Dalton's furnace. To avoid suspicion, he plots to have the Daltons suspect the communist Jan by writing a ransom note suggesting a kidnapping of Mary. Bigger forces his girlfriend Bessie to participate in the plan. When Mary's bones are discovered in the furnace Bigger flees with Bessie to an empty building, and there he rapes her. Fearing that Bessie now knows too much about his deed and might give him away, he first hesitates but finally knocks her head with a brick, killing her and disposing of her body by dumping it in an air shaft. Book three of *Native Son* entitled *Flight* is devoted to Bigger's being hunted by the police, arrested, tried for the charges of rape and murder of Mary and executed. The rape and murder of his black girlfriend Bessie is ignored.

By including the issue of rape in his novel Wright was raising significant questions regarding the American legal system and its double standards concerning the fairness of the court when it comes to judge a black person. Though Wright leaves no doubt as to the culpability of his protagonist, he nevertheless points to the blindness of the legal institution, which through a biased treatment of the crime, participates in making real the stereotypical image of the myth of the black rapist thus perpetuating it. On this level, *Native Son* is meant as a denunciation of the absurdity of Bigger's execution not because

of his rape and murder of his black girlfriend but because of his accidental killing of a white woman.

While the early criticism of *Native Son* focused on the double murder and the way it has been dealt with both by society and the court, later critical views such as those expressed by Irving Howe displaced the argument on another scale contending that:

Wright drove his narrative to the very core of American phobia: sexual fright, sexual violation. He understood the fantasy of rape is a consequence of guilt.... he grasped the way in which the sexual issue has been intertwined with social relationships, for even as the white people who hire Bigger as their chauffeur are decent and charitable, even as the girl he accidentally kills is a liberal of sorts, theirs is the power and the privilege. (101)

Other views privilege focus on the legacy of the psychological trauma caused by years of the practice of lynching and victimization of black males charged with the crime of rape of white females. It is the terrifying memory of this heritage that Bigger confronts in Mary's room when her mother makes her ghost-like apparition in the dark awaking the deeply rooted impulses of fear in Bigger. Wright gives a dramatic account of the trauma caused by the internalised panic of the charge of rape on white women by having Bigger totally overwhelmed by it:

Had [Bigger] raped [Mary]? Yes, he had raped her. Every time he felt as he had felt that night, he raped. But rape was not what one did to women. Rape was what one felt when one's back was against a wall and one had to strike out, whether one wanted to or not, to keep the pack from killing one. He committed rape every time he looked into a white face. He was a long, taut piece of rubber which a thousand

white hands had stretched to the snapping point, and when he snapped it was rape. But it was rape when he cried out in hate deep in his heart as he felt the strain of living day by day. That, too, was rape. (Wright 213)

By this statement, Wright deconstructs the stereotype of the black rapist which consists in the black male sexualisation. He, thus, turns his protagonist into a victim of the tragic legacy of the whites' construction of a myth that continued over the years following emancipation to exert a psychological torture upon black men whenever they found themselves confronted with situations that involve 'suspicious' proximity with white women.

The Southern obsession with this myth extended to a coverage by the media which as Susan Brownmiller reports: "although New York City police statistics showed that black women were more frequent victims of rape than white women, the favoured victim in the tabloid headline ... was young, white, middle-class and "attractive" (Brownmiller 338). Through his portrayal of Bigger Thomas, Wright was able to exhibit the mechanics of trauma at work in the character's psyche and producing a particular behaviour in the victim. With Bigger's case Wright is also revealing how the legacy of the myth of the black rapist anchored in the psyche of his protagonist led to his dehumanisation. With *Native Son* Wright succeeded in inversing the metaphor of rape from the sexualised black man as the oppressor to that of the oppressed and dehumanised negro. Wright's loosening and refashioning of the concept of rape resulted in turning it from its literal meaning to "positioning it as a figure for the black man's experience of and resistance to racial oppression" (Drake 55).

14.2 Rape in Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man

Prior to Morrison, Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man* tackled the issue of the incestuous rape committed by a black sharecropper named Jim Trueblood with his daughter and fathering her child. Ellison relates the scene by having Jim Trueblood recount to the white philanthropist Norton how he inadvertently committed this act with his daughter provoking an incredible fascination in his listener which caused him to faint after the tale. Mr Norton seemed completely absorbed by True Blood's story and wanted to know more despite being horrified by it. This intriguing attitude on behalf of Mr Norton is what has caused critics of Ellison to dig in psychoanalysis for arguments to explain the underlying motives of his behaviour and reaction to True Blood's story. Prior to this incident Mr Norton had been telling the narrator in a conversation about his only daughter who represented everything for him and whom he loved so much. It was during a stay in Europe that she died. Mr Norton spoke about his daughter in extremely idyllic terms:

She was a being more rare, more beautiful, purer, more perfect and more delicate than the wildest dream of a poet. I could never believe her to be my own flesh and blood. Her beauty was a well-spring of purest water-of-life, and to look upon her was to drink and drink again.... She was rare, a perfect creation, a work of purest art. A delicate flower that bloomed in the liquid light of the moon. A nature not of this world, a personality like that of some biblical maiden, gracious and queenly. I found it difficult to believe her my own. (Ellison 42)

It was this highly idealised picture that Norton conveyed about his daughter which, combined with the overwhelming fascination he felt when listening to Trueblood's account of the rape of his daughter and his subsequent fainting that psychoanalytical

critics sought to explore. As Daniel Y Kim put it: "While the incestuous quality of Norton's paternal love is suggested most dramatically by the rapt attention he gives to Trueblood's story, it is also implied by the excessive sentimentality with which he describes his deceased daughter to the narrator" (Kim 312). In addition to depicting an underlying incestuous desire in Norton, Kim sees in Trueblood's story a gratification of Norton's repressed desires which are at bottom sexual. That Norton offers 100 dollars to Trueblood at the end of the account is clearly a reward for the gratification. Trueblood, in violating the incest taboo without being adequately reprimanded for it, stands for the opposite image of Norton in that he acted out a phantasm which Norton refrained to commit.

14.3 Rape in *The Bluest Eye* or the Trauma of Sexual Humiliation

Morrison's addition of the issue of incest quite apart from emphasising the horror of the act serves also to expose the motives that resulted in this violation. Far from seeking any justifications for this abject act, Morrison insists on identifying and exposing the circumstances that led Cholly Breedlove to perform such a reprehensive deed and underscore its damaging consequences on Pecola. What emerges from the narrative as to the causes leading up to the rape is that these are rooted in the traumas of oppression of being black in a racist society. In this context Morrison relates the episode of traumatic sexual humiliation experienced by Cholly Breedlove. Prior to introducing the reader with the incestuous rape, Morrison, through the voice of an omniscient narrator, recounts Cholly's history. She signals a major incident that appeared to have caused a terrible trauma which affected his entire life.

As a boy, Cholly having his first sexual experience with the black girl Darlene, was interrupted by two white men just at the point when he was reaching orgasm. Calling him, "nigger" several times and threatening him with a gun, the two men, deliberately ridiculing him, obliged him to continue the intercourse under their flashlight. Feeling completely helpless and terrified, Cholly, in total confusion had no choice but to obey, turning his hatred towards Darlene instead of his white oppressors:

Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her. He almost wished he could do it – hard, long, and painfully, he hated her so much. The flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile. He stared at Darlene's hands covering her face in the moon and lamplight. They looked like baby claws. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 48)

This scene reintroduces Morrison's use of paradox. She achieves this by constructing a double rape; that of Cholly raping Darlene unwillingly, and himself "being somehow raped" by having his sexuality displaced and lacking control over it since his desire has been appropriated by the white men.

The violence undergone by Cholly and the subsequent damage it caused to his manhood will cause his entire life bear the mark of the trauma of racist humiliation. These, in turn, will result in having Cholly shift from the position of a victim to that of a persecutor. Such an approach which singles out Cholly from two opposite perspectives, being both victim and persecutor illustrates once again Morrison's use of ambiguity and paradox and the shift of the point of view regarding the character and his deeds. Thus, in depicting the motif of rape in her novel, Morrison was also seeking to dig deeper into this

issue and to reveal through the case of Cholly the oppressive part of white racism in prompting violence and hatred into those who have suffered from these ills.

Translated in Post-colonial critical terms Cholly's condition is comparable to that of the colonized and the colonizer in that he is made to bend under the hegemonic power of his white oppressors at the very moment when he is on the point of affirming his masculinity. By revealing this incident, Morrison creates a background to the rape Cholly commits with his daughter. The emphasis on the oppressive character of this background incident is made to involve the white men to the consequences of their action and subsequently associate them in the responsibility of the act of rape committed by their brutalised victim. Such a treatment of rape by Morrison while involving a black man in this incestuous rape, it clearly designates the real authors of the reprehensible deed by pointing to the white men racial and oppressive act against Cholly and on the psychological disturbances caused to his personality. Through such an approach Morrison breaks into pieces the white man's constructed myth of the black rapist and lifts the veil on the underlying causes beneath it.

14.4 Rape and Incest as Paradox in *The Bluest Eye*

Among the central issues in *The Bluest Eye* are rape and incest of which young Pecola Breedlove is the unfortunate victim. Pecola who has experienced domestic violence from both mother and father ends up suffering the damaging effects of the incestuous rape caused by her father Cholly. In narrating these events Morrison creates a paradox by devoting a different treatment to these issues. While focusing on rape and exploring the underlying motives that have led Cholly to commit such a reprehensible act on his daughter Pecola, she does not devote a similar concern to the parallel question of

incest in her novel. Here certainly lies the paradox, that of shifting the weight of interest to the sole question of rape making it visible while keeping a veil on the issue of incest. It is therefore useful to look at the author's motives to grant rape a deep concern and connecting it to other forms of oppression while remaining rather silent on the incestuous nature of this act since the term incest is absent from her diction in the novel. One of the possible reasons of her deliberate focus on rape is the link she establishes between rape and racism. It does, indeed, seem very much likely that the issue of rape lends itself more readily to a connection with racist oppression than does the no less monstrous act of incest.

Moreover, by deliberately not making incest the central issue of the plot in her novel, Morrison wishes probably to avoid the stigmatisation of the black race as this is an ageold issue and a taboo of a universal concern. As has been pointed out earlier in this chapter Morrison narrates the rape committed by Cholly against the background of an earlier episode during which the rapist has suffered humiliation by white racist folks while he was performing his first sexual intercourse. Morrison focuses on this incident as the backbone of Cholly's dislocation of personality that has resulted in mental confusion whose stigma is revealed by the rape of his daughter. The rape scene exhibits another form of paradox revealed through the contradictory feelings that Cholly experiences following the rape of his daughter. In Morrison's own terms he feels "hatred mixed with tenderness. The hatred would not let him pick her up, the tenderness forced him to cover her." (163)

In addition to the focus on the humiliating incident and its implied linking with the rape of Pecola, Morrison points to other no less significant elements of the personality of Cholly which certainly contributed in one way or another to shape his conduct and vision

of things. Along with extreme poverty, his tragic childhood was characterised by his abandonment by his father, Cholly received no love from his father and so it is difficult to expect him to give what he has not been given. Morrison explains:

Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be.... Had he not been alone in the world since he was thirteen, knowing only a dying old woman who felt responsible for him, but whose age, sex, and interests were so remote from his own, he might have felt a stable connection between himself and the children. As it was, he reacted to them, and his reactions were based on what he felt at that moment. (74)

Morrison's portrayal of Cholly as a useless and incompetent father who has put his family outdoors is not meant to seek just condemnation for the horrors he committed. Beyond these dreadful acts through which Cholly is depicted as a drunk and irresponsible father, Morrison seeks to unveil the underlying motives beneath these deeds. The evocation of Cholly's terrible childhood background of misery and abandonment and their culmination in anger and self-hatred serve to illustrate the victimisation of black people. For Morrison the roots of evil lie in the white man's dehumanisation of the black man, who unable to turn back the violence to his white oppressor, redirects it against people of his own race. Hence, as Edwards remarked: "This circle of violence that begins as white on black violence continues as black on black violence" (Edwards 71).

15. Motherhood of Ambivalence and Paradoxes in The Bluest Eye

While most literary works tend to portray mothers as the warmest and most caring creatures, Morrison deconstructed the stereotypical depiction that assigned black women

conventional roles as concubine, breeder or mammy whose eagerness for motherhood by far exceeds their white counterparts in most of white literature. Morrison brought into question such assumptions and provided completely different portrayals of black mothers that display so much paradox and ambiguity, making it difficult for the reader to take any firm stance regarding the role Morrison assigned them in her fiction. Parvin Ghasemi (2010) dealt with this issue in his article *Negotiating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels* and noted: "Morrison presents the complexity of black maternity in a unique way which allows for the display of the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding this conventional role" (235). Despite this, however, she allowed her readers a deeper insight into black women's spirits and hearts.

In many of her works, Morrison dealt with both mother image and more importantly mother experience. She attempted to present complex female characters and mothers that leave the reader in a confused situation now condemning them, and now sympathising with them. Her disruptive narrative contributes a great deal in avoiding unidimensional representation and oversimplification. Morrison, it should be stressed, stands against the standardization of black motherhood and insists on its complexity and paradoxical character. Patricia Hill Collins throws some light on the intricate aspects of the black motherhood condition:

African-American communities value motherhood, but the Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal cost. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature. (133)

Morrison created a large range of maternal figures that vary from Pauline who despises her own black daughter and adores the white daughter of the Fishers, to Geraldine who loves her cat more than her own son and to Mrs. McTeer whose love for her daughters remained ambiguous during their whole childhood phase. With the wide spectrum of black motherhood portrayed in Morrison's fiction, she undoubtedly questions and challenges all prototypes of the perfect mother images that prevailed in literature as it is sustained by Wade Gayles:

all black women became superhuman mother, not only for their own people, but for white people as well. More than white women, it is assured, black women look to motherhood as their chief justification in life; and more than white women, they are physically and emotionally capable of handling the responsibilities with it. (59)

Morrison decisively avoided to have "black mamas" in her novels; moreover, she did not want to deal with super-creatures who despite all their sufferings have succeeded to be perfect mothers, who find their spiritual peace and psychological fulfilment in being the icons of goodness and self-sacrifice. Handerson may be cited in this regard when he asserts:

Black women have...brought into the literature a special knowledge of their lives and experiences that is... different from the descriptions/portrayals of women by men... They (Black women writers) freed themselves from the roles assigned to them in the writings of their male counterparts, where, depicted as queens and princess, or as earth mothers and idealized Big Mommas of superhuman wisdom and strength, they were unrecognizable as individuals. (XXIV)

According to Peach, "the black mammy' is an especially damaging stereotype because it legitimises the association of black women with motherhood as their only function." (14). So, Morrison made her own statement about the stereotypical representation of women as black mammies who accept passively to serve everybody leaving no room for themselves as humans and as females. Hill Collins asserts that "the controlling image of "the super-strong Black mother" is praised by African American male thinkers, an image that controls black women in the sense that it requires the continuance of them putting their needs secondary to everyone else, in order "to remain on this pedestal" (174).

Morrison left the choice for her female characters to decide whether or not they wanted to be mothers. Pauline, for example, refused to be the obedient and submissive black mammy and preferred instead to live for herself and develop her own lifestyle and pleasures. Though she demonstrates a docile attitude in the Fisher's house, she was not the black mama in her own environment. Pauline shows a great resistance against her husband's moral and physical abuse; she reacted violently to his ferocity and refused to passively accept victimization.

By behaving and reacting naturally to their environment and conditions as black women, Morrison's mothers seem to be realistic. They are depicted with all their strengths and weaknesses; their paradoxes and incoherencies and with the ambiguous nature of their characters and personalities. The intricacies that mark all of Morrison's mother figures leave them far from easy categorizations because of the multi-sidedness that typify each one of them; Morrison herself penned, just a year after the publication of *The Bluest Eye*, "if anything is true of black women, it is how consistently they have . . .

defied classification." (Morrison, What The Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib 64)

By creating three main maternal figures; Mrs. Breedlove, Mrs. Mac Teers and Geraldine, Morrison shows her willingness to implement multiple approaches in dealing with the complex issue of black families and black motherhood. Mrs. Breedlove abandons her family due to a firm conviction and a blind belief that 'white is beautiful' in sharp contrast to Mrs. McTeers who rather believes in "black is beautiful". Mrs. McTeers embraces her blackness and feels proud about her origins and finds it natural to love and take care of her family members.

Geraldine, however, is another different portrayal of Morrison's maternal figures. She is the middle class "sugar brown" southerner whose main dream is to transgress the colour line and adopt the white lifestyle and manners. Geraldine harshly fights anything that reminds her about her African-American origins. Hence, Morrison characterised her motherhood portrayals with multifaceted characters, paradox and ambiguity.

Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity in her portrayals of black motherhood aims at depicting how the particular and unique experience and condition of black women traces their roles as mothers and the subtle influence they have on their children. Morrison, through the manifold and ambivalent representations of black motherhood, displays the discrepancy that characterises black mothers' attitudes in a racist and sexist society; this is due to the "double consciousness" that accompanies the whole process of their distinguished journey towards motherhood. Morrison does not provide a standard of universal paradigm of motherhood in her fiction particularly in her very first novel, *The Bluest Eye* in particular. She refuses to adopt and reproduce the maternal images

presented from the perspective of the whites who are definitely spared from the unique and particular experience of African-Americans.

Morrison does not always endorse images of perfect mothers that find their great bliss in motherhood but nevertheless she generally portrays mothers who, despite everything, do not renounce their parental responsibilities. They generally assume the biggest part of responsibility, if not the whole responsibility, compared to their irresponsible male counterparts. Ghasemi and Hijizadeh contend in their article *Demystifying the Myth of Motherhood* that the difference between Morrison's mother characters and the stereotyped mother representations is "their attempt at determining the course of their own and their children's destinies" (477).

Many of Morrison's female characters are portrayed as women who had great expectations about men and marriage, but who ended up in deep disappointment and turned to be rather financially independent and bread winners for their families and children. This is what exactly happened to Pauline who after moving to the North with Choly. Their pink dreams of a better life in Ohio ended up in sombre nightmares. The attitude of blacks in the North were "no better than whites for meanness. They could make you feel just as no-count" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 93). In their book *Essays on African-American History, Culture and Society*, Scott and Shade describe how this migration led to change:

The dual process of urbanization and migration dramatically increased the proportion of blacks living in northern cities between 1916 and 1940. This demographic shift involved the uneasy mingling of the cultures of southern and

northern blacks and the eventual evolution of a new urban African-American culture. (36)

This deception was for Pauline a step towards a journey of self-low esteem and hatred for her own children.

Morrison's mothers do not always opt for the nuclear family alternative. Having completely different life conditions compared to their white counterparts, black mothers tend to develop different priorities and concerns. The black female and mother being subjugated to various forms of physical and verbal abuse from both the white and the black communities and living in harsh socio-economic circumstances could not adopt the whites' social structure. Being denied appreciation, recognition and consideration in a racist and sexist environment, they rather feel themselves in a dilemma of self, other and identity which drives them away from stereotypical representations. Ghasemi and Hajizadeh also sustains: "Morrison populates her novels with atypical mother figures who are searching to attain some sense of individuality and self-worth in a world which denies them these values" (Demystifying the Myth of Motherhood: Toni Morrison's Revision of African-American Mother Stereotypes 478). Thus, it seems obvious that Morrison' use of paradox and ambiguity in portraying black motherhood stems from a consciousness of the complex and controversial condition and status of the black female and mother. This particular condition of black females made their experience and their personalities not typical to any other female category.

15.1 Deconstructing Conventional Images of Black Motherhood

Morrison's representation of black motherhood deviates from what was suggested in the literature of the 1960's and 1970's. The cultural movements of the time, namely the Black Power Movement though fighting for freedom and emancipation did not, by pure selfishness, support women to rid themselves from their conventional roles as mothers and households. It was felt that encouraging black women to revolt against this traditional status threatened their supremacy as males.

Despite aiming at reaching a universal dimension of freedom and gender equality, European or white feminism excluded in a way or another an approach that would take into account the uniqueness of the black female's experience. Hence, all the previously stated movements have historically been featured by their exclusion and homogenisation of black women's issues. As a black woman, Morrison felt the need to convey the image of the African-Americans in its diversity and proceeded in her fiction to a deconstruction of all the prevailing conventional images of motherhood. She achieved this in *The Bluest Eye* by displaying a wide canvas of black mothers who differ in every aspect except in their ambivalent nature. Patricia Hill Collins made this clear in the following comment:

African-American communities value motherhood, but the Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also extract high personal cost. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect

motherhood's contradictory nature. (Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood 50)

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison exposes her readers to a diversity of mother representations with various backgrounds, attitudes and responses to their environment. Socio-economic status, origins and marital condition, all contribute in shaping her maternal figures each in a particular way. Morrison, through such characters as Pauline and Geraldine, shows how black women's thirst for assimilation with white women lifestyles calls into question the universality of women's aspirations and reveals instead their different perceptions of sexism and gender concerns. Paradoxically, while white feminists were denouncing the absence of gender equality among whites, some black women's sole and most ultimate dream was to live one day like white women; a dream that remained far from being fulfilled. So, all the irony lies in the fact that this universal movement that seeks emancipation of all women of the world was actually of no help for black women who aspired to transgress the colour line and live the life of white women. Therefore, Morrison opted for her own way of treating gender issues and particularly the question of black motherhood in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*.

One of the main concerns of Morrison in her fiction and particularly in her first novel *The Bluest Eye* is to account for the complexity of the black family and its unusual and sometime dysfunctional familiar bonds including the issue of motherhood. By referring to the Dick and Jane book that projects an image of the perfect American family, Morrison makes a statement about the cultural impact of this book that brainwashed American children for long decades. Morrison, therefore, endeavoured to contrast this Dick and Jane family standard by providing other images of American families that do not fall under this paradigm. Heinze asserts in her book *The Dilemma of Double Consciousness*:

While Morrison writes primarily about the need for the family and community to nurture and sustain the individual, she never valorizes the traditional structure, which for the majority of whites and blacks in America until very recent times consists, major studies have shown, of two parents and their children. Instead, Morrison chooses to consistently, almost systematically, dissect the nuclear structure. (55)

15.2 Questioning the Dick and Jane Model

In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison exposed her readers to different types of American families mainly black ones; the Breedloves and the MacTees in an attempt to raise people's consciousness about the multiplicity of American families and identities. She created very intricate and indefinable family roles for her characters. She dropped the veil on the dangerous and damaging psychological effect caused by the incarnation of this unique and exclusive model of the perfect American family which denies the diversity that characterises the American community. The Dick and Jane model was the only visible and promoted ideal of what is perceived as a good family. Black families, exposed exclusively to the Dick and Jane prototype, feel themselves excluded from this world of beauty, harmony, happiness and perfection.

None of Morrison's families in *The Bluest Eye* meet with the Dick and Jane model. She created multiple black families with diverse mother figures in an attempt to show that the act of mothering which seems naturally and spontaneously achieved in white families tends to be rather a challenging experience for black women. Mothering in *The Bluest Eye* is an act that holds much intricacy; this complexity is reflected in the paradox and ambiguity that characterise most of Morrison's mothers.

Mrs. Breedlove for instance is one of the most controversial mother figures in the novel. Pauline Breedlove, ironically, does not "breed love" for her children. A mutilated mother, Mrs. Breedlove imposed her own self-loathing and low self-esteem on her own children; she was not able to break the vicious cycle of self-hatred imposed on blacks by the hegemonic racist culture; "...into her son she beat a fear, a loud desire to run away, and into her daughter she beat a fear of growing up, fear of people, fear of life" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 102).

Pauline failed to establish a functional relationship with her children and she could not fulfil her sacred and conventional role as a mother, who unconditionally embraces her children with natural feeling of love and affection. Pauline's distorted-self had a direct impact on her children's psyche. Being drastically influenced by the damaging white standards of beauty, Pauline could not help avoiding hating herself and her own children by extension. In this regard, in her book *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness"* Denise Heinze elucidates the maiming consequences of these beauty stereotypes by asserting: "Idealized beauty has the power to disenfranchise a child of mother love, to psychically splinter an entire race identity, and to imprison ail human beings in static and stagnant relationships" (15).

Pauline's toxic ideas about white beauty standards made her blindly convinced that white is beautiful and black is ugly, and that is why she sees ugliness everywhere; in her own family members and family environment including her own house. One of the most striking confessions of Pauline is her firm conviction of her daughter's ugliness. Morrison shifts the novel's perspective to Pauline to reveal her deep and most sincere feelings toward Pecola just after she delivered her. Her perception of the baby shows a great deal of paradox in Pauline's very first maternal emotions:

Anyways, the baby come. Big old healthy thing. She looked different from what I thought. Reckon I talked to it so much before I conjured up a mind's eye view of it. So, when I seed it, it was like looking at a picture of your mama when she was a girl. You knows who she is, but she don't look the same. They give her to me for a nursing, and she liked to pull my nipple off right away. She caught on fast. Not like Sammy, he was the hardest child to feed. But Pecola look like she knowed right off what to do. A right smart baby she was. I used to like to watch her. You know they makes them greedy sounds. Eyes all soft and wet. A cross between a puppy and a dying man. But I knowed she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 126)

What is rather astonishing is the fact that Pauline was really happy and excited to have her second baby Pecola. She did not worry or felt it a heavy burden to be responsible of a second child; on the contrary, she showed a great predisposition for bringing up her new child and felt herself enthusiastically concerned with the baby more than anything else. She even promised to "love it no matter what it looked like" (124). Here is a passage that displays Pauline's friendly talks with her coming baby:

But that second time, I actually tried to get pregnant. Maybe 'cause I'd had one already and wasn't scairt to do it. Anyway, I felt good, and wasn't thinking on the carrying, just the baby itself. I used to talk to it whilst it be still in the womb. Like good friends we was. You know. I be hanging wash and I knowed lifting weren't good for it. I'd say to it holt on now I gone hang up these few rags, don't get froggy; it be over soon. It wouldn't leap or nothing. Or I be mixing something in a bowl for the other chile and I'd talk to it then too. You know, just friendly talk. On up til the end I felted good about that baby. (124)

Unfortunately, however, these beautiful feelings and sweet moments preceding the delivery of the baby have soon left room for more contradictory and ambiguous emotions and reflections; It is noticeable that Pauline's feelings are fluctuating between attraction and repulsion.

Pauline's reaction when she saw her baby girl contradicts to a great extent the reaction of a true blood mother. Naturally, it is the mother who is the first person to see her babies' beauty whatever could be the opinion of the other people. Mothers tend to be highly subjective in perceiving their children as the most beautiful ones in the world. Regrettably for Pecola, it is her own mother who initially perceives and admits her ugliness. Thus, Pecola grew up with the only feeling she experienced, and this was her ugliness of which she was made aware from her mother's perception of her. How can Pecola, a very young and vulnerable girl resist the negative gazes her mother throws at her at every encounter between them. In her article *Pariah's and Community*, Roberta Rubenstein sustains:

the core of what eventually forms as the individual's self-concept begins with the mirroring that occurs between mother and baby. Typically, what the baby sees when it looks into its mother's face is "himself or herself. In other words, the mother is looking at the baby and what she sees there." In this sense, then Pecola's first perception is her mother's reflection of her ugliness. From the seed of that initial negation grows her subsequent "fear of growing up, fear of other people, fear of life. (129)

However, when Pauline started working as a housekeeper for the Fishers; a wealthy white family, a docile side of her character as a mother was revealed. The cold, indifferent

and abusive mother turns astonishingly to be a very affectionate and caring mom. Pauline generates strong feelings of love towards the little blonde girl of the Fishers in sharp contrast to her abnormal and offensive attitude towards her own helpless daughter. It is crucial to see how she exchanged her role as the mother of Pecola to be the mother of the little girl of the Fishers. At a given moment, Pauline seems to believe herself a real mother for the little blonde girl and not for her black daughter. It is as if she has appropriated everything in the Fishers house, their house, their kitchen and their own daughter. She enjoys everything she does there.

On an occasion, Pecola and her friends Claudia and Frieda went to see Pauline in the Fishers house. They were surprised by Pauline's different and nice manners at the Fishers house. She welcomed them and invited them in to the nice white Fishers' house. Everything seemed alright until the pink and white little girl of the Fishers came in the kitchen looking for "Polly"; this was awful for the girls who have always heard Pecola calling her mother "Mrs. Breedlove".

Claudia felt envy and anger as she always feels when she is exposed to situations of this sort "The familiar violence rose in me. Her calling Mrs. Breedlove Polly, when even Pecola called her mother Mrs. Breedlove, seemed reason enough to scratch her" (108), and Pecola as well reacted the same way feeling shame, self-contempt and self-hatred. But what was actually more striking is Pauline's reaction after Pecola accidentally knocks over the berry cobbler in the Fishers' kitchen; Pauline bitterly bastes Pecola and tenderly comforts the little pink and white girl even though Pecola was painfully burned and the Fishers girl was only slightly stained. Angrily Claudia reports this incident:

In one gallop she was on Pecola, and with the back of her hand knocked her to the floor. Pecola slid in the pie juice, one leg folding under her. Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly and Frieda and me by implication. "Crazy fool . . . my floor, mess . . . look what you... work . . . get on out . . . now that . . . crazy . . . my floor, my floor . . . my floor." Her words were hotter and darker than the smoking berries, and we backed away in dread. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 109)

Pauline, by contrast, seems to invest all her maternal feelings in consoling and heartening the Fishers little girl; "Hush, baby, hush. Come here. Oh, Lord, look at your dress. Don't cry no more. Polly will change it" (109). What is really disturbing is Pauline's refusal to tell the Fishers little girl that the three girls who were in the kitchen were her own daughter and her two friends. Pauline did not want to inform the little girl that she already has a daughter may be unconsciously to let the little girl feel and believe she is the only "baby" for "Polly". It is important at this stage to see how Pauline negates her own daughter in a desperate attempt to affirm her own identity; her newly acquired and more preferable identity for her being part of the Fishers "white beautiful" family;

"Who were they, Polly?"

"Don't worry none, baby."

"You gonna make another pie?"

"'Course I will."

"Who were they, Polly?"

"Hush. Don't worry none," she whispered, and the honey in her words complemented the sundown spilling on the lake. (109)

Therefore, it seems clear that for Pauline the world of the Fishers is just like the world of Hollywood. The pleasure she used to feel when watching pictures in the cinema is the same pleasure she lives when she is in the Fishers' environment. The Fishers' house was an alternative for the inaccessible Hollywood world. It is there where she buries her dark feeling of disgust towards her roots, her life and her circumstances. Susan Willis states:

As housemaid in a prosperous lakeshore home, Polly Breedlove lives in a form of schizophrenia, in which her marginality is constantly confronted with a world of Hollywood movies, white sheets, and tender blond children. When at work or in the movies, she separates herself from her own kinky hair and decayed tooth. The tragedy of a woman's alienation is its effect on her role as mother. Her emotions split, Polly showers tenderness and love on her employer's child, and rains violence and disdain on her own. (Eruptions of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison 36)

Furthermore, Pauline appears to be completely absorbed by her job in the Fishers house. Her most ultimate gratification is when she learns the Fishers are satisfied. This absolute absorption in work made her miss an extremely important event in her daughter's life; Pecola's menstruation. Pecola experienced menstruation for the first time with her friends Claudia and Frieda, and Pecola's reaction shows a great deal of her mother's negligence of her. Pauline did not naturally, as most of mothers do, initiate her daughter to that crucial moment in the life of any girl:

Suddenly Pecola bolted straight up, her eyes wide with terror. A whinnying sound came from her mouth.

"What's the matter with you?"

Frieda stood up too. Then we both looked where Pecola was staring. Blood was running down her legs. Some drops were on the steps. I leaped up. "Hey. You cut yourself? Look. It's all over your dress."

A brownish-red stain discolored the back of her dress. She kept whinnying, standing with her legs far apart.

Frieda said, "Oh. Lordy! I know. I know what that is!"

"What?" Pecola's fingers went to her mouth.

"That's ministratin'."

"What's that?"

"You know."

"Am I going to die?" she asked. "Noooo. You won't die. It just means you can have a baby!"

"What?" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 28)

This scene is highly significant for the reader who may question once again his perception of Pauline. At first glance, Pauline fits well in the stereotype of the black mammy who is always happy serving her white boss and who is never resentful of her life and destiny, however, her violent reaction toward her daughter and her firm denial of the reality of her real-life calls into question her categorisation in this stereotype. Paradoxically enough, Pauline is not the constant happy black mammy who feels peace and satisfaction with the quality of her life and her role in it. On the contrary, Pauline through her fierce attitude and her troubled psychological state shows a great deal of discontent and dissatisfaction with her life. Hence, one more time, Morrison stresses the paradox that controls the dynamics of black motherhood through the significant and complex scenes and situations she creates in her novel.

Moreover, one of the strangest behaviours of Pauline towards her daughter is her reaction concerning Pecola's rape. Everybody was talking about how violently she slaughtered her daughter "the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive" (189). Instead of feeling pity for the helpless Pecola who lived the double trauma of rape and incest twice, Pauline paradoxically punishes and abuses her daughter who remains in fact the most pitiful victim in this heart-breaking situation. Her reaction is actually ambiguous; is she jealous that her husband Cholly was sexually attracted to another person? Or it is just that she poured out all her anger on Pecola because she could not do this with Cholly? Or simply, while she was beating Pecola she felt herself beating the ugliness of her life as a wife and a mother within the "black ugly Breedlove family".

All these paradoxes in Pauline's treatments of her real black daughter and the white little girl of the Fishers made the character of Pauline and her attitude as a mother ambiguous, thus stimulating in the reader's mind a lot of questions and queries. It is possibly Morrison's objective to have chosen to reveal this dark side of Pauline as a mother before shifting the perspective of the novel and giving Pauline a more positive status as a mother. Morrison purposefully complicated the dynamics of mother-daughter relationship within the Breedloves before opening a window on the very heartly confessions and perceptions of Pauline about her life and her past background through long stream of consciousness passages. Morrison undoubtedly did not want her readers to fall under easy and superficial judgments.

Pauline is a character that is full of contradictions. Many critics pointed out to the ambivalence that characterises her personality. It is difficult to categorise Pauline under any stereotypical maternal image or architype. It is important to notice that Pauline, the abusive and indifferent mother, is the same mother who assures bread for her children

and a roof over their heads. She is the one who cares about providing for her children's material needs; a responsibility that seems completely dismissed by their drunken father who freed himself from any familial burdens, and who complicated things more by putting his children's house on fire. It is, in effect, Pauline who thinks and cares about everything in the house and Morrison records a very significant scene in this regard at the beginning of the novel when she shows Cholly's indifferent and irresponsible attitudes towards the simplest and most immediate needs of his family. He simply refused to bring coal, irritating Pauline "If working like a mule don't give me the right to be warm, what am I doing it for? You sure ain't bringing in nothing. If it was left up to you, we'd all be dead" (40-41). Morrison makes use of paradox in making Pauline play the role of the father and not of the mother in an attempt to deconstruct the old cliché regarding the woman's place in the home and the roles of black mothers.

Besides, what actually adds to Pauline's paradoxical and ambiguous character is her contrasting attitude when dealing with the Fishers and with her own family members. When Pauline is in the Fishers' house, she becomes "Polly" with all the characteristics of the black "mammie" who is there to serve everybody without complaining and who is always wise whatever are the circumstances. She becomes the ideal domestic helper for the Fishers as she makes sure that all what she does for them is done in a perfect way. For example, she always tries her best to buy things that are really impeccable "She refused beef slightly dark or with edges not properly trimmed. The slightly reeking fish that she accepted for her own family she would all but throw in the fish man's face if he sent it to the Fisher house" (128).

Pauline's most ultimate pleasure is to see the Fishers fulfilled with her good services, and she could finally reach her dream and hear them saying: "We'll never let her go. We could never find anybody like Polly. She will not leave the kitchen until everything is in order. Really, she is the ideal servant" (129). This relatively pejorative image of Pauline as a black worshiper of her white bosses, as a black woman who enjoys serving the white family at the expense of her own black family is soon reversed when Morrison opened a window for her readers on the real circumstances and context in which Pauline lived.

Morrison remains ambivalent in her treatment of Pauline by providing some comments on the society's attitude toward Pauline "The creditors and service people who humiliated her when she went to them on her own behalf respected her, were even intimidated by her, when she spoke for the Fishers" (128). So, by including such a comment, Morrison is trying to find some excuse to Pauline and indirectly blaming the society with its racist stands for the behaviour of Pauline. The racist black society in one way or another encourages Pauline live in a white skin and deny her black nature to grant herself some advantages and some prestige.

The temptations that Pauline faces whenever she is outside her own black family could be a good reason behind the paradoxical and ambiguous character Pauline develops toward her black identity and by extension her black family and more particularly her own daughter. Therefore, Pauline absurdly prefers to reject and deny her black daughter in an attempt to appropriate herself the comforts and advantages of the white mother. Morrison's display of Pauline's interaction with her black daughter and the white Fishers' daughter serves her aim of portraying paradox and ambiguity that characterise the complex and controversial nature of the dynamics of black mother-daughter relationships.

Morrison, by unveiling in a scene through Pauline's point of view the behaviour of the doctor towards Pauline few moments before her delivering of her baby reveals a lot about the effects of racism on her. The racist society that granted Pauline prestige when she spoke on behalf of the white Fishers is the same society that deprives her any form of humanity when she speaks on behalf of her own. In a prominent scene, Pauline speaks about how a white racist doctor perceives her at her very sensitive and decisive moments few minutes before she gives birth to Pecola. The doctor who examined her told his students that unlike white women, black women do not feel any pain when delivering their babies. He dehumanized her at a crucial moment when almost all women need support and consideration:

A little old doctor come to examine me. He had all sorts of stuff. He gloved his hand and put some kind of jelly on it and rammed it up between my legs. When he left off, some more doctors come. One old one and some young ones. The old one was learning the young ones about babies. Showing them how to do. When he got to me he said now these here women you don't have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses. (125)

Hence, Morrison by shifting perspectives and brusquely changing tones and providing background information about characters and the experiences they have undergone, she gradually deciphers and repeals prejudgments and deconstructs stereotypes. When dealing with The Breedloves; either Pauline or Cholly, Morrison introduced them through a series of violent, shocking and unconventional scenes that reveal their dark side before giving the reader insight to some other contradictory and completely paradoxical instances that allow some other different traits of her characters to resurface.

Pauline, viewed from this other angle, becomes a maternal figure that escapes easy categorisations. Her embodying of contrasting maternal features confirms her ambiguous

nature. The paradox that pervades her life; being torn between a world she aspires to be part of and her real world, which she desperately aspires to desert, serves a great deal to illustrate Morrison's complex stands towards black motherhood in racist America. In using fragmentation in her narrative technique, Morrison throws into confusion the reader's simplistic perception of Pauline as a bad mother. The reader's assumptions of good and bad as binary oppositions are soon questioned as Morrison reveals much about the contextual details of Pauline's early life. It is at this stage that things get ambiguous and paradoxical and to a great extent ambivalent.

15.3 Clinging to Tradition: A Challenge to White Values

Morrison did not blindly opt for the "Black is beautiful" slogan. Adopting superficially and simplistically such slogans, Morrison believes, will never serve the issue and interest of the black community. She avoided reproducing the white racist dogma which accords the highest interest and value to whiteness as the principal and unquestioned criterion of beauty. On the contrary, she believes that reversing things and making "Black" beautiful will inevitably make "White" ugly; and Morrison did not actually aspire to promote for such discriminatory stands. These categorisations, derived from clichés; will unavoidably victimise either the whites or their counterparts; the blacks. Morrison does not believe that associating blackness with beauty is the best way to revalue African Americans and their ideology and culture. Focusing exclusively on physical beauty and centring the whole debate around it was not a chief priority for Morrison.

Morrison (1974) elucidates her own view about physical beauty saying that "the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumpiest, most pernicious and

destructive ideas of the western world and we should have nothing to do with it" (Behind the Making of the Black World 87). She rather favoured a better alternative which resides in racial pride and reconnection with roots through the oral tradition and music like blues and jazz. By according much interest to music and considering it as an important part of the black American culture and heritage, Morrison joins Angela Davis who believes that "Art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge, black people were able to create with their music an aesthetic community of resistance, which in turn encouraged and nurtured a political community of active struggle for freedom" (Lubiano 201). Morrison displayed this alternative through her anti-heroine Claudia who thanks to her connection with her 'maternal black culture' through listening to her mother's songs and stories succeeded to survive in racist America.

Unfortunately, this was not the case for apprehensive Pecola who was brought up between the hands of a mother whose first and most ultimate dream was to deny and detach herself from her black roots and everything that reminds her of her African-American origins. Moses argues in this context,

this connection to ancestral knowledge transmitted through songs, habits and storytelling is essential to the survival of the MacTeer sisters, and its absence is one of the reasons for the downfall of the Breedloves ... the crucial difference that enables Claudia to challenge white ideological values while Pecola is systematically destroyed by them is the degree of stability and self-love fostered within their home environments. It is in fact Mrs. Mac Teer who embodies this alternative in the novel. She is portrayed as a mother who is rather faithful to her black nature and who succeeded in transmitting her racial pride to her daughters. (131)

Mrs. MacTeer who constantly sings the blues is a strict but a loving and affectionate mother. Though she treats her daughters with harsh severity, she, nevertheless, loves them ferociously. It is in fact this fierce love that helped building her daughters' strong personalities and sense of pride; especially, Claudia who resisted to the hegemonic culture that perceives her as black and ugly. Mrs. MacTeer does not explicitly express her love to her daughters but her absolute preoccupation with maintaining peace and stability within her family, and her daily hard working and strong devotion to keep her family nurtured, hale and healthy is the best way for her to express her intense motherly love. She sometimes passes for the callous woman who fusses loudly but at the same time she is witty enough to make her pain and frustration less cruel by singing them in pure blues hymns. She is rather felt as a burdened mother but not as a bad one.

Mrs. MacTeer seems to be aware that in addition to all her conventional domestic responsibilities as a mother, she has another more crucial duty as a black mother more particularly. She feels constantly the need to sustain her daughters to make them ready to confront the harsh racism that awaits them just a step away from their home. O' Reilley asserts in this context; "the heart of black motherhood, in both practice and thought, is how to preserve, protect and more generally empower black children so that they may resist racist practices that seek to harm them and grow into adulthood whole and complete." (4)

Morrison believes that story-telling, though an old tradition for transmitting black culture to generations, remains an effective way for black mothers to protect their children from disconnection from their mother culture. This disconnection, Morrison believes, leaves them vulnerable to the racist treatment they will receive later on in their lives, and

which might leave them with irreversible psychological sequels and traumas just like Pecola.

Mrs. MacTeer is portrayed as the mother who always tells stories about 'folks' as Claudia mentions in many instances in the novel and those stories are didactic in nature because they initiate the little girls to life and its challenging experiences. These stories introduce the girls to some issues that are common for the black community and this can be inspiring for them to develop strategies of resistance against the toxic hegemonic ideas they are subjected to everywhere in their environment. Alice Walker states in *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*: "So many of the stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother's stories...I have absorbed not only the stories themselves, but something of the urgency that involves the knowledge that her stories...like her life must be recorded" (179).

Thus, many other black writers, share Morrison's approach about the importance of the black heritage, particularly, the oral tradition as an effective means for empowering black children and strengthening their ties with their mothers; the case of the the MacTeers illustrates well this approach. According Reilley:

Mrs. MacTeer speaks her grievances, she is not silenced by them, as is Mrs Breedlove. Frieda and Claudia learn from their mother's songs, soliloquies, and conversations that women have a voice and that through the speaking, singing and sharing of experiences women can claim and can take control of their lives. (126)

Many critics and scholars share the view of Reilley that black women and mothers should voice their experiences to their children to secure their passage from innocent and naïve childhood to maturity with the minimum of hindrances. Karla Holloway further

argues, "Black women, carry the voice of the mother—they are the progenitors, the assurance of the line . . . as carriers of the voice [black women] carry wisdom—mother wit. They teach the children to survive and remember" (123).

Mrs. MacTeer is also a singer, and her songs convey constructive knowledge to her daughters. Her songs reflect on her mood and her different moods affect her daughters' as well. Claudia asserts:

If my mother was in a singing mood, it wasn't so bad. She would sing about hard times, bad times, and somebody- done- gone- and-left- me times. But her voice was so sweet and singing voice so melty I found myself longing for those hard times, yearning to be grown without a "thin di-i-ime to my name." I look forward to the delicious time when "my man" would leave me, when I "hate to see that evening sun go down..." misery colored by the greens and blues in my mother's voice took all the grief out of the words and left me with a conviction that pain was not only endurable, it was sweet. But without songs, those Saturdays sat on my head like a coal scuttle, but if mama was fussing as she is doing now, it was like somebody throwing stones at it. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 26)

Claudia and her sister meditate the words in Mrs. MacTeer's songs and deduce their deep connotations. Her words widen the spectrum of her daughters' imagination and reflection. Therefore, conceivably Mrs MacTeer does not fit the conventional image of the nurturing mother, but she succeeds in creating a healthy and sane environment for her daughters to grow in peace with their origins and live with reconciliation with oneself. Bernard and Bernard sustain in this context, "Black mothers pass on the torch to their

daughters, who are expected to become the next generation of mothers, grandmothers, or othermothers, to guard future generations" (47).

However, Morison did not overtly expose the positive qualities of Mrs. MacTeer as a mother, she abruptly infuses them with some paradoxical and ambiguous behaviours that results in some ambivalence in the portrayal of Mrs. MacTeer as a maternal figure. This seems to be done purposefully by Morrison whose philosophy has always been avoiding easy categorizations. Morrison was realistic in her presentation of Mrs. MacTeer who, despite the fact that she assumes her role as a mother, still has some limitations, this ambiguity and ambivalence are manifested in some of her attitudes, action and reactions which demonstrate Morrison's complex presentation of black taking into account their particular socio-economic condition.

Claudia calls and narrates a significant childhood scene when she got sick just after a trip to collect coal. She later on shows how her young age and lack of maturity and experience led her to misinterpreting her mother's attitude:

when on a day after a trip to collect coal, I cough once, loudly, through bronchial tubes already packed tight with phlegm, my mother frowns. 'Great Jesus. get on in that bed. How many times do I have to tell you to wear something on your head? You must be the biggest fool in this town. Frieda? Get some rags and stuff that window'. (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 10)

At first glance, this scene sounds really disappointing; Mrs. MacTeer, who is supposed to express some affection and pity towards her little sick daughter, she rather shows toughness. However, this coldness from the part of Mrs. MacTeer did not seem to last long as Claudia further narrates:

No one speaks to me or asks how I feel. In an hour or two my mother comes. Her hands are large and rough, and when she rubs the Vicks salve on my chest, I am rigid with pain. She takes two fingers' full of it at a time, and massages my chest until I am faint. Just when I think I will tip over into a scream, she scoops out a little of the salve on her forefinger and puts it in my mouth, telling me to swallow. A hot flannel is wrapped about my neck and chest. I am covered up with heavy quilts and ordered to sweat, which I do promptly. (11)

Thus, though Mrs. MacTeer has not initially displayed any signs of affection and tenderness, she nevertheless performed all the necessary tasks to help her daughter recover. So, Morrison displays that Mrs. MacTeer, though not showing conventional motherly attitudes, she still, assumes her duty of taking care of her daughter's health with all possible means and ways. Claudia at the time was young enough to misread her mother's brutal and forthright mannerisms for apathy. Mrs. MacTeer does not fit in the stereotypical and prevailing image of the 'black mammy'; nor does she represent the monarch that is oppressed and that oppresses the more vulnerable section of society which is children. Afterall, Mrs. MacTeer shows her motherly care and anxiousness about her daughter's health, however, she has her own way of expressing her feelings. She seems to express them with the same anger, fear and anxiety she feels about her daughter's health and well-being. She could hardly bear seeing her daughter's weakness and vulnerability because she is afraid not to be able to provide for her the necessary care because of their difficult socio-economic condition. Mrs. MacTeer feels powerlessness in front of poverty and this is the reason behind her perpetual nervousness and anxiety. Claudia adds that she throwed up, and once again her mother was fussing but Claudia this time understands better her mother's reaction:

My mother's voice drones on, she is not talking to the puke, but she is calling it my name: Claudia. She wipes it up as best as she can and puts a scratchy towel over the large wet place. I lie down again. The rags have fallen from the window crack, and the air is cold. I dare not call her back and am reluctant to leave my warmth. My mother's anger humiliates me; her words chafe my cheeks, and I am crying. I do not know that she is not angry at me, but at my sickness. I believe she despises my weakness for letting the sickness "take holt". By and by I will not get sick; I will refuse to. But for now, I am crying. I know I am making more snot, but I can't stop. I know I am making more snot, but I can't stop. (11)

Claudia carries on questioning her childish and naïve interpretations of her mother's reactions. With an adult perspective, Claudia tends to reverse all what she has assumed before about her mother's aloofness and hardiness; But was it really like that? As painful as I remember? Only mildly. Or rather, it was a productive and fructifying pain. Love, thick and dark as Alaga syrup, eased up into that cracked window. I could smell it—taste it—sweet, musty, with an edge of wintergreen in its base—everywhere in that house. It stuck, along with my tongue, to the frosted windowpanes. It coated my chest, along with the salve, and when the flannel came undone in my sleep, the clear, sharp curves of air outlined its presence on my throat. At the night, when my coughing was dry and tough, hands repinned the flannel, readjusted the quilt, and rested a moment on my forehead. So, when I think of autumn, I think of somebody with hands who did not want me to die. (12)

Hence, Mrs. MacTeer, though often felt and described by Claudia as an enigmatic character that she all the time attempts to decipher, she, later on, understands more neatly her mother's condition and what is behind her equivocal manners. This shift in perspective from naïve childhood to wise maturity was a witty choice made by Morrison

who aimed at showing how black motherhood in racist America can be easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. The burden black mothers have on their shoulders may lead them to have particular ways of experiencing motherhood and more particularly expressing it.

Morrison displays how black mothers sometimes need some masculine attitude to be able to show and preserve their strength; they are sometimes unwillingly led to sacrifice their natural feminine attitude to keep strong and courageous in front of the harsh circumstances that their white counterparts have never experienced. Morrison questions the conventional and classical images of the ideal and perfect mother, and endeavours to display that motherly love, for black mothers, can be expressed with the same darkness of the milieu it exists in. Thus, black mothers who do not share the same conditions and status of their white counterparts tend to resist any form of homogenisation.

The multi-temporality that characterises Claudia' narration and tone symbolically exhibits how black mothers' behaviours can be easily misinterpreted by their children; their excessive care and anguish about their offspring can be easily belittled. Claudia, as a naïve little girl shares white and black men's perception of black mothers who are constantly criticised because they to be strong. They tend to blacken the image of the black woman by associating her strength with aggressivity and masculinity.

The shift in the narrative voice of Claudia and her simultaneous revision of her memories and flashbacks helps in bringing into question the negative judgment passed on black women and mothers and displays how a completely different reading of black motherhood could be made when children grow mature, and then, better perceive and interpret their mothers' behaviours. The behaviours and attitudes that might carry some

anger and severity can also be an expression of fierce love and concern of a mother who tends to transgress her ordinary and conventional role; that of domestic chores. If Mrs. MacTeer projects the image of the heavily burdened mother; it is because of her deep consciousness of her duty as a black mother that is not limited to taking care of her daughters' physical health; but it is rather her awareness that mental health matters a lot and this is perhaps what makes her seem most of the time anxious, nervous and difficult to understand.

Morrison' view joins Collins' in that children can only learn how about life and its challenges in a racist environment from home; it is at home that children get empowered to face the American racist practices. Collins argues:

Racial ethnic women's motherwork reflects the tensions inherent in trying to foster a meaningful racial identity in children within a society that denigrates people of color... [Racial ethnic] children must first be taught to survive in systems that oppress them. Moreover, this survival must not come at the expense of self-esteem. Thus, a dialectal relationship exists between systems of racial oppression designed to strip a subordinated group of a sense of personal identity and a sense of collective peoplehood, and the cultures of resistance extant in various ethnic groups that resist the oppression. For women of color, motherwork for identity occurs at this critical juncture. (57)

One of the main issues that Morrison highlighted concerning Mrs. MacTeer is the sense of compassion she holds towards her black community. She was was the 'othermother' for Pecola who was put outdoors by her father who set their house on fire. Though living in very harsh socio-economic conditions, Mrs. MacTeer took in charge the

responsibility of taking care of abandoned Pecola despite the fact that having another mouth to feed was not what Mrs. MacTeer wished most in such circumstances: "I got about as much business with another mouth to feed as a cat has with side pockets. As if I don't have trouble enough trying to feed my own and keep out the poorhous" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 24). Mrs. MacTeer further complains about the quantity of milk Pecola drank but this was out of fear that she could not afford the burden of having boarders anymore due to her poverty:

Mama's soliloquy slid into the silence "... Bible say feed the hungry. That's fine. That's alright but I ain't feeding no elephants... anybody need three quarts of milk to *live* need to get out of here. They in the wrong place. What is this? Some kind of *dairy* farm"? (27)

Mrs. MacTeer is not angry at Pecola but at her selfish and irresponsible parents. She criticises Pauline and Cholly for abandoning their little daughter, a thing she cannot admit or tolerate:

I don't mind folks coming in and getting what they want... I'm willing to do what I can for folks. Can't nobody say I ain't. But this has got to stop, and I'm just the one to stop it. Bible say watch as well as pray. Folks just dump they children off on you and go on 'bout they business. Ain't nobody even peeped in here to see whether that child has a loaf of bread. Look like they would just peep in to see whether I had a loaf of bread to give her. But naw. That thought don't cross they mind. That old trifling Cholly been out of jail two whole days and ain't been here yet to see if his own child was 'live or dead. She could be dead for all he know. And that mama neither. What kind of something is that? (25)

Mrs. MacTeer feels herself torn between her ideals and values of compassion with her community and her instinct of a mother who prefers to feed her own children and not the others at the expense of her own family. Securing the needs of her family within the harsh poverty they were living in made her behave with some brutal stinginess. Despite all the challenges that face black mothers and mainly poverty, Morrison shows how Mrs. MacTeer inherited the African-American tradition of 'other mothering'; a tradition that remains central to her native culture. It is thanks to this tradition that the black community could survive within the misery that controlled their lives for long decades. Bell Hooks, in her essay "Homeplace: A site of Resistance" notes:

Child care is a responsibility that can be shared with other childrearers, with people who do not live with children. This form of parenting is revolutionary in this society because it takes place in opposition to the idea that parents, especially mothers, should be the only childrearers. Many people raised in black communities experienced this type of community-based child care. Black women who had to leave the home and work to help provide for families could not afford to send children to day-care centers and such centers did not always exist. They relied on people in their communities to help. Even in families where the mother stayed home, she could also rely on people in the community to help... People who did not have children often took responsibility for sharing in childrearing. (44)

Morrison, however, extends the scene of Mrs. MacTeer's interaction with the girls over the fact of 'playing nasty' to reveal the docile side of Mrs. MacTeer who soon abandoned her long and irritating soliloquy about Pecola and 'folks' just after she learned about Pecola's menstruation. Morrison highlighted a remarkable human side once again in Mrs. MacTeer's personality.

Though in a mood of tension, Mrs. MacTeer unveils her motherly affection when she tenderly takes care of Pecola who seems completely panicked and terrified seeing herself bleeding. Mrs. MacTeer, after making sure that the girls, contrary to Rosemary' accusations, were not 'playing nasty', and that all this fuss was just because of Pecola's menstruation, she tenderly took her to the bathroom to take care of her and her eyes were full of remorse for having blindly beaten the girls:

Mama looked at Frieda for verification. Frieda nodded. "She's ministratin'. We was just helping." Mama released Pecola and stood looking at her. Then she pulled both of them toward her, their heads against her stomach. Her eyes were sorry. "All right, all right. Now, stop crying. I didn't know. Come on, now. Get on in the house. Go on home, Rosemary. The show is over." We trooped in, Frieda sobbing quietly, Pecola carrying a white tail, me carrying the little-girl-gone-to-woman pants. Mama led us to the bathroom. She prodded Pecola inside, and taking the underwear from me, told us to stay out… The water gushed, and over its gushing we could hear the music of my mother's laughter. (31)

What should be stressed concerning this incident, is the significant reaction of Frieda, she was the one who initially tried to comfort Pecola, who contrary to Frieda, was completely ignorant about what menstruation is. Pecola's mother has not initiated her daughter to this crucial detail in the life of any girl. Mrs. MacTeer, however, with all the burden she has on her shoulders had enough consciousness about the necessity of initiating and preparing Frieda, her elder daughter, to such an issue.

It is neatly noticeable how Frieda's reaction was in sharp contrast to Pecola's. Frieda masters all the rituals that must be practiced when you menstruate, contrary to Pecola

who could not help disassociating blood from death. At this stage, Morrison shed light on the devastating effects of the lack of communication between mothers and daughters. This is highlighted through Pecola's heart-breaking reaction when she experienced menstruation for the first time and the pitiful psychological state she was in. Besides, Mrs. MacTeer, once again, proves to be a real 'othermother' for Pecola who, though having parents still alive, is living like an orphan.

Mrs. MacTeer is very sincere in her feelings and attitudes towards her community. Though she might not be discreet in her speech or manners, and sometimes she passes for the callous woman because of her outspokenness, but her sincerity is felt in different instances in the novel. When Rosemary accused the girls for 'playing nasty', Mrs MacTeer showed the same concern about sexual education for both, her two daughters, and Pecola who is not actually her biological daughter. She considers Pecola one of her daughters just like Frieda and Claudia and she feels responsible of her education; and believes that she has the right to correct and punish her when necessary: "Mama looked at Pecola. "You too!" she said. "Child of mine or not! She grabbed Pecola and spun her around" (31).

Claudia and her sister learnt to love Pecola from their mother who despite her impoverishment never refuses to help members of her community. Claudia, though very young, generates great love and affection for Pecola and was eagerly awaiting to see her baby that symbolically represents a new member of the black community. Claudia describes Pecola's arrival and how her mother paved the way for the coming of Pecola as a boarder to live with them for some time:

Mamma told us that a "case" was coming – a girl who had no place to go. The county had placed her in our house for a few days until they could decide what to do, or, more precisely, until the family was reunited. We were to be nice to her and not fight. Mamma didn't know "what got into people," but that old Dog Breedlove had burned up his house, gone upside his wife's head, and everybody, as a result, was outdoors. (11)

Hence, Mrs. MacTeer embracing of her community made her daughters respect her more. Claudia asserts in many passages in the novel how her mother's songs; tuneful and melancholic enthused different emotions in her heart; emotion of high esteem and consideration towards her mother who becomes her first idol in life. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Claudia developed strong ties with Pecola and established strong sisterhood with her. Claudia's unconditional love and support for Pecola is a firm confirmation of how Mrs. MacTeer successfully transmitted her communal values to her daughters.

However, it should be stressed that though Mrs. MacTeer is seemingly presented in binary opposition with Mrs. Breedlove, Morrison transgressed this opposition by shedding light on the particular condition of each one of them. Mrs. MacTeer who shares the manifold oppressive forces of race, gender and socio-economic conditions still possesses things Pauline is completely denied. Mrs. MacTeer has a loving husband who shares the burden with her; he is a responsible husband and a loving father to his daughters. Mr. MacTeer cares about his daughters and works hard to provide for his family. He is not only a breed provider, but he is also a protecting father. In her book *From Mammies to Militants: Domestics in Black American Literature*, Trudier Harris describes Mr. MacTeer as a "provider, loving parent, protector" and argues that "although [he] has a less conspicuous place in the novel than his wife, his concern for his daughters

equals hers, and he works equally hard to ensure their moral development... [w]olf killer turned hawk fighter, he worked night and day to keep one from the door and the other from under the windowsills" (41).

When he learned about Mr. Henry molestation of his daughter Frieda, he behaved as a real father who fiercely protects his daughters, he was ready to shoot Mr. Henry and end his life in prison, Claudia narrates: he "threw [the] old tricycle at his head and knocked him off porch and then chased him down the street with a shotgun" (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 80). In sharp contrast to Cholly Breedlove, Mr. MacTeer is jealous about his daughters' honour and dignity. Cholly, paradoxically, raped his own daughter twice and put their house on fire leaving his family without a refuge. Hence, Morrison by presenting all these discrepancies between the two husbands and fathers, pushes the debate over the different acts of mothering of both Mrs. MacTeer and Mrs. Breedlove a little far from hasty and immediate stands.

Moreover, Mrs. MacTeer has strong ties with women of her community which sustained her in her hard times. Being connected to women who might share her same conditions and pains helped her feel supported. She can lean on those friends who provide her with the necessary backing. Her community provides her with guidance when she feels lost or burdened; Claudia describes her mother's long discussions with her friends which at the time were ambiguous for her as a young girl:

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtsies, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter—like

the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meanings of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So, we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (15) Pauline,

however, was completely detached from the black community. The shift in perspective allowed Pauline to reveal her disappointment with people of Lorain, Ohio. Those people received her with hostility and contempt. What was shocking for her is the fact that blacks were not different from white in their hostility and coldness towards her. Therefore, Pauline being a new comer to Ohio soon found herself rejected and alienated. This alienation made her sink in the world of cinema and movies which reinforced her obsession with the white world; the white standards of beauty and the white lifestyle. Thus, Pecola experiencing a double rejection; the one of her own community, and the one of her husband Cholly made her completely unbacked which was not actually the case for Mrs. MacTeer. Therefore, Morrison by presenting nuanced and ambivalent situations in her novel creates some paradox and ambiguity in interpreting the different approaches for mothering her female characters hold. Mrs. MacTeer and Mrs. Breedlove though sharing oppression because they are black, females and poor developed different approaches to life and motherhood. By unveiling details about the particularities of the situations of each one of her maternal figures Morrison invites her readers to make a close reading to each of her mother figures taking into account their different problems and conditions. Their concerns and their backgrounds not being uniform justifies the divergence in their perception of the act of mothering.

15.4 Crossing the Colour-line: Assimilationism and the Urge of Whiteness

Through the character of Geraldine, Morrison exposes her readers to another type of Afro-American families. Those families are different from The Breedloves and The MacTeers. They have recently migrated to Lorain, Ohio, in an attempt to radically detach themselves from their roots. Those families most ultimate goal in life is transgressing the colour line and joining the white world. Women from those families are described thoroughly by Morrison who generously gives details about every aspect that characterises them. What should be stressed is the fact that those women share many things leading Morrison to treat them as a stereotype figure. They belong to the lower middle class and they consider themselves 'coloured people' and not dark niggers. their light skin, they believe, allows them to be nearer to the white world contrary to their black brothers. The narrator describes their women:

They are thin brown girls who have looked long at hollyhocks in the backyards of Meridian, Mobile, Aiken, and Baton Rouge. And like holly- hocks they are narrow, tall, and still. Their roots are deep, their stalks are firm, and only the top blossom nods in the wind. They have the eyes of people who can tell what time it is by the color of the sky. Such girls live in quiet black neighbourhoods where everybody is gainfully employed. Where there are porch swings hanging from chains. Where the grass is cut with a scythe, where rooster combs and sunflowers grow in the yards... (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 82)

Morrison stresses how these women do their best to differentiate themselves from other black women sparing no effort to assimilate themselves with white women in both appearance and manners:

These particular brown girls from Mobile and Aiken are not like some of their sisters. They are not fretful, nervous, or shrill; they do not have lovely black necks that stretch as though against an invisible collar; their eyes do not bite. These sugarbrown Mobile girls move through the streets without a stir. They are as sweet and plain as butter-cake. Slim ankles; long, narrow feet. They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion. They smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla. They straighten their hair with Dixie Peach, and part it on the side. At night they curl it in paper from brown bags, tie a print scarf around their heads, and sleep with hands folded across their stomachs. They do not drink, smoke, or swear, and they still call sex "nookey." They sing second soprano in the choir, and although their voices are clear and steady, they are never picked to solo. They are in the second row, white blouses starched, blue skirts almost purple from ironing. (83)

In their assimilationist endeavour these women attend special schools designed to teach them white manners and white lifestyle. There, they learn about good morals that allow them to access the white world. Consequently, those schools rid them from all what is associated with their black origins. Morrison ironically stated:

They go to land-grant colleges, normal schools, and learn how to do the white man's work with refinement: home economics to prepare his food; teacher education to

instruct black children in obedience; music to soothe the weary master and entertain his blunted soul. Here they learn the rest of the lesson begun in those soft houses with porch swings and pots of bleeding heart: how to behave. The careful development of thrift, patience, high morals, and good manners. In short, how to get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions. (83)

Morrison's combination of the adjective "dreadful" with the word funkiness sheds some light on how this type of women perceive their origins. Funkiness, for them, jeopardises their access for the white world which remains their most ultimate dream. Morrison's ironical tone highlights the pejorative outlook these women hold on one of the very characteristics of the black community which is funkiness. Funkiness, according to Morrison, is what most features the black community. It is related to emotions, spontaneity, sensuality...etc. By getting rid of their funkiness those women end up as cold and emotionless women who can neither love nor enjoy being loved. In a significant passage Morrison shows to what extent these women are living out of their skin:

The laugh that is a little too loud; the enunciation a little too round; the gesture a little too generous. They hold their behind in for fear of a sway too free; when they wear lipstick, they never cover the entire mouth for fear of lips too thick, and they worry, worry, worry about the edges of their hair. (83)

Morrison elucidates how these women's obsession with maintaining order and good appearance in their houses make their houses just whole and empty because of the lack of the warmth of love. For them home in not family; home is a property they possess and

people who share with them this house or space are part of the equipment. They do not have sincere feelings towards them:

What they do not know is that this plain brown girl will build her nest stick by stick, make it her own inviolable world, and stand guard over its every plant, weed, and doily, even against him. In silence will she return the lamp to where she put it in the first place; remove the dishes from the table as soon as the last bite is taken; wipe the doorknob after a greasy hand has touched it. A sidelong look will be enough to tell him to smoke on the back porch. Children will sense instantly that they cannot come into her yard to retrieve a ball. But the men do not know these things. (84)

Morrison goes further to speak about the sexuality of these "brown sugar women". She describes their coldness with their husbands and how artificial they are in their intimate relations. Because they care more for their appearance, their cleanliness, their odour, they cannot enjoy the natural sexual pleasure other women experience. They deal with sex the way they deal with their domestic chores; for them it is a routine activity they must finish with as soon as possible to get back to order and cleanliness. Morrison goes further to speak about these women's exotic sense of pleasure; astonishingly those women are more affectionate with pets. They can even experience quick moments of sensual pleasure with cats for example, especially, if this cat respects her life rituals:

Occasionally some living thing will engage her affections. A cat, perhaps, who will love her order, precision, and constancy; who will be as clean and quiet as she is. The cat will settle quietly on the windowsill and caress her with his eyes. She can hold him in her arms, letting his back paws struggle for footing on her breast and his forepaws cling to her shoulder. (85)

Morrison introduces Geraldine who is part of the above-discussed category of women in a highly original way. Associating Geraldine to specific group of women means that Morrison is discussing a whole section of black women. Choosing to deal with Geraldine as part of a group shows Morrison's willingness to deal with a distinct type of women that has its own philosophy of life and its own way to identify itself within the hegemonic culture. Morrison has chosen to deal more precisely with Geraldine, the mother, because she endeavoured to examine this section's approach to motherhood and mothering. She initially presented Geraldine as follows:

The cat will always know that he is first in her affections. Even after she bears a child. For she does bear a child—easily, and painlessly. But only one. A son. Named Junior. One such girl from Mobile, or Meridian, or Aiken who did not sweat in her armpits nor between her thighs, who smelled of wood and vanilla, who had made soufflés in the Home Economics Department, moved with her husband, Louis, to Lorain, Ohio. Her name was Geraldine. There she built her nest, ironed shirts, potted bleeding hearts, played with her cat, and birthed Louis Junior. (86)

It is crucial to notice how Morrison has introduced us to Geraldine, the mother. This mother, it should be stressed, seems to be denied all what characterises a true mother. Geraldine delivers without pain, births only one child, and more astonishingly loves her cat more than her own son. Geraldine who has "super-human" qualities of not "sweating between her armpits and thighs" paradoxically lacks the least human qualities of a mother. Morrison highlights the sharp contrast between the order, beauty and delicacy that characterise Geraldine's life and the rigidity and estrangement that features her motherhood. Geraldine by getting rid of "funkiness" ironically and metaphorically got rid of her motherly emotions as well. In her way for the sacred white world, she lost

many valuable things including the warmth of her heart, the warmth of her gestures and the warmth of life in general.

Adopting the white hegemonic culture made her very far from her inner self; this unnaturalness made of her a mere doll who has nothing more than a beautiful face and body, a doll that looks like real people but which is actually heartless. It can even be assumed that Geraldine does not share the instinct of mothering with other women and for her having a child was just a way for her to meet a further standard of the white community.

In a passage in the novel, Morrison displays the way Geraldine upbrought her son Junior. Everything seem to be done mechanically. Geraldine settles for the minimum as she resumes her mother duties in taking care of the physical side of Junior. She performs her daily rituals with Junior and she assumes that now he is not allowed to cry because he has no reason for:

Geraldine did not allow her baby, Junior, to cry. As long as his needs were physical, she could meet them—comfort and satiety. He was always brushed, bathed, oiled, and shod. Geraldine did not talk to him, coo to him, or indulge him in kissing bouts, but she saw that every other desire was fulfilled. (86)

However, after few years, Junior could easily notice that his mother who does not generate any form of affection towards him paradoxically directs all her tenderness toward her cat. This pathologic deviation in the behaviours of the mother had tremendous psychological effects of Junior's Psyche. The pain he felt because of his mother's ignorance and rejection of him was soon translated in a frightening hatred he develops

towards the cat and towards other children by extension. He turned to be a sadistic child who enjoys bullying children and hearing their screams:

As he grew older, he learned how to direct his hatred of his mother to the cat, and spent some happy moments watching it suffer. The cat survived, because Geraldine was seldom away from home, and could effectively soothe the animal when Junior abused him... More and more Junior enjoyed bullying girls. It was easy making them scream and run. How he laughed when they fell down and their bloomers showed. When they got up, their faces red and crinkled, it made him feel good. (86, 87)

Moreover, Geraldine indoctrinated her son Junior with the belief that coloured people are superior to niggers; that coloured people should make themselves very distinct from blacks in both appearance and manner:

Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud. He belonged to the former group: he wore white shirts and blue trousers; his hair was cut as close to his scalp as possible to avoid any suggestion of wool, the part was etched into his hair by the barber. In winter his mother put Jergens Lotion on his face to keep the skin from becoming ashen. (87)

She incarnated these racist ideas in her son's mind who after few years adopted them to be a harsh racist. Morrison shows how Geraldine deprived her son from the pleasure of playing with black children; the innocent Junior has a strong desire to play with children and have close physical contact with them whatever the colour of their skin. Little Junior craves for playing naturally and impulsively with black children:

Junior used to long to play with the black boys. More than anything in the world he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness, and say "Fuck you" with that lovely casualness. He wanted to sit with them on curbs-tones and compare the sharpness of jack-knives, the distance and arcs of spitting. (87)

Unfortunately, Geraldine deeply invested herself in damaging all what is innate and natural in her son Junior just the same way she does with herself. Distancing him from his maternal identity and make him believe black is dirty and bad and white is clean and good, Junior could not but have feelings of hatred and contempt towards black children. The feelings of superiority Geraldine cultivated in him made him behave with harsh arrogance with other children. He considers the school yard his own and it is there where he performs all the acts of violence and repression he developed out of his dysfunctional relationship with his mother.

One day, he invited Pecola to his house and promised to show her their beautiful cat. His intentions were not sincere but rather malicious. His intention was only to abuse Pecola. He drove her to his house and Pecola was amazed by the beauty and cleanliness of the house. He tugs her into another room and threw his mother's cat on her face. The cat scratched Pecola's face and the poor girl started to cry and tried to escape from the room Junior imprisoned her in. Pecola desperately tried deliverance from this torment but unfortunately, she could not. Junior, now, manifests his evil and directs it towards the poor cat that he tortured mercilessly. Pecola tried to stop him but regrettably when she intervened Junior lets go off the cat that hits the window and falls dead. At this very moment Geraldine enters the room and Junior starts his accusation by telling his mother

that it is Pecola who killed the cat. Geraldine looked at Pecola paying attention to every detail. Pecola's face and appearance do not seen unusual for Geraldine. However, by identifying Pecola with blackness, dirtiness and poverty, Geraldine is reminded of her black roots, the thing she could not bear. Pecola symbolises for her the black girl she wants to forget about, the girls she avoids to be like and the nightmare she aspires to forget forever:

she looked at Pecola. Saw the dirty torn dress, the plaits sticking out on her head, hair matted where the plaits had come undone, the muddy shoes with the wad of gum peeping out from between the cheap soles, the soiled socks, one of which had been walked down into the heel of the shoe... She had seen this little girl all of her life. Hanging out of windows over saloons in Mobile, crawling over the porches of shotgun houses on the edge of town, sitting in bus stations holding paper bags and crying to mothers who kept saying "Shet up!" Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied 91 and caked with dirt...They slept six in a bed, all their pee mixing together in the night as they wet their beds each in his own candy-and-potato-chip dream. (88)

After having these flashbacks, Geraldine in a quiet voice and cold blood said to Pecola: "Get out, you nasty little black bitch. Get out of my house" (88). Many critics examined this distressing scene and pointed to the virulent consequences of the internalisation of racism on Geraldine's personality and psyche. Her repression of feelings of hatred towards her black origins manifested itself in her reaction towards Pecola. This destructive disconnection with the native culture and the adoption of the hegemonic standards and attitudes led to a chain of violence and antisocial pathologies.

In her attempt for transcending her blackness and her identity Geraldine lost a good portion of her heart and humanity. It costed her a lot, including her sense of motherhood.

To conclude, The Bluest Eye attempts to represent black motherhood as a heterogenous condition. The nuanced portrayals of maternal figures in the novel aims at rewriting the hegemonic discourse. Morrison did not align herself with the previous trends that hegemonize the experience of motherhood. She liberates herself from the tunnel of the white patriarchal discourse that projects pejorative images of black mothers who are most of the times dehumanized and devalued. She also avoided promoting images of perfect black mothers who are praised in the black patriarchal literature which associates them with archetypal motherhood. She deconstructed the stereotypical portrayals of black mothers that prevailed in both black and hegemonic discourses and opted for a more realistic representations that take into account the unique condition of the black woman. The double oppression of race and gender, in addition to the socioeconomic context made the experience of black mothering different from white mothering. Thus, by exposing her readers to different African-American families, Morrison aims at displaying the complexity of black motherhood. Black mothers do not share the same concerns and their problems are not uniform. A unidirectional vision of black motherhood will severely disadvantage black mothers.

Through the process of her nuanced portrayals of black mothers, Morrison sheds light on the failure of white feminist movements which did not succeed in meeting black women's aspirations. A crucial discrepancy is noticeable concerning domesticity and work for black and white women for instance. While white women aspire to escape domesticity and join the world of work as a way for reaching fulfilment, for the black woman, working outdoor has never been an option; the black mother should work both

at home and outside when necessary. It is important to note at this stage how Pauline felt extreme pleasure in the domesticity white mothers aspire to desert. Having to split herself between domestic chores and work outside the house, Pauline felt overloaded and devalued, and as a result, she came to despise her husband and children. With Pauline, Mrs. MacTeer, Geraldine and other female characters, Morrison attempts to show that there is no universal image of black womanhood and black motherhood. Dealing with completely different mother figures raised the readers' consciousness about the ambivalent, ambiguous and even paradoxical nature of black motherhood.

Conclusion

With *The Bluest Eye*, her first novel, Morrison revealed her early concern with issues related to black women's existence and chose to deal with a wide range of female characters including daughters and mothers for the sake of displaying a multiplicity of black women images that resist their reductive production of types in white hegemonic discourse. This chapter puts forward the argument that by opting for female-centred plots Morrison, to shed light on the dilemmas they face in their quest for identity and self-realisation, relied on the devices of paradox and ambiguity to approach the black woman's question. Morrison explores this dilemma in terms of the damaging psychological effects of the internalisation of white standards of beauty.

Morrison's narrative strategy in *The Bluest Eye*, it is argued, aimed at deconstructing the long-held images of black women shaped by racist stereotypes that viewed them as docile mammas, domineering matriarchs emasculating their husbands, hypersexual creatures, irresponsible mothers, and unfeminine women to cite just few of the prevailing clichés conveyed by white racist ideology. Her representation of diverse black female images, exhibiting different reactions to the racist and sexist forms of oppression they have been subjected to is a clear indication of the duality they have experienced. This is best rendered by Morrison's option for a narrative discourse that, based on paradox and ambiguity, represents a challenge to white stereotyping.

CHAPTER THREE: Sula

So when they met, first in those chocolate halls and next through the ropes of the swing, they felt the ease and comfort of old friends. Because each had discovered years before that they were neither white nor male, and that all freedom and triumph was forbidden to them, they had set about creating something else to be. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eves the intimacy they were looking for. -Toni Morrison, Sula

Introduction

Sula is probably the one of Morrison's novels that is concerned with the black woman's condition in its diversity. This is illustrated by a large spectrum of female characters of different age and social condition sharing a common setting in the small town of Medallion in Ohio.

Though the action of the novel revolves around the two young female protagonists. Sula Pearce and Nel Wright, the novel extends its plot to their relationship with their families, and the individual stories of their mothers and grandmothers. Clearly, Morrison's inclusion of the closest persons to the two young girls is of great significance, for not only it serves to illustrate the family bonds of the two families, but it also shows how these play an important part in shaping the personalities of the protagonists.

Moreover, through such themes and motifs as female friendship, family relationships and households, and motherhood, Morrison dives deep in the black woman's psyche to explore the tensions resulting from differences of attitudes towards the values of family and community. In this respect, while *Sula* exhibits the complex conflicts that the protagonists confront in their fight for self-assertion and rights, it also reaffirms Morrison's belief in how family and community exert their impact on the individual's values and attitudes in life.

The presence of grandmothers and mothers in the novel draws its significance from their own individual experience and its impact on their offspring, it also serves Morrison's purpose to extend her female representation to the widest possible section of the black community and their multifaceted struggle. Hence, in dealing with such a wide range of characters, Morrison is able to illustrate their concerns and attitudes, with, as a result, a broader account of the diversity of their beliefs and standpoints. This all-inclusive portrayal of black women seeks to avoid reductive images of black womanhood by offering a vision ranging from females accepting to assume the expected societal roles of wife and mother, and others rejecting these and challenging the traditional codes established by society which they regard as obstacles to their self-assertion.

1. Prologue

1.1 The Paradoxical Genesis of the Bottom

Morrison begins her novel *Sula* with a short prologue designed as a setting which unveils the tricky conditions that surrounded the levelling of a black neighbourhood—the Bottom, ironically situated in the hills above the valley town of Medallion, Ohio-- in order to lay out space for a golf course for white people. Prior to the changes that were initiated by the whites for their own comfort and leisure, the black people lived in the Bottom while the whites lived in Medallion. Lately, the Bottom has been reduced to a suburb of the valley town of Medallion with the white people outnumbering the original black population.

Just as she relies on paradox and ambiguity to portray characters and situation in her fiction, Morrison adopts a similar method in introducing the genesis of the black neighbourhood of the Bottom in *Sula*. The Bottom derives its name from a cruel trick played by a white farmer upon his black slave labourer to whom he promised he would give him freedom and some fertile "bottom land" if he performed some difficult chores for him. Upon completion of the work, the white farmer, not willing to offer the slightest piece of the fertile land situated in the valley, deceitfully planned a trick by telling the black labourer that the "bottom land" was in fact situated up in the rocky hills overlooking Medallion. He cynically explained to the credulous black man that this piece of land was the best because "when God looks down it's the bottom".

The master said: "Oh no! See those hills? That's bottom land, rich and fertile". "But it's high up in the hill," said the slave. "High up from us," said the master, "but when God

looks down, it's the bottom. That's why we call it so. It's the bottom of heaven- best land there is". (Morrison, Sula 5)

Gladly accepting the deal, it was not long before the trusting black man realised the white man's cheat when he was confronted to the steep and hilly 'bottom' land that could be farmed only through arduous ways and painful hardship because of the eroded nature of the soil.

Morrison's evocation of the genesis of the Bottom is designed as a denunciation of the historical exploitation of the black people in America. It portrays an upside-down world established by the whites through the story of the black labourer and the falsity of the location of the Bottom ironically situated up in the hills.

By beginning her novel with an unconventional way of story opening unlike "in the beginning" or "Once upon a time" and preferring instead a descriptive mode that emphasises reversal and destruction, Morrison proceeds in a post-modernistic fashion to introduce a pattern of paradoxes that manifest themselves throughout her novel. The irony established by the incongruity of the bottom located up the hills is used by Morrison as a prelude to the disturbing events that pervade the novel. Commenting the way Morrison dealt with the Bottom issue, McDowell in his article *New Directions for Black Feminist Criticism* noted:

Sula glories in paradox and ambiguity, beginning with the prologue, which describes the setting, the Bottom, situated spatially in the top. We enter a New World here, a world in which we never get to the 'bottom of things', a world that demands a shift from an either/or orientation to one that is both/and, full of shifts and contradictions. (155)

With this statement McDowell is making a crucial point regarding Morrison's dialectic, which, in order to avoid categorisation, relies on a contrastive method that emphasises complementarity in the elements she initially opposes to one another.

Morrison's portrayal of the Bottom is achieved through a judicious combination of irony and paradox, which, beyond the focus on the changes that occurred on the setting, point to the inverted moral order in which the traditionally opposed notions of good and evil become interchangeable. Morrison argues that what may appear to be evil in particular circumstances may prove to be good in the end, and similarly what we may assume to be good may prove quite the opposite in the last instance. Hence, despite the white man's use of what has become known as "the nigger joke" to dispossess the black community of their bottom land, and which certainly is an evil act, this population continued its struggle metamorphosing the formerly worthless land into a socially pleasant locale now very much appreciated by the whites.

2.Good and Evil as Interplay of Opposites in Characters and Situations

Clearly, Morrison holds a position that views good and evil not as immutable categories, but rather as notions that are not absolute and that can evolve according to situations. With such an interplay of opposites in characters and situation Morrison's text gives the impression of first misdirecting the reader into assuming, for example, that Nel is good while Sula is evil before reversing this assumption to assert that each character has his share of both moral values. In other words, they are, as Morrison claimed in her interview with Nellie McKay:

a combination of virtue and flaw of good intentions gone awry, of wickedness cleansed and people made whole again. If you judge them all by the best that they have done, they are wonderful. If you judge them by the worst that they have done, they are terrible. (413)

In the prologue, as with the rest of the novel, Morrison reveals a continuous concern with questions of right and wrong by underscoring contrasting situations. The creation of the golf course which is regarded as a sign of progress and leisurely refinement for the white people, offering a better sight of the landscape, is however achieved at the expense of the social values that once characterised the area. It cannot compensate the loss of the lively atmosphere and spontaneous warmth in interpersonal relationships forged by a sense of communal belonging among the black people who once lived there. Morrison illustrates this by recalling the "shucking, knee-slapping, wet-eyed laughter" (Morrison, 1973,6) that once echoed the vibrant atmosphere when the blacks still peopled the area. And on a nostalgic note, she adds: "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood" (4). The imagery of the uprooting of the flowery vegetation to let room for the Golf course suggests also the uprooting of the black people from their original neighbourhood and their displacement to the hostile environment of the hills. Proceeding by opposites, Morrison contrasts Medallion, the residence of the white people with its golf course as a symbol of wealth and profit, to the Bottom with its fertile land and its black population living in harmony with it and enjoying;

a neighbourhood where on quiet days people in the valley could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills- collecting rent insurance payments-he might see a dark collecting woman

in a flowered dress doing a bit of a cake walk; a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messing around' to the lively notes of a mouth organ. (Morrison, Sula 5)

Morrison's account of the genesis of the Bottom in the prologue of *Sula* recreates in fiction a glance at the history of blacks after the Civil War and Reconstruction, which, as Moore explains:

As descendants of the freed but economically deprived slaves, Sula's characters reside in the Bottom, a semiotic marker of their status in hegemonic society and discourse. In the Bottom, Morrison re-creates the near total asphyxiation of the Jim Crow culture of spatial boundaries, where the characters are cut off from the oxygen of normal space and growth. (15)

As a background to the novel proper, the prologue, with its focus on the tricky character of the genesis of the Bottom, serves as a foregrounding of the disturbing events of the plot. The presence of paradox, illustrated by the contrasted locations of the valley and hills, sharing a true and a false name of the Bottom bears a special critical significance. Being mentioned at the start of the book and encompassing the town of Medallion where the novel is set, the paradox of the 'nigger joke' signals the dubious character it has on the narrative. It suggests that whatever takes place in the Bottom will embody the paradoxes arising from the contrastive genesis of this setting. The community born from the white man's perverted truth regarding the location of the Bottom has suffered the trauma of displacement. Its impact is reflected by the deficiencies from which many of the characters of the novel suffer and of which Shadrack is the forerunning incarnation.

3. Shadrack: The National Suicide Day as a Quest for Order

Beginning with the genesis of the Bottom as a "nigger joke", the prologue continues with the image of a maddened Shadrack, a shell-shocked African-American soldier and veteran from World War I who returns from combat without any memory of who he is or where he comes from. Shadrack suffers from haunting visions of his hands growing larger and larger every time he looks at them. Memories of scenes of war while he was in combat in France keep invading his mind. The horror provoked by the sight of the head of a comrade blown off from the rest of his body accentuate his trauma through the transfer of these violent images on his own body and his subsequent obsession with death. As a result of his mental troubles, Shadrack spent two years at a military hospital before he was discharged because of overcrowding. In his hospital bed Shadrack felt completely isolated and devoid of identity as he could connect neither to past nor to present and found himself:

not daring to acknowledge the fact that he didn't even know who or what he was . .

. with no past, no language, no tribe, no source, no address book, no comb, no pencil, no clock, no pocket handkerchief, no rug, no bed, no can opener, no faded postcard, no soap, no key, no tobacco pouch, no soiled underwear and nothing nothing to do ... (Morrison, Sula 12)

Shadrack's traumatic experience changed his perception of things as his overwhelming terror of unexpected death and its omnipresence underscore his psychic dislocation. In an effort to contain his fears of the suddenness of death, Shadrack proceeds to the creation of something rather weird, he invents The National Suicide Day, a holiday celebrated on January 3 of every year and the only day, according to his perceptions,

during which death will occur. Having witnessed the brutal suddenness of death on the battlefield Shadrack developed an obsessive fear of it. His institution of the National Suicide Day is meant to counter the unpredictability of death by offering an opportunity to those who wish to kill themselves or others to control their destiny. Morrison describes Shadrack's futile effort to contain death through instituting The National Suicide Day during which he held a noose and a ringing cow bell exhorting his townspeople not to miss this opportunity to meet their death or that of the others:

In his quest for order Shadrack begins by the ordering of the wagon which is his household:

In the back of the wagon, ... Shadrack began a struggle that was to last for twelve days, a struggle to order and focus experience. It had to do with making a place for fear as a way of controlling it. He knew the smell of death and was terrified by it, for he could not anticipate it. It was not death or dying that frightened him, but the unexpectedness of both. In sorting it all out, he hit on the notion that if one day a year was devoted to it, everybody could get it out of the way and the rest of the year would be safe and free. In that manner he instituted National Suicide Day. (14)

Having witnessed chaos during combat, Shadrack seeks order as a way to restore a balance in his world dominated by the fear of the hegemony of unexpectedness, particularly that of death and dying. Thus, setting up a date, January 3, on a calendar was for him the first step towards making order prevail over the unexpected. But creating a time and place for death proved a vain dream.

By the end of the prologue, Shadrack realises that his wish for "a safe and free" order is but an illusory hope and that the ordering of house and death could not prevent death's

occurrence. He recognises the futility of his claim and its ironic character particularly with the collapse of the Medallion tunnel and the death that struck his community with him left as a survivor.

Though a minor character who makes a brief appearance in the novel, Shadrack is important for the symbolic role he fulfils as a double victim shattered by the appalling experience of war and by the low status as a black in a segregated society. Through Shadrack, Morrison exhibits how "the war continued for black veterans in more ways than one" (Keene 237) when they return. The scars of war, the lack of care in an overcrowded military hospital, and finally his isolation in the Bottom neighbourhood placed Shadrack in a marginalised position from which it was difficult to re-establish the broken bonds with self and community. As Melanie Anderson contends in his book Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison, he "was used in war, damaged, and set completely free with no assistance" and was "set adrift in a world that seems unpredictable and dangerous" (33).

Consequently, Shadrack epitomizes a double estrangement, an estrangement from self through the damage caused by his witnessing of the violence of the war, and which resulted in psychological trauma, and linked with it, was his isolation from his community represented by his living in a waggon on the outskirts of Medallion. Clearly Morison suggests a parallel between Shadrack's individual experience and that of the Bottom community. Philip Page noted this in his book *Dangerous Freedom: Fusion and Fragmentation in Morrison's novels:*

...Shadrack, whose sense of self and other is shattered in the war. He, however can provisionally control his fear of disintegration through his obsessively well-ordered

cabin and his ritual of National Suicide Day, measures that parallel the Bottom's collective ability to control its traumas by incorporating whatever evils confront it.

(71)

4. Widening the Scope of Black female Representation: Daughters, Mothers and Grandmothers

Having started her novel with the genesis of the African American neighbourhood known as the Bottom and its ironic foundation based on "the nigger joke", Morrison 's narrative begins with the community's destruction to make way for the Medallion City Golf Course and then unfolds with flashes backward to introduce the story of Sula. This, concerns two girls coming of age, Sula Peace and Nel Wright who assert strong ties of friendship from childhood and whose complex relationship Morrison unveils in her plot by first opposing family backgrounds and ways of life. As the girls grow older, differences of responses to the norms of their community distinguish Sula from Nel and form the core of the conflicts that ultimately separate and split their bonds. Though strongly attached to one another through genuine bonds of friendship the girls exhibit different values and priorities in their path of self-discovery and the construction of their identity. In the beginning chapters of the novel, Sula and Nel seem alike; indeed, they seem to form one identity, one personality: "... their friendship was so close, they themselves had difficulty distinguishing one's thoughts from the other's..." (Morrison, Sula 83). But later in the novel, Sula has to discover that although she "had clung to Nel as the closest thing to both another and a self, ". . . "she and Nel were not one and the same thing" (119). Each one lacked something that the other one had. In Parker's *Sturdy* Black Bridges: Visions of Black Women in Literature, Morrison describes this relationship in the following terms: "I suppose the two of them together could have made a wonderful single human being. But, you see, they are like a Janus' head" (253).

Although the plot of *Sula* revolves around the story of the friendship of the two young protagonists Sula and Nel, the novel avoids devoting the centrality of concern to these two characters only. In fact, Morrison involves other female characters in the story whose relationships with the young protagonists serve to illustrate the larger context of issues related to the black woman's circumstances in the American society. In *Sula*, Morrison explores the black woman's condition in its multiple aspects through a focus on the lives of female characters of different age and status. For this sake, Morrison chose to deal with five female protagonists through accounts of the most distinctive features of their life events as well as their relationships with family and community.

Thus, in her all-embracing attempt to deal with their plight in its entirety, Morrison chose to carry out her exploration of the black woman's psyche through a number of themes and motifs such as female friendship (Sula/Nel), all women households (Eva, Hannah, Helene) and motherhood as a fundamental issue that involves mothers and children. Morrison's selection of the above mentioned five protagonists aims at widening the scope of the black woman interest and priorities. Her account on their condition and concerns seeks to avoid stereotypical portrayals of the black female by offering diversity in attitude and behaviour towards their condition as black women and their perspectives towards the achievement of their aims in life. By contrasting their ways and their rapports towards themselves and others, Morrison seeks to insist on the necessity to view the black woman through no reductive lenses that can result only in stereotypes. Consequently, she offers a fairly wide range of black female characters, each struggling to achieve what matters most for her in life. Differences of outlook and perspectives among them account

for the complexity of the woman's issue and the impossibility to reduce it to a single question of common denominator and concern. It is clear, therefore, that by dealing with a diversity of black female protagonists, Morrison was following a strategy that necessarily relies on paradox and ambiguity as techniques that enable portrayal of these characters in their manifold existence and quest. With such an approach Morrison was able to offer multiple views of black womanhood.

5.Transgressing Binary Oppositions

With Sula as with The Bluest Eye we propose to extend our approach to the novel's reading in terms of the paradigms characterised by Morrison's reliance on paradox and ambiguity as a way of avoiding categorisation and offering instead "a journey to the epicenter of the human soul, depicting the post-modernist dilemma of multiple incoherent selves" (Hoffarth-Zelloe, Resolving the Paradox?: An Interlinear Reading of Toni Morrison's 'Sula.' 114). It is indeed our belief that these two notions pervade Morrison's fiction and confirm a continuation of her stand that emphasises indeterminacy and transgression as a way of challenging unquestioned assumptions and world views. Morrison's choice of the narrative strategies that incorporate ambiguity and paradox simultaneously are designed as a pattern that seeks to fuse theme and style in an effort to embrace a wider understanding of the issues she deals with, whether with character or situation. In this context, both The Bluest Eye and Sula explore the double conflict of black females caught in a web of contradictions with antagonistic selves exhibiting the tensions they experience in their search for identity and freedom. Zelloe describes with great accuracy Morrison's narrative strategy when she writes: "Contrastive parallelism, antithetical character development, subtle intricacies, multi-perspective points of view,

and ambiguous figurative language are used in order to say one thing and mean another" (114).

In *Sula* and in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows a continuity of concern involving black females whom she depicts in conflicting situations with protagonist and antagonist having split selves and experiencing different forms of victimisation. While in her first novel she deals with the central issue of white beauty through her creation of the two seemingly antithetical characters of Pecola and Claudia, she gradually leads the reader to the realisation that she ends up deconstructing this binary opposition and maintaining ambiguity through her rejection of clear- cut judgement and categorisation. As a result, Pecola and Claudia, who initially gave the full impression of being diametrically opposed, particularly with regard to their attitude towards the blue-eyed white model, end up having a meeting point in that they both suffer from the racist standards of white beauty. Thus, the seemingly clear-cut opposed positions held by the two girls finally reveal a hidden communion of desires and beliefs, now expressed and now suppressed not easy to untangle. Moreover, despite differences in family background and upbringing they share similar frustrations as black females and both experience material insecurity.

Despite diversity of themes and intricacies of plot Morrison's recurrent features of her fiction remain the focus on black female characters and the multiple forms of dilemmas they experience in their quest for freedom and selfhood. More often than not a great deal of the harm caused to the characters cannot be reduced to the simplistic racial equation of black versus white antagonism but includes aspects related to particularity of family backgrounds and characters, individual yearning and inclination which are deeply rooted in their double consciousness. To illustrate the racial and gender tensions that prevail in her novel *Sula*, Morrison sought to follow the fate of two female characters

Sula Peace and Nel Wright who, despite being issued from utterly opposed family backgrounds and environments, become very close friends. Though Sula is the eponymous protagonist of the novel, she is denied centrality in this role which she shares with Nel in a self-other dichotomy through which Morrison tackles most of the issues she raises in her fiction.

Being a tale about two women, Nel Wright and Sula Peace, Morrison's second novel Sula, describes the lives of her two protagonists making use of flashbacks in the book's chapters which are made to correspond to different years. The setting is the small town of Medallion, Ohio, in which the events take place over a time span of forty years from 1919 to 1965. In the 1920's Nel and Sula are ten-year-old girls whose education and social background look diametrically opposed. Despite this, however, their mutual attraction is far greater than whatever differences separate their worlds, and so the girls develop an intense friendship they believe would last for life. Being the only girls in their respective families Sula and Nel find themselves at odds with the ways and expectations of their parents, and the two dream to escape from what they feel as the obstacles to their longing for a life free of all the constraints imposed by mothers and grandmothers. Growing up together, the girls remain very close to each other despite great oppositions in their respective family backgrounds and ways of life. A common denominator to the two families, however, is the absence of men, a condition which Morrison chose to introduce in her plot for the sake of emphasising the multiple roles of her female characters in confronting personal, family and social issues. In this respect, *Sula* provides a rich spectrum of black females ranging widely in age and condition from young protagonists to mothers and grandmothers. Though the novel centres on Sula and Nel as the main figures around whom the action of the novel revolves, they are portrayed in the

light of the relationships they maintain with their families and most importantly with their mothers. And it is precisely by exploring the complex web of relationships within and outside family that Morrison sets in motion the elements of tension that characterise them.

In a recent interview, Morrison expresses her continuous interest for the feminine side of the black existence. For this sake, she privileges the literary representation of: "Outlaw women who don't follow the rules are always interesting to me ... because they push themselves, and us, to the edge. The women who step outside the borders, or who think other thoughts, define the limits of civilization, but also challenge it". (O'Connor).

The protagonist of her novel *Sula* embodies the rebellious features that Morrison seems to cherish, particularly her spirit of defiance and her resolute desire to assert her selfhood. Brought up by her widowed mother Hannah, a rather flighty and disordered person in the clamorous house owned by her grandmother Eva Peace, Sula's world is characterised by the promiscuous conditions of communal living in the noisy atmosphere of a house shared by family, three informally adopted boys and boarders. The house is continuously teeming with activity and neither Eva nor Hannah seems to worry a great deal about strict tidiness at home as is the case with Nel's mother Helene.

6. The Wrights as the Epitome of Order and Respectability

With the chapter entitled "1920" Morrison introduces Nel's family. Unlike the Peaces, Nel Wright lives in a house and with her mother Helene who is defined by her attachment to an image of a respectable person in the community. Helene appears as a figure who privileges the stability, she finds, in caring about her home and raising her daughter. Through her church attendance and her austere ways, she battles against a disturbing background as the daughter of a Creole prostitute in New Orleans, a painful

secret she is keeping deeply buried in her heart. Helene has had the vision of her mother resentfully shaped by the constant warning of her grandmother to be "on guard of any signs of her mother's wild blood" (Morrison, Sula 17). As result, Helene embraced a negative disposition toward her mother because of the trauma which caused her to bury the shame deep in herself. She took every step to distance herself from the repulsive memory of her mother by projecting an image of herself as a model of respectability in her Bottom community. In addition to exhibiting refined manners, Helene attended a conservative church and gained admiration from the members of her society. Morrison describes her in the most complementary terms: "a woman who won all battles with presence and conviction of the legitimacy of her authority." (18) Helene got married to a ship's cook, Wiley Wright, and was also admired by the people of the Bottom for her long hair and light skin. Nel was the only child born out of this relationship.

7.The Trip to New Orleans and the Wright's Confrontation with Southern Racism

When her daughter Nel was ten, Helene experienced a racist incident on a train journey to visit her dying grandmother Cecile in New Orleans, which had a profound impact on Nel. Taking her daughter with her, Helene was hoping to arrive in time before her grandmother dies. While on this train Helene experiences white racism and humiliation in front of her daughter when she accidentally enters the train's Whites Only car and is cynically reminded of her black status by a racist white conductor. Her absence of reaction to the insulting attitude of the conductor caused a shock to Nel who did not expect her mother to bend her neck by returning a smile as the only response to the white man when he later came to collect the train tickets. The presence in the waggon of returning from war black veterans who witnessed the scene, glaring at Helene with

contempt, caused her further confusion and shame. Morrison describes the embarrassing scene in the following terms: "All those who watched the scene with their 'midnight eyes' bubbled with hatred for Helene, a hatred that had not been there in the beginning but had been born with the dazzling smile" (Morrison, Sula 49)

Further humiliation is experienced by Helene as there are no toilets for the blacks on the train and who are left with fields next to the train stations as the only alternative for It is only when the train stops at stations for resupplying fuel that the black passengers would rush to urinate in the fields. The effects of this racist incident were devastating for both mother and daughter. While Helene, felt stripped of her dignity and was suddenly reminded of the dark aspects of her past as the child of a prostitute, her daughter Nel witnessed the disintegration of the external appearance that her mother has always endeavoured to project to her community as a highly respectable woman enjoying an excellent reputation as a pious person and a caring mother. Nel, who has so far seen her mother stand as a model of values of respectability was deeply disenchanted with her passive attitude to the train conductor and began to doubt her true personality and dignity. The image of strength that Nel associated with her mother began to show fractures in her shell and reveal hidden vulnerabilities which Helene struggled to combat through strict codes of behaviour of home care and religiosity. By switching perspective to Nel's point of view regarding her mother's attitude toward the racist experience on the trip down South, Morrison points to the precocious awareness of Nel awaiting the complicated struggle she has to face as a black woman. Witnessing her mother's humiliation, she resolved to be always alert so that no man will ever treat her the way her mother was treated:

It was on that train, shuffling towards Cincinnati, that she resolved to be on guard always. She wanted to make certain that no man ever looked at her that way. That no midnight eyes or marbled flesh would ever accost her and turn her into jelly. (Morrison, Sula 48)

Nel understood that being deferential to the whites might be pleasing to them but a source of anger to the black men who would consider this as a traitorous attitude. Upon arrival to New Orleans, Helene suffers great frustration as she finds her grandmother Cecile has just died. Inside the house, Helene and Nel meet a woman in a yellow dress, it is Rochelle, Helene's creole prostitute mother whom Nel sees for the first time. The meeting is characterised by an absence of warmth between Helene and her mother whom she introduces to Nel. Helene who has hardly experienced any affection or motherly care by Rochelle considers that Cecile, her grandmother, was the one who filled this maternal gap by raising her. Cecile has always told her to reject her mother's "wild" ways. Helene blames her mother for this and describes her as "that painted canary who never said a word of greeting or affection." Deep within herself Helene finds it shameful that Rochelle continues that dirty profession. Though only ten years old Nel sensed the tension between her mother and Rochelle.

With Helene, Morrison displays the paradox of a black woman torn between the shameful aspects of her background and the positive image of a respectable mother she wants to communicate to her community. From her grandmother Cecile she has learned that her mother is unworthy of love and thus endeavoured to construct an identity in complete opposition to the image of her mother. In addition, as a female character, Helene represents some of the many concerns of Morrison's complex portrayals of black womanhood. Quite apart from fulfilling the conventional role of mothering her daughter

Nel and deriving pride from her caring for her household, Helene is shown suffering from exposure to the bitter realities of white racism and the constraints resulting from the absence of a husband whose job as a cook on a ship keeps him frequently away from family and home. Her trip to New Orleans serves also to illustrate the helplessness of black women who have no protection from white men and even from fellow black men. Despite this, Helene shows her willingness to continue to live by the conventional standards of her community without showing any need to question their social and moral codes. Her conservative trends signify also her hidden admiration of whiteness and white physical looks which she regards as way of avoiding confrontation with white racism. Approaching this urge of whiteness among some black people and especially the mulatto section of the population from a Lacanian perspective Seshadri-Crooks suggests that Helene desires "whiteness [that] offers a totality, a fullness that masquerades as being" (45).

But all this has proved illusory with the train incident on the trip down South to New Orleans. Nel, however, experiences a profound change through this trip. Having witnessed the racist train incident, her mother's undignified reaction to the white train conductor, and finally the nature of the relationship between her mother and her grandmother, Nel grew more conscious of her need to affirm her own identity far from the norms and values that her mother wanted her to adopt. Once back home in Medallion Nel expresses the change she felt by looking at the mirror and whispering: "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me... I want to be wonderful. Oh Jesus, make me wonderful" (Morrison, Sula 28-29).

Even though still a young girl Nel affirms her urge to be herself realising somehow the contrast between the dull reality of her life and her newly felt youthful dreams of shaping her own identity. This scene, certainly anticipates the future relationship of Nel with Sula, a girl she sees in school but without being close to her. Through the voice of a narrator Morrison hints at the events of the future meeting of the two girls highlighting the contrasting backgrounds of the two protagonists. Nel mirrors the orderly setting of her mother's world where everything is kept under control, a tidy home and strict rules of behaviour. Sula, contrastingly, shares the independent ways of a rather eccentric family unpreoccupied with issues of order and tidiness of a house run by Sula's grandmother Eva.

8. Sula and Nel: From First Encounter to Strong Ties

It didn't take long before mutual attraction made the two girls very close friends. Sula's first visit to Nel's house made a good impression on Helene who finds her well-behaved and quite different from her mother Hannah. Nel feels at ease with Sula, and is even attracted by the messy state of Eva's house:

As for Nel, she preferred Sula's woolly house, where a part of something was always cooking on the stove; where the mother Hannah never scolded or gave directions; where all sorts of people dropped in; where newspapers were stacked in the hallway, and dirty dishes were left for hours at a time in the sink, and where a one-legged grandmother named Eva handed you goobers from deep inside her pockets and read you a dream. (Morrison, Sula 29)

Unlike Nel, Sula is fascinated by Helene's house and likes the way it is kept nice and orderly. Thus, the mutual visits of the protagonists' homes serve to illustrate the growing friendship of the young girls and the strong ties they quickly develop. Feeling at odds with the ways of their respective families Sula and Nel saw in their friendship a

promise for a liberation from family influence and social constraints. Morrison describes the girls' encounter as follows: "Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers . . . they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for." (Morrison, Sula 52).

Moreover, to illustrate the closeness of the bonds of their friendship Morrison narrates two significant episodes to confirm their unity. She first mentions the incident when the girls are threatened by the four white boys, newly settled in the community and who seek to affirm themselves by tormenting black pupils on their way home from school. In response to the boys' threat Sula takes a protective attitude towards Nel and defies the boys by the use of a violent act cutting the tip of her finger as a warning that "If I can do that to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (55). With this rather incongruous gesture Morrison displays a paradox, that of the inversion of self-protection by which Sula causes herself harm to avoid being harmed by the boys. Quite apart from Sula's response to bullying, Morrison shows through Sula's slashing off her forefinger that the girl is issued from an environment where violence is commonplace. Moreover, one is tempted to see through the challenging act of Sula, Morrison's announcement of a female bold character embodying traits fostered by feminist activism of the 1970's. In contrast to Sula, Morrison depicts her friend as a girl with opposing characteristics. Having been reared in a different setting where she is kept under the strict control of her mother, Nel's response to the harassing boys is marked by her absence of aggressiveness. Contrary to Sula, she remains passive having been moulded according to her mother's standards. The difference of attitude towards events and family quite apart from distinguishing the girls in terms of their individual experiences and expectations serves also to foreshadow their future choices.

Through the voice of the narrator and a flashback Morrison describes how the two girls met. Sula and Nel attended Garfield Primary School, and both are initially depicted as lonely and quiet children. Their common childish fantasy was about meeting a "prince" someday. In addition to their naïve perception of men, the narrator gives a first descriptive glance at the appearance of the girls. Nel is light-skinned while Sula has a dark brown complexion, but most remarkably a birthmark that looks like a rose above her eyebrow.

The girls began to have strong ties following the bullying incident to which they were confronted, with Sula revealing her strong reaction to the Irish boys, and adopting a protective attitude towards her friend Nel. Through cutting the tip of her finger, Sula sent a message to the boys that she is capable of violent retaliation if ever they dare approach them. As they got to know each other more, the girls grew more adventurous and enjoyed experiencing new things to prevent themselves falling into routine. Nel is encouraged by Sula not to obey her mother's strict orders, particularly Helene's attempts to adopt ways that make her daughter look as white as possible such as straightening regularly her hair or even pinching her nose with a clothespin to look prettier.

Clearly, Helene being submitted to the white standards of beauty, wanted Nel to share her convictions and follow her pattern, not realising that she was in fact instilling in her daughter the feeling of being ashamed of her blackness and the recognition that whiteness is superior to blackness. What mattered most for Helene was to construct an image of respectability for her daughter inspired from what she perceived as white refined manners. Attracted by the easy-going ways of the Peaces and Sula's adventurous mind, Nel was reluctant to adopt her mother's desired strict outline of her. At this stage of the

narrative, Nel resolves that she is a person different from her mother Helene; the new bonds she forges with Sula seem to encourage this perception.

In the chapter entitled "1921" Morrison's use of the circular narrative method focuses on the Peace family which she depicts in great details to relate the chronology of events that have marked its history and which serve to shed some light on the relationship of Sula with her mother Hannah and her grandmother Eva, and particularly the tensions that may have shaped her choices and behaviour.

Morrison devotes this section of the plot to an account of the Peace family where Sula has been brought up. Unlike the well-ordered and peaceful home of Nel Wright, Sula lives in the tumultuous house owned and run by her grandmother Eva. The extended Peace family consists of the matriarch Eva, her daughter Hannah, a widowed woman, her son Plum and her granddaughter Sula. In addition to the three adopted children whom she named Deweys and Tar Baby, a white alcoholic, who lives in one room drinking himself to death, occasional boarders and visitors frequently stay in the house. As a result, the house was almost always teeming with people, a situation that did not displease Eva and her family. In fact, Eva enjoyed the company and chat with her male boarders. Despite a missing leg and being an elder woman, Eva, as Morrison writes: "had a regular lock of gentleman callers, and although she did not participate in the act of love, there was a good deal of teasing and pecking and laughter" (41).

Eva's hate of Boy Boy did not lead her to adopt an all-anti maleness attitude. She did not shut herself up to other men and did not mind seeing Hannah mixing with men. Morrison notes that:

Those Peace women loved all men. It was man love that Eva bequeathed to her daughters. Probably, people said, because there were no men in the house, no men to run it. But actually, that was not true. The Peace women simply loved maleness, for its own sake. (41)

This interest in men was shared by Hannah whose husband Rekus died when Sula was just three years old. Consequently, when the widowed Hannah and her young daughter Sula came to live with her mother, she mixed with several men regarding sex as a natural and pleasurable part of life.

The very story of how the house came to be built at 7 Carpenter Road is a significant part of the intriguing events of the novel. At the background, Morrison mentions Eva's abandonment by her delinquent husband Boy Boy who deserted her, leaving her with no resources to feed and take care of her children. Morrison provides a brief glance at Boy Boy, as a black male who flees from the responsibility as a provider for the family, a white patriarch model for which he feels unfit:

After five years of a sad and disgruntled marriage BoyBoy took off. During the time they were together he was very much preoccupied with other women and not home much. He did whatever he could that he liked, and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third. (Morrison, Sula 32)

Being confronted with such a dilemma, Eva leaves her children with Mrs Suggs, a neighbour, saying she will be back the next day and disappears only to return eighteen months later with a missing leg, a pair of crutches, but with sufficient funds to reward Mrs Suggs with some dollar notes and build a house for her family. Morrison relates the event in the following terms:

Eighteen months later she swept down from a wagon with two crutches, and one leg. First, she reclaimed her children, next she gave the surprised Mrs. Suggs a ten-dollar bill, later she started building a house on Carpenter's Road, sixty feet from BoyBoy's one-room cabin, which she rented out. (Morrison, Sula 53)

Stories and gossip in the community tell of Eva's sacrificial mutilation as a provoked injury caused by a passing train to benefit from insurance financial compensation. Even though the source of the money acquired by Eva is not clearly stated, the thesis of the self-mutilation of Eva is quite a plausible explanation for the budget needed for the construction of the house. Morrison reports the townspeople's gossip over the mystery of the incident:

Fewer than nine people in the town remembered when Eva had two legs... Somebody said Eva stuck it under a train and made them pay off. Another said she sold it to a hospital for \$10,000—at which Mr. Reed opened his eyes and asked, "Nigger gal legs goin' for \$10,000 a piece?" as though he could understand \$10,000 a pair—but for one? (31)

In addition to securing a home for her children Eva allowed access to her home to people suffering from precarious social conditions such as abandoned children and other homeless persons creating as Denise Heinze noted: "an extended family, a microcosm of the ideal community in which love is not stingily reserved for chosen few. Eva, unmarried and probably celibate, is Christ/Madonna figure capable of dispersing endless love." (50)

9.Eva or the Paradox of Love Expression by Death

While Eva is undeniably presented as a generous and loving person, she clearly embodies ambiguity and paradox regarding her expression of love. The episode regarding

her dearest child Plum is a perfect illustration of Morrison's granting Eva, as a mother, a most disturbing action resulting from a complex conception of love. The narrator describes in a manner that recalls Shadrack, Plum's return from the army after World War I. The young man who fought the war in 1917 returned to the U.S. in 1919, and spent a full year travelling around the country and visiting New York, Chicago and other cities before returning to Medallion. Worn out by the experience of war Plum did not even communicate about his trips to the American cities. Plum is so shattered that he is hardly recognisable by his mother and sister who soon realise that he is heroin addicted. Eva, for whom Plum is the best loved of her children, could not continue to bear the sight of the degrading state of her son from the effects of his drug addiction. As Lucille P. Fultz points out: "When Plum returns from the war (which makes him a warrior, like Adonis) mired in heroin addiction, Eva is not able to accept his self-destructive behaviour, slovenliness, and diminishment to a mere shadow of himself." (41)

Eva recalls the poor health of Plum as a child suffering from bowels problems and complicated forms of constipation and how she intervened to soothe him from the pain caused by his blocked solid waste. Plum, it must be stressed, was Eva's child who received the most affection from his mother; she had high expectations of him hoping he would stand by her when she ages and would take responsibility for family and household matters. Even as an adult she kept calling him "my baby". But Plum's image of a decaying man mirrored the deep frustration and disillusionment of Eva whose abiding love of him led her to commit a most absurd crime, killing her son to save him from dying an undignified death. One night, Eva went downstairs to visit her son in his ground floor room. She found him lying in bed. Morrison describes the horrific scene:

Eva stepped back from the bed and let the crutches rest under her arms. She rolled a bit of newspaper into a tight stick about six inches long, lit it and threw it onto the bed where the kerosene-soaked Plum lay in snug delight. Quickly, as the whoosh of flames engulfed him, she shut the door and made her slow and painful journey back to the top of the house. (Morrison, Sula 57)

This episode in the narrative brings this section of the plot to its climax with the statement of a cruel paradox that leads a mother to burn her son to death 'out of love'. With this, a hidden side of Eva is brought to daylight. Before she perpetrated this ferocious crime, she embodied the most characteristic features of a loving, self-sacrificing and generous woman who showed concern for the needy, extending her help beyond her immediate family. Eva, seems thus, to endorse contradictory images. By regarding her role as a mother to primarily ensuring her children's survival, Eva exposes herself to charges of lack of affection for them. When her daughter Hannah asks her if she ever loved them, Eva answers by stressing how she fought against the hardships of life to raise and empower them: "you settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? hem big old eyes in your head woulda been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't." (68)

Upon this, Hannah attempted to explain to Eva what she felt was missing in her motherly love: "I didn't mean that, Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like. Like. Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?" (68)

Despite the legitimacy of both claims, it seems quite clear that Eva adapted the love of her children according to the vital priorities of her conditions after her abandonment by Boy Boy. She saw love essentially as sacrifice. Play, in those hard times, therefore,

was not regarded an essential quality of motherly love. She made this clear to Hannah who saw in play an expression of love:

Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895...I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy... Don't that count? Ain't that love? You want me to tinkle you under the jaw and forget 'bout them sores in your mouth? Pearl was shittin' worms and I was supposed to play rang-around-the-rosie? what you talkin' 'bout did I love you girl I stayed alive for you can't you get that through your thick head or what is that between your ears, heifer? (68–69)

For Eva maternal love is determined by her notion of what the role of the mother is, and given her particular circumstances, she saw it as the struggle not to let her children perish, a "preservative love", which, according to O' Reilly "is not regarded as real, legitimate, or 'good enough' mothering." (Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart 120)

In dealing with the issue of motherhood and motherly love through the character of Eva in *Sula* Morrison was paving the way for the shocking incident of her son's killing. Expressing motherly love through the insane burning of her deeply loved son is an act which is utterly unacceptable by any human common sense. Sokoloff asserted that Eva "played God" in "her decision to destroy her son", adding, "Eva's murder of Plum, deliberate and premeditated, fills her with desolation and mourning. Yet, she experiences no guilt or remorse." (430)

Yet, Eva has an explanation for it. For her, this extreme act stems from her deep concern for her son whom she refused to see perish because of his heroin addiction.

Fearing that her son Plum will sink into infantilization, Eva saw herself as a saviour of her son's dignity. She was horrified at the idea of Plum wanting to be a baby again. She had already expressed her resentment that Plum had not grown up: "being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dream and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. ... He was growed, a big old thing ..." (Morrison, Sula 71) She was not prepared to cope with such a degrading situation for her dearest child: "after all that carryin'on, just getting' him out and keepin' him alive...and he wanted to crawl back in my womb and well... I ain't got the room no more even if he could do it." (71)

With this conviction, and the sense that her son belongs to her, she disposed of his life as she would with her own self as she did with her leg. Plum, finally, was perceived by Eva as one of her limbs, and even more so as he was losing his autonomy and seeking to return to his mother's womb. For Eva, death is perceived as a liberating act from the painful existence of her shattered son. She performs it in terms that makes it look almost like a ritual, trusting that with death she is preserving his integrity and having him die "not all scrunched up inside [her] womb, but like a man." (72) On these grounds, Plum's ritualistic death is perceived as an act of mercy by Eva who wants to grant her son the manhood that he is lacking particularly after his war experience and subsequent drug addiction. With this death, Eva feels she is granting peace to her son's tormented soul and easing his pain from the hellish craving for heroin. Eva's assertion that her son wanted to return to her womb invites a psychoanalytical reading approach to what may be regarded as an oedipal complex relationship involving Plum and his mother. Accordingly, and on the basis of the precepts of psychoanalytical theory, Plum can be perceived as a child who has not reached a resolution of his Oedipus complex, and thus could not grow up to manhood by ending his dependence on his mother. Sensing that her son is far away from gaining maturity and assuming his manhood, Eva's resentment grew to the degree of her losing hope from ever seeing her boy emerging out of this dreadfully degrading condition. She, then, sought in death the only and best alternative for the preservation of her son's integrity claiming: "I done everything I could to make him leave me and be a man but he wouldn't and I had to keep him out." (72)

Eva's act of putting an end to her son's life to ease his suffering was a claim that stimulated controversy among her critics. Rather than creating unanimous approval, critical reactions to the paradox of the expression of love by death produced antagonistic viewpoints. While some critics shared Morrison's view of Eva as being selfish, claiming that:

"[Eva] decided that her son was living a life that was not worth his time. She meant it was too painful for her; you know, the way you kill a dog when he breaks his leg because he can't stand the pain. He may very well be able to stand it, but you can't so that's why you get rid of him. (Rand 346)

Such criticism puts the blame on Eva by underscoring the fact that with this act she was putting an end to her own suffering as the sight of her decaying son was destroying her. Feminist criticism expressed sympathy with Eva, exonerating her from the charge of murder. Stephanie Demetrakopoulos makes this clear asserting:

"I am unable to fault Eva for her life decision or acts. Morrison thinks that Eva and Hannah have committed wrong or bad acts, but I think Eva is a portrait of archetypal feminine strengths that goes beyond the author's intentions. . . And she does not really cause any of her adult children's deaths; she merely hastens death to save them from misery. (Holloway et Demetrakopoulos 61)

Nellie Y. McKay, on the other hand, sought to explain Eva's perception of death and found some justification for her act asserting that:

To Eva, death was the ultimate reality. Having given Plum life through tremendous struggles, she could not endure his meandering in the artificial pastiche of death; she took him out of his dope-ridden misery and gave him the real thing. (26)

Moreover, Ghasemi, noting the ambiguous character of her emotions, she refers to Eva's troubled mind arguing that she "displays desperation and difficulty in expressing herself about Plum's life and death; she has difficulty verbalizing her ambivalent feelings and ambiguous emotions about her material ties with her children." (Negociating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels 242)

In her book *The Mother-Daughter Plot*, Marianne Hirsch, resorting to W E B Dubois' notion of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folks*, sees in Eva a double personality, a self-division as the source of her complex maternal feelings. For her, Eva's dilemma resides in her blurred perception of the boundaries that separate her identity from that of her son. As a result, Hirsch argues, Eva displays a "double identity, as an individual subject and as a mother, signalling perhaps the self-division that by necessity characterizes and distinguishes maternal discourse... The message, too, is of course double; love is mixed with anger, pain with pride, sadness with tenderness." (181)

For Hirsch, evidence of Eva's self-division is articulated by the explanation she gives about Plum's death and in which Morrison mentions this duality by referring to her double voice: "like two people talking at the same time, one fraction of a second behind the other." (Morrison, Sula 71)

10. Eva, Mother and Patriarch as the Core of the Peace Family

By making Eva the core of the Peace family, Morrison does not limit the plot of her novel to the mere events that characterise her central characters Sula and Nel. In fact, both girls carry distinguishing traits of their respective families. Morrison makes this clear by referring to the girls' mothers and grandmothers as significant influences in their lives and conducts. The role of Eva in the novel, quite apart from illustrating the nature of the relationships between the family members, enables Morrison to raise crucial issues regarding the black woman condition and experience. Among these, the notions of black motherhood and the matriarch are largely dealt with through such characters as Eva, Hannah and Helene. With the story of Eva as referred to earlier, Morrison deconstructed long held white stereotypes of the black matriarch holding a domineering position in the family and emasculating their husbands. Eva, contrary to the stereotypical images of the authoritative matriarch, is abandoned by her husband simply because he favours womanizing and drinking instead of taking responsibility for the care of his wife and children. As a result, she undertakes to endorse the role of the white patriarch model which her husband Boy Boy deserted feeling unconcerned with it. Conventional gender roles are here plainly reversed. With Eva, as the woman provider, Morrison deconstructs the white patriarch model as a cultural construct applicable to the black society at large. She substitutes to it a black matriarch strikingly opposed to the images elaborated by white racist discourse. According to Janice M. Sokoloff, Morrison "is speaking of another world of matriarchy; in the case of Eva, the configuration is one not of demure subservience to men but of courage, aggression, and indomitable strength." (430)

In her depiction of Eva, Morrison has indeed created a brave female character endowed with strong will and a fighting spirit. She epitomises the self-sufficient woman

who refuses to submit to the patriarchal or male-centred white cultural model and its subsequent uneven balance of power in favour of males. Eva, as a matriarch, exerts her authority mainly on her household and children. Now, in the absence of a husband, she appears as though she is the ruling figure of family matters as Morrison seems to suggest through the following description: "The creator and sovereign of this enormous house ... was Eva Peace, who sat in a wagon on the third floor directing the lives of her children, friends, strays and a constant stream of boarders." (Morrison, Sula 30)

The new Eva stands in sharp opposition with the abandoned mother with three children and no resources, having for a while, to rely on her neighbours' generosity to feed her offspring. Eva resolved to contain her anger against BoyBoy and determined to find a way of never depending on a male partner to meet the needs of her children. She sought and found support for her family in the extreme act of self-mutilation. Morrison's focus on Eva as the core of the Peace family not only serves to give centrality to this character as an illustration of the complex interplay of motherhood and matriarchy, but it is also destined to expel long held stereotypes of black women. The case of Eva is most suitable to fulfil these aims.

Motherhood being a recurrent theme in Morrison's fiction, it is dealt with from different perspectives and is necessarily multi-voiced as the various mother characters in her novels confront different experiences and life conditions. With the wide range of mothers that populate her fiction, Morrison is able to explore essential issues regarding black motherhood, including mythical and stereotypical assumptions concerning the role of mothers. Though Eva is not the sole mother character in *Sula*, she is undeniably the most prominent one given the position she holds in the plot of the novel and the controversial role she assumes as a mother and a matriarch. Despite her self-sacrifice to

nurture her children, Eva's role is not restricted to being the food provider, she was also concerned with the image of her children. Such a concern led her to commit the reprehensible act of murder against her son Plum believing she was preserving his dignity. Eva's character presents a complex case of black motherhood with a mother confronted to the dilemma of having to feed and raise three children abandoned by their father. Her struggle, as a black woman, involved her coping with race and gender oppression in addition to her precarious financial condition. She managed to get around these barriers and find a way out of this situation securing survival of her children. Despite undeniable humane qualities, Eva, as Lizabeth Rand remarks, "is far from being simply a saint", adding "Toni Morrison certainly recognised her generous, yet selfish character: [Eva} kills her son, plays God, names people and you know, puts her hand on a child. You know, she's God-like, she manipulates – all in the best interest. And she is very, very possessive about other people, that is as a king is." (344)

In her portrayal of Eva, both as a mother and as a patriarch Morrison remained faithful to her method of displaying paradox and ambiguity regarding her black female characters as an option to avoid one-sidedness of perspective. That Eva embodies contradictions is no surprise considering Morrison's attachment to her dual treatment of characters and situations to avoid categorisation and resist conformity. This led Ghasemi to point out:

The ambiguity and complexity of Eva's character as an individual capable of making important decisions and taking drastic measures - such as her initial endeavour to secure funds to support her family and later her termination of Plum's life present her not merely as a maternal force conditioned by the idealised notions of assumed

expectations but also as a multidimensional, autonomous individual. (Ghasemi, Negociating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels 246)

11. Ambiguous Bonds between Mothers and Daughters in Sula

The issue regarding the bond between mothers and daughters is central in Morrison's fiction in general and *Sula* is no exception. The novel's plot devotes a broad space to depicting the complex relationship between mothers and daughters with particular focus on the two protagonists Sula and Nel and the nature of the bonds that tie them to their respective mothers. Similarly, Morrison explores the family line and extends her treatment of this question to grandmothers whose impact upon their daughters and granddaughters proves to be significant in terms of their influence on the formation of their identity. Hence, with regard to the Peace family, the bond involves the grandmother Eva, her daughter Hannah and her granddaughter Sula and the nature of relationships they have together. In the Wright's case Morrison adopts a similar family line approach by involving Nel's mother Helene, daughter of a Creole prostitute Rochelle, and Nel's grandmother Cecile.

By populating her novel *Sula* with a wide range of mothers and daughters with the exception of the male character of Plum, Morrison is able to explore the issue of black motherhood from a multiplicity of perspectives. Such an approach, in addition to refuting narrow conformity by the presentation of diverse mothers and conceptions of motherhood, raises essential questions regarding the socially defined notions of conventional motherhood. In this context, it is important to indicate that Morrison's discourse on motherhood relies a great deal on shifting points of views as the issue is now presented from the mothers as subjects revealing their condition, and now as objects

perceived almost exclusively in the light of their daughters. Mother of Nel Wright, Helene whose troubling background has been introduced earlier, deserves further attention regarding the perception of her role as a mother and how her daughter Nel regards her. Starting from the premise that "the female characters in *Sula* are built within the interpersonal relations, but where "it is almost always that the mother's influence is the strongest", Kitanovska considers that the protagonists Sula and Nel are always compared to their mothers and grandmothers. (305)

In Nel's case the mother's influence on her daughter is characterised by Helene's strong attachment to the conventional values of the community and the importance she gives to her sense of self-worth and image of respectability. Helene who has been raised by her grandmother Cecile who feared that she would follow the path of her prostitute mother, did everything to break the bond that links her to this shameful background. Through marriage to a remote cousin Wiley Wright, she founded a family and birthed a daughter. With this, she gathered the conventional ways which, in addition to her church attendance and strict moral behaviour, would establish her as a model of respectability in her community. Helene wanted to shape the personality of her daughter Nel according to the conventional standards that she adopted for herself believing them to be the key to belonging to the community. She instilled in her daughter the strict conformity to what she regarded as right and proper behaviour. But Nel's encounter and growing friendship with Sula soon exerted an attraction that contradicted her mother's expectations. Nel was thus exposed to a double influence which will mark her identity formation and will account for the ambivalent attitude she has towards mother and friend. Soon, Nel succumbs to Sula's independent and unconventional ways. Moreover, despite contrasting upbringing the girls found completion in their differences. Thus, being raised in completely opposite backgrounds was paradoxically an attractive incentive to the two girls with each finding comfort in her counterpart's home and lifestyle. This difference in their life style brought them even closer to one another. Nel, enjoying the carefree ways of Sula's family felt relieved from the pressures of her mother's strict code of conduct. With Sula she learned to distance herself from her mother's influence and regard herself as a separate individual. Similarly, Sula's visit to Nel's home provided her with the pleasure of a calm and neatly kept and ordered home. If from the outset one fears that fundamental differences will come in the way of the forming friendship of the two girls, soon Morrison contrasts the reader's expectations by revealing that it is precisely because of their opposite traits that they are attracted to each other. Their friendship is formed, not on sharing similarities, but on complementing each other through their differences. Morrison insists on the closeness of the bonds that characterise this friendship regardless of their differences:

"Their friendship was as intense as it was sudden. They found relief in each other's personality." (Morrison, Sula 53) It is clear, therefore, that though the mothers' influence on their daughters is undeniable and that it would impact them either positively or negatively in the formation of their identity, other interpersonal relationships will also interfere with their process of the growth and maturation. Friendship between the two young female protagonists and the dreams that they share as adolescents were the ingredients that embarked them on adolescent fantasies and new adventures. These included their newly discovered interest in boys:

The new theme they were now discovering was men.... And the boys. The beautiful, beautiful boys who dotted the landscape like jewels, split the air with their shouts in

the field, and thickened the river with their shining wet backs.....It was in that summer, the summer of their twelfth year, the summer of the beautiful black boys, that they became skittish, frightened and bold—all at the same time. (56)

The girls, seeing their world in a new light "joined in mutual admiration and watched each day as though it were a movie arranged for their amusement." (55) Being black, young and females they needed their mutual support for each other's protection and the realisation of their dreams. Morrison describes the depth of the feeling of togetherness that the girls shared: "they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for." (52)

While this friendship gradually revealed different aspects of the girls' personalities, it also served to unveil mutual conflicting inclinations with their mothers. Just as Hannah felt deprived of motherly love blaming Eva for caring only for the subsistence of her children at the expense of a more affectionate behaviour, Sula was, in turn, shocked when she overheard Hannah saying "I do love Sula but I don't like her" (57). With such comments Morrison hints at the tensions that characterise the relationships between mothers and daughters and which serve to shed light on some of the dark aspects of the plot. It is important at this stage to relate the incident that caused the death of Hannah and the reactions it engendered on Eva and Sula who witnessed the terrible scene. Lighting a fire in the yard of Eva's house to boil water for the laundry, Hannah caught fire. Eva, witnessing Hannah's burning from upstairs jumped out of her window in an attempt to put out the flames and save her daughter. At the same time, the neighbours Mr and Mrs Suggs rushed to pour a bucket of water on her body. Sula, however, who was standing on the porch watched passively her mother perish making no move to rescue her. Eva describes Sula's attitude as being "interested", an ambiguous term, signifying that she

wished her mother's death. By contrasting Eva and Sula's attitudes towards the lethal incident of Hannah, Morrison shows Eva's love of her daughter despite any tensions that have marked their relationships. As to Sula's absence of reaction in the face of her mother's accident, it may have its explanation in her overhearing her mother saying "I do love her, but don't like her", an ambivalent claim that may have deeply affected the daughter-mother relationship, with Sula undergoing the damage caused by the ensuing frustration. From that moment onwards, Sula, feeling that she did not experience maternal love, determined she did not need anyone in her life. The narrative of her solo life in the novel is most certainly the illustration Morrison wanted to give of her central protagonist's struggle to affirm her identity by a troubling challenge of the values of friendship, family and community which allows the display of the ambiguity and the ambivalence surrounding this character.

It is therefore through problematising the relationships between daughters and mothers that Morrison depicts the complex experience of black women in their respective roles as mothers and daughters insisting on their ambiguous character. With the peace family, Morrison focuses the conflict between mothers and daughters on the issue of love and affection. Hannah craves for a maternal love almost impossible to give by her mother Eva whose utmost concern is to ensure the basic needs of her children. As to Sula, her relationship with Hannah is harmed by her mother's interest in her own adventures with males and the frustration caused by her lack of interest in her. Hannah, who blamed her mother for failing to connect emotionally with her children, and for not giving her the love, she needed, found herself, in turn, incapable of expressing it to her own daughter Sula. Hannah seems to have found compensation for what she felt as lack of love from her mother in the sexual activity she was having with a number of men without getting

attached to any of them. Sula, for whom Hannah's male pursuits were no secret, learned from her mother to regard sex as "pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable."

(41)

Depicting the relationship between Sula and Hannah in the light of such intimate situations regarding the way one approaches sexuality and the openness with which mother and daughter address such an issue, Morrison displays, beyond taboos, the complex dimensions in which her female characters evolve. The quest for identity, individuality and selfhood depends a great deal on these dimensions. Kitanovoska made this clear when she observed:

Sula provides a perfect image for the position of the African-American women in the last century. Among other issues, it examines the dynamics of family life and friendship and the expectations for conformity within the community. It also represents the complex images of mothers and turbulent mother-daughter relationships. (303)

'The turbulent images of mother-daughter relationships' are indeed omnipresent in *Sula*. They constitute a significant element of the plot by the exposure of the tensions between mothers and daughters engendered by the frustrations caused by contrasting behaviour and expectations. These tensions, which display differences of perspectives among black women, can have an incentive effect prompting a redefinition of self and identity as part of their quest for freedom and self-realisation. Morrison's adoption of such methods of female characterisation in her novel serves to deconstruct the ideological mechanisms responsible for the reduction of the black women's experience to stereotypical propaganda. By offering complex depictions of the personalities and

concerns of her black women, she challenges the traditional restrictions imposed on them by U.S and African American communities as well. Seen in this context, Sula epitomises the new spirit of independence that wants to assert itself through a challenge of the codes of conduct of her community, even at the cost of being regarded as the town's pariah.

12. Chicken Little's Death as a Step toward Adulthood

Already as an adolescent Sula displayed clear signs of defiance and unpredictability which pointed to a personality radically opposed to that of her friend Nel. The episode of the tragic death of the five-year-old boy named Chicken Little whom Nel and Sula met by the river's bank is indicative of the ambiguous attitude of the two protagonists toward this incident. After teasing the boy for picking his nose, Sula offered to play with him by showing him how to climb a tree. After they climb down, Sula playfully starts to swing the boy around by his hands and he laughs enjoying the game. But things took a tragic turn when the kid suddenly slipped from Sula's grip and fell into the river not reappearing on the surface. Morrison uses a gloomy metaphor to report the accident: "the water darkened and closed quickly over the place where Chicken Little sank." (Morrison, Sula 61) Stunned by the dreadful turn of events the girls stood reactionless for a while before Sula ran to Shadrack's shack to check if he had witnessed the event. As soon as he appeared in his room the enigmatic war veteran answered Sula's question by an ambiguous "always", probably suggesting that nothing escapes his sight that takes place by the river. His answer terrified the confused Sula who hurried to meet her friend.

Right after the accident when Sula, overwhelmed by a sense of guilt cannot contain her tears, Nel attempts to comfort her by telling her that she was not responsible for the accident and that "she had done nothing" (65). Considering she was a mere observer and having played no part in the accident, Nel asserted she was not prepared to share her friend's guilt. Later, when the body is discovered by a white man and brought back to his mother, Sula and Nel attended the church service for the boy's funeral keeping completely silent and avoiding to look at one another; "There was a space, separateness between them", wrote Morrison hinting at the forthcoming events that will lead to the separation of the two friends. (64)

This moment is significant in the lives of the two girls particularly with their decision to keep this accident secret. Morrison writes that following this event "there is now something missing" (61) in the girls. Even though, she did not furnish any explicit explanation with regard to what is exactly "missing", it is possible to infer that it is their innocence as children that is now lost. Their confrontation with the death of Chicken Little engendered their complicity concerning the necessity to cover up the accident to avoid any troubles with the community. With such a decision the girls reveal a significant transition in their lives. This was characterised by their passage to adulthood through their newly felt awareness of the vulnerability of human life as well as a test of the bonds of their friendship. Nel and Sula must have felt that the secure world of their childhood days is now behind them. Faced with the tragic death of Chicken Little, they were initiated to the suddenness with which life can be lost. The death of Chicken Little which is actual, generated the metaphorical death of innocence of the two young girls.

13. Following Opposite Paths: From Togetherness to Separation

Another significant episode in the circular plot of *Sula* and which prompts the events forward is devoted to the girls' contrasting destinies as they mature to adulthood. Morrison shifts the narrative to the individual journey of the two friends by which they

make life choices which will lead them on separate paths only to meet again later in life. By 1927, Nel is seventeen when she marries Jude Green, a waiter at the Medallion hotel, and experiences life away from her friend. Following her mother's path, she has acquiesced to her community's social demand that women must marry and found a family. Despite her youthful dream to escape social constraints and her initial rejection of her mother's ways, Nel came to represent the conventionally defined gender roles that her mother strived to instil in her.

Nel's early cry upon her return from New Orleans "I'm me. I'm not their daughter", which, once, evoked her strong desire to affirm her own identity has now vanished with the dreams she was sharing with Sula. By contrasting Nel's early insistence on her guest for selfhood and individual freedom with her present status as a married woman indistinguishable from the rest of the women of The Bottom community, Morrison is once more proceeding by way of contrast and paradox to convey the complexity of the black female condition highlighting in Nel's case, the gap that separates dreams of self-fulfilment from the reality of communal pressures. Contrary to Sula, Nel appears to have been tamed by the standards of her mother as she finally favoured the promise of a traditional union with Jude to the uncertain path mirrored by her short venture with Sula. Marriage was an outlet for Jude's frustration for not getting the manly job he was craving for in the new road building project down Medallion's river. Morrison is clear about Jude's motives when she writes: "So it was rage and a determination to take on a man's role anyhow that made him press Nel about settling down." (Morrison, Sula 75) The white racist foreman hiring white men only enraged Jude, and Nel's favourable response to Jude's marriage proposal was meant to ease his resentment. Through the Nel and Jude's union Morrison is displaying the conventional model of a marriage according to the social expectations of the Medallion community with total conformity to the gender roles being assumed by this couple. Nel endorses the image of the housewife that her mother Helene has always wanted her to be, while Jude, frustrated by his job as a waiter, strives for a 'manly' job with the road builders of his town. At this stage of the plot, Nel's portrayal by Morrison seems to fit with Jung's theory of the collective unconscious, in which he argues that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter, which means that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter contains her mother. (Grewal 15)

Sula who has celebrated her friend's wedding departs for college on a journey that keeps her ten years away from Medallion. By this decision, Sula, in an act of venture outside the confining limits of her community, opts for a life of defiance and self-exploration. Being at odds with the principles of her community Sula's adventurous mind is associated with masculine behaviour. By assuming the commonly regarded masculine traits, Sula transcends the traditional gender role of the female stereotype in an epic attempt of self-discovery and development. Morrison makes this clear when she stresses that her female protagonist "is a masculine character. . .. She will do the kind of things that normally only men do... She's adventuresome, she trusts herself, she's not scared." (Morrison et Stepto, Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison)(, 475-76)

Travel, for Sula, is perceived as a liberating act which enables her to free herself from the social pressures of life in Medallion. By her wandering in different American cities on a long and solo journey, Sula, from the perspective of her society, embodied a typically male attitude in her quest for independence. Such a conduct, considered as "unfeminine" cannot possibly meet the approval of a community strongly tied to its

traditional gender roles. Even her soulmate Nel, will at a later stage of the novel, explicitly voice her disapproval of her friend's male manners bringing to light fundamental differences between them: "You a woman and a colored woman at that. You can't act like a man. You can't be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like, taking what you want, leaving what you don't." (Morrison, Sula 142) Despite being reminded by Nel of the social rebuke of such behaviour Sula remains determined to live by her own codes replying, "You say I'm a woman and colored. Ain't that the same as being a man?" (142)

14. Sula's Return to The Bottom: A Presage of Evil?

In the chapter entitled 1937 Morrison moves the plot forward with the dreaded return of Sula to her hometown particularly as this takes place during an abnormal proliferation of robins regarded as a bad omen by the small- minded citizens of Medallion. Morrison describes the profusion of birds a plague using a word that carries a certain ambiguity, hence foreshadowing the troubles that will soon manifest themselves in the community. Even at Eva's house there are four dead robins on the walk possibly suggesting forthcoming evil actions. Through this profusion of birds, Guthrie explains in her book *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, "Morrison wants the reader to get the awful feeling of those birds everywhere, to the point that Sula has to kick them aside to make her way through them, while suggesting that something is about to happen (36)

Morrison signals a first instance of antagonism with the tension manifested during Sula's reunion with her grandmother Eva. Their meeting is marked by the cruel memories of the burning of Plum and Hannah and the mutual accusations and threats they exchange over these tragic events:

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"God's going to strike you!"

"Which God? The one watched you burn Plum?"

"Don't talk to me about no burning. You watched your own mamma. You crazy roach! You the one should have been burnt!"

"But I ain't. Got that? I ain't. Any more fires in this house, I'm lighting them! ... Whatever's burning in me is mine! ... And I'll split this town in two and everything in it before I'll let you put it out!" (Morrison, Sula 93)

With anger growing on both sides the tension reaches its heights with Sula threatening to inflict the same fate Eva inflicted to her son Plum: "Maybe one night when you dozing in that wagon . . . maybe I'll just tip on up here with some kerosene and - who knows - you may make the brightest flame of them all." (93)

Quite apart from displaying the strong personalities of the two characters, the aggressive tone of this dialogue brings to the surface the animosity engendered by fundamental differences of identities and opposite expectations from life. When Eva spoke to Sula about marriage, Sula, unwilling to draw her way of life from her grandmother, replied by expressing her fierce attachment to her independence as displayed in this excerpt:

"When you gone to get married? You need to have some babies. It'll settle you."

"I don't want to make somebody else. I want to make myself."

"Selfish. Ain't no woman got no business floatin' around without no man."

"You did."

"Not by choice."

"Mamma did."

"Not by choice, I said. It ain't right for you to want to stay off by yourself. You need...I'm a tell you what you need." (95)

It is clear from this conversation that Sula shows an uncompromising spirit by dismissing her grandmother's advice to get married and to found a family. She insists on her quest for a personal definition of self-realisation distinct from the conventional norms that restrict women's choice to marriage, family and motherhood. Moreover, Sula has strong arguments against her grandmother's gender roles reminding her that neither she nor her mother Hannah remarried after the separation from or loss of their husbands. Both of them chose to remain 'free' and favoured indeed casual relationships with men to being attached to a single one through marital union. Morrison, is once more relying on paradox to put Sula in a strong position for dismissing Eva's point of view to settle for a traditional life of which she herself was not an example. Despite the apparent binary opposition between the two characters of Sula and Eva regarding clashing definitions of ways of life, it would be wrong to conclude that they are totally different.

In fact, it was Eva who taught her granddaughter to be strong and Sula, in turn, learned a great deal from her grandmother's experience not to sacrifice her individuality for the sake of a life union with a male. What emerges clearly from Sula's personality is that it owes a great deal to the particular influence of Eva and Hannah in shaping her into what she has become. Sokoloff makes an interesting point when she writes: "Sula's personality and destiny are most fully revealed through contrasts and comparison with the grandmother Eva", adding "What they share is remarkable energy. Where they differ is that the vitality Eva has spent a life time investing in endurance, Sula redirects into defiance." (430)

Making use of an ingenious narrative process which relies on paradox and ambiguity, Morrison proceeds by a juxtaposition of difference and similarity as features that bring together and at the same time distance these characters. Her adoption of such method stems from her conviction that she has no ready-made recipe of a truth to offer to her reading audience, and that it is up to the reader to draw his conclusions through his confrontation with the text.

Opposed, but alike, the Peace females refuse to abide by the traditional women's roles which submit them to the social standards prevalent in the community. Despite their compelling character, these roles, Grewal argues, are adopted by the community "in the name of black solidarity and survival" and "any assertion of independence from the communal codes of conduct –especially by its women– is viewed with hostility" (44), being regarded as a threat to social harmony.

15. Sula's Non-conformist Self-versus Community

In general communities tend to expect conformity from their members. Defiance by individuals who refuse submission to the social norms generates conflicts with community which retaliates by inflicting punishment to the transgressor. Sula's refusal to comply with the patriarchal ideology of the Bottom initiated her departure from her home. Her ten-year solo journey in American cities endowed her with experience with men but did not prevent the urge of a disturbing return to the nest. Sula, as Morrison writes, "lived out her days exploring her own thoughts and emotions, giving them full reign, feeling no obligation to please anybody unless their pleasure pleased her." (Morrison, Sula 114)

With Sula's return to the Bottom, Morrison displays the nature of the conflict that came to oppose Sula to the community by emphasising the shared fatalistic attitude of the townspeople who feel they are doomed to lead a miserable existence and Sula's rejection of such a life of resignation. The community resentment of Sula, having been foreshadowed by the coincidence of the presence of a plague of robins upon her arrival to her hometown after a long absence, soon turns to hatred particularly with Sula's now endorsing the reputation of sleeping with different men and worst of all with whites. Even though Morrison does not furnish any clear evidence of Sula's sexual relationships with white men, every move of her becomes suspect in the eyes of her community. Her alleged interracial relationships were regarded as an unforgivable affront to the black society and a transgressive act that was not tolerated.

Unlike the women of the Bottom, Sula did not believe in the virtues of marriage claiming that "those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles" (122). She preferred to remain single and free to being robbed her individuality and independence through conformity. Such an attitude, which subverts the patriarchal system, is perceived differently by the community which regards her as a rule breaker and a potential threat to the pillars of their society.

With all these accusations hanging over her head, Sula is reduced to an ideal scapegoat upon which the townspeople find comfort after pouring all their frustrations on a member of their community who has made choices that contradict their presumably shared social standards. Her marginalisation from her community for being evil served the local women to enhance their image, and thus: "They began to cherish their husbands and wives, protect their children, repair their homes and in general band together against the devil in their midst" (117).

Perceived as an outlaw by the community because of her defiance of the social mores and her assertion of sexual freedom, Sula came to embody the image of a witch responsible for all the ills of her townspeople. By her transgression of the social norms, she came to be regarded as the incarnation of evil, a degenerate figure whose "personality, along with the snake-like birthmark that so intrigues those who encounter her, makes her the closest thing to a witch that the Bottom will ever have" (Harris, Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison 57)

Further incidents contribute to darken the image of Sula within her hometown. Sula, whose reunion with her grandmother was marked by mutual accusations and hostility led to Eva's fear to undergo the same fate as the one she imposed on her son Plum by deciding that death would honour him better than the degenerate life of a drug addict. Consequently, she decided to keep the door of her bedroom closed to prevent Sula from carrying out her threats. Sometime later, when Sula became the legal guardian of her grandmother, she took a decision that is going to enrage the whole of the black society of the Bottom and lead to the break with Sula and her estrangement from the community. The decision concerns Sula's committing her grandmother to a nursing home for the elderly ironically run by whites. When the townspeople learned about this, they were horrified by what they regarded as an insulting act to the elderly who deserve to be honoured and respected.

By being disrespectful to the ancestor, Sula overstepped the limits tolerated by the community, thus engendering severe reproval of her townspeople. Whatever conflict may have opposed Sula to her grandmother, Eva, it should be stressed, was the one who established a home for her family and built life from nothing. The community witnessed all this and would not tolerate Sula's dumping her grandmother to a nursing home

ignoring the past history of her sacrifice to preserve the family. As a matter of fact, Morrison, herself, asserted her respectful stance toward the ancestor in her 1984 essay entitled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", in which she insists on the notion of ancestor as the core of identity and continuity which establish a linkage with one's past and rootedness.

As a result of her violation of the social norms of her community, Sula's return to Medallion is viewed with hostility leading the women of the town to regard her as a witch whose transgressive behaviour constituted a threat for communal self-preservation. Sula, does indeed stand in complete contrast with the other women of the community particularly with regard of her rejection of the conventional gender roles adopted by the community. Her status as a woman without a man and without children made people in the Bottom view her as a pariah. Her independent and rebellious ways while illustrating her choice to live a life of defiance serve at the same time Morrison's purpose to expose the social norms and codes of conduct that oppress women by restricting their choices. In this respect, Sula as well as other female characters in the novel, through their different conditions and life perspectives illustrate the limitations of their race and gender and justify the antipodal responses they adopt toward their life choices. They also exemplify Morrison's larger concern with the multiplicity of African American women and their diversity and their opposition to any stereotypical categorisation that would reduce them to sameness and absence of individuality.

16. Sula: From the Challenge of Patriarchal Ideology to Sexual Dissidence

Absent from her community for ten years, Sula returned to Medallion with an experience that taught her that wherever she went, she realised that she lived in a world

dominated by men. Visiting different American cities and mixing with men did only contribute to confirm her belief that men had the "the same language of love, the same entertainments of love, the same cooling of love. Men taught her nothing but love tricks, shared nothing but worry, gave nothing but money." (Morrison, Sula 120) Sula's confrontation with gender prejudice is clearly articulated by the choice of diction that reflects the lack of seriousness on behalf of men regarding love matters. The dubious character of such terms as "tricks", "worry" and "money" is clearly incompatible with the notion of love and accounts for Sula's total disbelief in the possibility of a happy life in marriage.

Contrary to her friend Nel who settled for a married life, Sula felt that marriage not only restricted women to domestic chores but confined them to the roles of wives and mothers. Sula, feared that marriage would wipe out her individuality and would associate her with the subordinate condition of the women of Medallion who abandoned their own needs to fulfil the conventional roles assigned to them by a society dominated by men. In her quest for self-fulfilment, Sula rejects marriage, family and motherhood, but retains men whom she regards as sex partners. Asserting her sexual autonomy, Sula challenged the moral codes of her community by sleeping with married men. Soon rumours spread among the women of the town concerning Sula's deviant sexual behaviour and aimed at her exclusion from the community. Sula came to epitomise evil; the very evil that accompanied her return to Medallion with a plague of robins. And paradoxically this alleged threat served to bring some cohesion in the society through a change initiated by a felt danger of which Sula was the instigator. Sula's defiance of the social norms as a way to achieve self-fulfilment is met with great hostility by the community which

regarded her "first a roach, then a bitch and ultimately a witch—that is, an embodiment of evil and danger" (Ni 116)

Even though facing a collective fight against her, Sula did not surrender to the norms assumed by the community and lived up to her own convictions not caring about the danger of victimisation. Among the significant events that precede the conclusion of the novel Morrison introduces a climactic episode that raises fundamental questions over Sula's personality, her conception of friendship and her sexual drives. Having renewed contact with her friend Nel Sula pays her afternoon visits during which the two ladies evoke memories of their childhood and reminisce funny events. To Nel, her friend's return is "like getting the use of an eye back, having a cataract removed.... Talking to Sula had always been a conversation with herself." (Morrison, Sula 82) Eventually their talk turns to sex and they laugh at some funny moments during which they evoked the subject and some other situations related to it. Nel's husband Jude took part in the chat that went on between the two friends and enjoys Sula's humour. He eventually comes to notice that Sula is an attractive woman.

The climactic scene occurs when the narrator reveals that Jude and Sula have an affair. It was on an afternoon that Nel discovered them having sex in her bedroom. Completely shattered, she isolates herself in the bathroom and meditates about the consequences of Sula's constant urge for change as a challenge of the stagnant ways of the community life. Nel feels that Sula robbed her of her femininity as she looks at her thighs, a symbol of her sexuality and finds them "empty and dead...and it was Sula who had taken the life from them... the both of them ... left her with no thighs and no heart, just brain ravelling away" (110). She remembers that Sula regarded stagnancy like hell, and realises that change in her case is no better, now that she has lost her husband and

seen her family ruined. Following this incident, Jude had decided to leave for good, while Sula continued to assert her sexual autonomy and non-conformist ways by not showing any sign of guilt. Morrison describes her attitude in the following terms:

"Unremorseful, she takes it as a common act, as if nothing has happened, when Nel enquires about it: "you did not love enough to leave him alone, to let him love me, you had to take him away." (145)

Sula answers: "What do you mean take him away? I did not kill him. I just fucked him, if we were good friends, how come you could not get over it?" (145) Sula, as can be seen from her words, fails to understand the notion of possessiveness in marriage. From her youthful days she has seen her mother Hannah getting involved sexually with men without being attached to any of them. Her conception of sexuality had its roots in the informal ways that she must have derived from her mother's relationships with men. When she came to maturity, Sula's experiences with men challenge traditional norms of sexuality. She rejects societal expectations and embraces her own desires and choices which can be seen as both liberating and provocative within the conservative society of the Bottom.

Through the aberrant character of Sula's behaviour toward her friend, Morrison displays her rebellious and uncompromising spirit in her dedication to challenge the community's norms. Paradoxically it is Sula who is disappointed that her friend Nel has become "one of them", "part of the town" "and all its way" (120). What Sula is displaying in her sexuality is in fact a reproduction of the masculine ways which she experienced in her relationships with men both outside and inside her native town. She, thus, determined to use men just as they are using her. The way she gives expression to her sexuality in no

different from the way "in which men have done ... for generations; she seeks to satisfy herself not others and is willing to have sex without committing herself emotionally to her partners, discarding them as she wishes." (L. Peach 129)

Sula, as a matter of fact, regards her sexuality as part of her identity and individuality. It is a significant aspect of her self-discovery and sense of autonomy. Her relationships with men while challenging conventional morality serve also to confront the reader with conflicting perspectives and further illustrations of Morrison's ingenious use of paradox and ambiguity. Contrary to Sula, Nel could not conceive of having sex outside marriage and now that Jude has deserted her, she feels "her thighs were really empty." (Morrison, Sula 110) As Keith Byerman notes, "the loss of Jude is the loss of identity and the loss of life ... [Nel] now becomes a woman without a man; and is unable to raise her eyes. For this change, she blames Sula, who without a sense of ownership, cannot conceive of Jude as an object to be taken" (198)

Nel has not gained any freedom after the loss of her husband, the vacuum she faces after the departure of Jude left her heartbroken. Stein draws a sinister picture of Nel's desperate condition: "Without Sula and Jude, with her children growing away from her as they grow up, Nel's life contracts even further, narrowing into a loveless round of duties and responsibilities, to job, children, and church." (Stein 148)

Moreover, the shock she experienced by her discovery of Jude's and Sula's sexual affair forced her to confront the complexities of human relationships, deeply affecting her sense of self and others. Having lost her innocence, she begins to the differentiate herself from Sula's and reassess her identity. In doing so, Nel experiences an ambiguous mix of anger, betrayal and at the same time envy towards Sula. Grappling with the conflicting

emotions of love of her friend and the resentment caused by the pain of betrayal Nel gradually evolves toward a consciousness of the intricacies of human behaviour.

17.Sula and Ajax: The Temporary Idyll of an Unconventional Love

In her exploration of Sula's sexuality, Morrison introduces another significant encounter which serves to reveal other conflicting elements in her protagonist's relationships with men. This concerns her meeting with Ajax, a resident of the Bottom, whom Sula has not seen since her youthful days during her outings with Nel when he called them "pig meat", a compliment for their young and beautiful bodies.

Ajax 's arrival in her life, with her as an adult, represents a significant departure from her previous experiences with men. It was during some neighbourhood celebrations involving food, music and games that Sula noticed Ajax, a man that recently returned to the Bottom after having been away for some time. With his good looks and a certain charisma, Ajax quickly catches Sula's attention. They engage in a conversation, exchange stories, and are drawn to each other due to their shared inclination for unconventionality.

Sula becomes captivated by Ajax's attentiveness and interest in her stories, finding him different from the men she had met before. Ajax, in turn, appreciates Sula's unconventional approach to life and feels confident in pursuing a deeper relationship with her.

She is more and more dawn to him as she feels he is so different from the men she had met so far. Similarly, Ajax appreciates her unconventional approach to life, and feels confident he can go further into a relationship with her without fear of being hooked.

Ajax, has had many relations with the women of the Bottom without committing himself to a lasting partnership. Charmed by Sula, Ajax pays her several visits offering her gifts and showing genuine interest in her. She appreciates his respectful attitude towards her. Feeling confident, she decides to sleep with him and explore her sexual desires within a framework of mutual understanding.

Sula and Ajax relationship is depicted as a harmonious physical and emotional bond that the two lovers share with great intensity. Ajax seems to have stirred new emotions in her. Sula, who has not experienced something like it in her previous relations with men, soon succumbs to a newly felt desire for constancy which contradicts her so claimed spirit of autonomy and independence. Through Ajax, Morrison reveals a new side of Sula, which emphasises Morrison's use of ambiguity as a way of accounting for human complexity. Though subtly, Sula betrays a feeling of possessiveness which Ajax does not fail to notice. Fearing that their relationship might bend toward the traditional standards of marriage Ajax takes flight. Abel noted: "Sula cannot completely resist succumbing to a nurturing feminine response to Ajax that drives him away and, by violating her essential self, appears to precipitate her own death." (Abel 428)

Ajax is indeed the only man to whom Sula develops a genuine attachment and this is precisely what he has always resisted, and despite their mutual attraction and deep understanding their relation vanished because of the very sense of autonomy and independence that both of them proclaimed. Despite an initial shock and confusion regarding Ajax's departure without any explanation, Sula, even though feeling a sense of betrayal, manages gradually to cope with the disappointment and continues to explore her own identity and independence. In her complex portrayal of Sula, Morrison enables her

protagonist to lift her head up through a questioning of her choices and a new start in her journey of self-discovery.

The final chapter of the novel re-introduces Sula, a few years after Ajax's departure. She is very ill and near death. Nel, who has not spoken to her since the discovery of her affair with her husband, pays her a visit during which, realising the complexity of the relationship with her friend, forgives her for the betrayal with her husband. Nel, undergoing a shift of perspectives, understands more of the tangled feelings of love, friendship, jealousy and anger that have marked her relation with Sula. Shortly after Sula dies, the novel ends with an enigmatic transformation of Nel who now feels she has misunderstood Sula, regretting to have chosen marriage at the expense of self-definition and the perspective of a more meaningful life. The scene takes place twenty-five years after the death of Sula when Nel visits her tomb in the local graveyard. The visit turns out to be a moment of recognition and self-discovery with Nel reflecting on her tumultuous relationship with Sula. There, Nel, mourning Sula, experiences a moment of insight with the revelation of her continuing love for her dead friend.

Nel's confrontation with herself enables her to transcend the old constraints and false moral pride bringing her closer to the values that Sula cherished and lived for. Her last words displaying the depth of the journey into her soul conclude the story on a lamenting note. Nel, finally comes to terms with the tensions that have marked the ambivalent character of her life, reconciling herself with her friend and acknowledging her absence of sympathy for her friend's choices and the meaning of her life. Morrison evokes in a troubling and ambiguous imagery Nel's lament in words that echo the "nigger joke's" falsity of top and bottom of the prologue: "It was a fine cry- loud and long-but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow." (Morrison, Sula 149).

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In her interview with Stepto, Morrison comments on the characters of Sula and Nel and their relationships, "And so I wanted to say, as much as I could say it without being overbearing, that there was a little bit of both in each of those two women, and that if they had been one person, I suppose they would have been a rather marvelous person. But each one lacked something the other one had." (Morrison et Stepto, Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison 480) This is once again a further evidence of Morrison strategy on transcending binary opposition to display the complexity of the human nature and the human experience.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the focus is on exploring the intricate issues that arise within the plot. The central narrative thread revolves around the tumultuous friendship between two black female protagonists, Sula and Nel. What sets this examination apart is the spotlight it shines on the pivotal role played by their respective families in shaping their individual personalities. Furthermore, the chapter delves into a rich tapestry of themes and motifs, including the dynamics of female friendship, the complexity of family relationships, the symbolism of households, and the transformative journey of motherhood.

Within this exploration, a striking theme emerges - the tensions arising from differing attitudes towards the values of family and community. These differences, it becomes evident, cast a profound shadow over the lives of Sula and Nel. To illustrate the narrative's intricate nature, we must begin with an analysis of the prologue, where Morrison sets the stage. Here, we encounter the genesis of the Bottom, a community whose very name hints at paradox. This inversion of "top" and "bottom" is the first instance of Morrison's skillful use of paradox, signaling the complex and enigmatic nature of the narrative.

As we delve deeper into the text, we encounter further evidence of Morrison's penchant for paradox and ambiguity. These literary devices are woven throughout the narrative, adding layers of complexity to the characters and their actions. Morrison insists that Sula and Nel share both sameness and difference, a paradox that reflects the intricacies of their friendship. This complexity extends to characters like Eva, who expresses love for her son Plum through a shocking act - his murder. It also surfaces in Sula's chilling indifference as she watches her mother Hannah burn without attempting to rescue her.

Moreover, this chapter presents a compelling exploration of ambiguous perceptions of friendship. This complexity is epitomized in Sula's sexual affair with her best friend's husband, Jude, an act that challenges traditional notions of loyalty and betrayal. Despite the tumultuous events, the narrative takes a poignant turn as Nel reconciles with the soul of her deceased friend, Sula, even in the face of the betrayal that shattered her marriage with Jude.

In summary, this chapter delves deep into the narrative's core, unraveling its complexities through the lens of paradox, ambiguity, and the intricate relationships between characters. It invites readers to navigate a world where friendship, family, and community values are inextricably intertwined, making for a compelling and thought-provoking literary journey.

CHAPTER FOUR: Beloved

"I will call them my people,

Which were not my people;

And her beloved,

Which was not beloved."

Toni Morrison. Beloved

Introduction

Beloved (1987) is one of Morrison's most controversial and thought-provocative novels. Set in an era of slavery, emancipation and reconstruction, Beloved raises fundamental questions about freedom, sense of selfhood, identity, love and motherhood. The novel's unusual and intricate discursive strategies and complex characters, in addition to its deep investigation of African-American history, makes Beloved a substantial and challenging literary work. The novel received widespread critical responses since it was approached from various theoretical perspectives thanks to its richness in themes related to slavery and its legacy, the power of memory and the manifestations of trauma. Beloved tells the story of Sethe, the protagonist of the story, who is a former slave who managed to escape with harsh difficulties to Ohio in the aftermath of the Civil War. Sethe bears the heavy burden of the horrific act of infanticide she committed in a desperate attempt to spare her children the fatality of living as slaves. This event marked the life of Sethe and all the people around her.

This chapter involves an investigation of the representation of black female characters in *Beloved* to explore Morrison's reliance on paradox and ambiguity in her narrative discourse to deconstruct and revisit established assumptions about black

womanhood and motherhood. By drawing on history and memory, Morrison endeavours to establish a counter-discourse that challenges the literature of the canon which blurred the history of black people in general, and black women in particular for long decades as she argues in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and Literary Imagination:*

in the absence of real knowledge or open-minded inquiry about Africans and African-Americans, under the pressures of ideological and imperialistic rationales for subjugation, an American brand of Africanism emerged: strongly urged, thoroughly serviceable, companionably ego-reinforcing, and pervasive. (9)

Thus, the literature of the canon left small room for African-American presence "to enforce invisibility through silence and to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body" (10). Hence, Morrison called for a literature of reclamation that aims at "the re-examination of founding literature in the United States for the unspeakable unspoken may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significances" (Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature 375). This remained a central cause in Morrison's life as she has always believed that "failure to revisit America 's canonical literature risks lobotomizing that literature, and in diminishing both the art and the artist" (376). In all her fiction and non-fiction works, Morrison was determined to revisit the canon and establish new and contextualised approaches to African-America literature, and Beloved is a prominent example of her philosophy. In this regard, Jeanna Fuston-White comments on *Beloved*, "it remains oppositional and liberatory work because it confronts head-on the intellectual tradition which has structured Western thought for centuries ... it breaks down marginality ... it gives a strong, authoritative voice to black culture." (From the Seen to the Told': The Construction of Subjectivity in Toni Morrison's Beloved 471)

Beloved portrays the brutality of slavery on different generations of black families; the grandmother Baby Suggs, the mother Sethe and the daughter Denver. However, Morrison stressed the fundamental role of the community, all along with the black man, in rescuing the black woman who was the most victimised section during the dark years of slavery, and even later when she was subjected to other forms of oppression like negative stereotyping as she argues in her interview with Christina Davis, "males and females should complement each other, fulfil one another or hurt one another and are made whole or prevented from wholeness by things that they have incorporated into their psyche" (419).

Furthermore, the chapter examines the manifestations of traumatic anxieties experienced by slaves and their devastating impact on both their present and future with a particular focus on sexual assaults. Morrison highlights the importance and the necessity of retrieving the repressed memory of the slaves for it is the only way for them to heal their distorted souls, as she asserts in her interview with Christina Davis "The reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance ... and the job of recovery is ours." (413). Accordingly, Morrison succeeded in subverting the mainstream canon in favour of a genuine African-American one. She became a highly influential figure for black writers who were excluded from the American literary scene for long.

1. Post-modern and Postcolonial Concepts at Work in Morrison's Discourse

Toni Morrison's acclaimed novel, *Beloved*, is an outstanding work that skillfully employs postmodern and postcolonial approaches to provide a counter-discourse that displays the complexity of Morrison perception of identity, history and trauma. At its postmodernism's Beloved embraces inclination towards narrative core, experimentation and deconstruction. Morrison makes use of multiple voices, nonlinear plots, and fragmented narrative structures to create a sense of bewilderment and ambiguity. The story unfolds through shifting perspectives and timelines, resisting classical notions of linearity and coherence. This approach, not only reflects the fractured experiences of the characters, but also mirrors the broader postmodern concern with the instability of truth and memory.

Moreover, Morrison's use of postcolonialism in *Beloved* is integral to her exploration of paradox and ambiguity. The novel investigates the poignant legacy of slavery, exploring how the characters wrestle with their traumatic past memories and the cultural disruption caused by centuries of subjugation. Through her characters, Morrison underlines the paradoxical nature of freedom and identity for African Americans in a post-slavery world. The character of Sethe, for instance, grapples with the complexities of motherhood and identity portraying the contradictions inherent in a slave even after gaining freedom.

Furthermore, Morrison's language in *Beloved* is rich in symbolism and metaphors, inviting readers to engage with multiple layers of interpretation. The character of Beloved herself embodies ambiguity, as she may be seen as a ghostly

presence, a symbol of the past, or a manifestation of repressed memories and a resurrection or the incarnation of the dead. Morrison herself remained ambiguous towards the nature of this character in the novel.

Besides, Toni Morrison's works gained great popularity and received substantial critical attention because they reveal to what extent this writer was committed to recover the history of her community to build them a better future. 'Voicing the silenced', 'speaking the unspeakable' and 'retrieving the suppressed' are articulated issues in Morrison's fictional and non-fictional works. During her whole career, and in most of her interviews, she has always asserted that there are stories in the lives of black people which cannot be 'passed on'.

Morrison was determined to place the question of black females at the front. She believed this issue should be discussed in depth. Black females, either little girls; adult women, mothers or grand-mothers have constantly been a central preoccupation in all Morrison's fiction. She aspired to read a literature about her community written by members of the black community itself and not by writers from other cultural and ideological backgrounds, asserting in this context:

Now that the Afro-American artistic presence has been "discovered" actually to exist, now that serious scholarship has moved from silencing the witnesses and erasing their meaningful place in and contribution to American culture, it is no longer acceptable merely to imagine us and imagine for us. We have always been imagining ourselves. We are not Isak Dinesen's "aspects of nature," nor Conrad's unspeaking. We are the subjects of our own narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with

whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, "other". We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare those centers with the "raceless" one with which we are, all of us, most familiar. (Morrison, Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature 208)

Morrison displays a decisive endeavour to unveil all what has camouflaged the real condition and unique experience of her community and its female members in particular. Though expressing her appreciation of other works by black writers, she nevertheless perceives them far from being satisfactory; in her interview with Charle Raus she declares:

I was preoccupied with books by black people that approached the subject (the African-American girl) but I always missed some intimacy, some direction, some voice. Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright- all of whose books I admire enormously-I didn't feel were telling me something. I thought they were saying something about it or us that revealed something about us to you, to others, to white people, to men. (22)

She insists that African-American native imagination is definitely the best source for the production of a literature that represents the African-American community. Her fiction succeeded in voicing the censured voices of her community, not only through a challenging language that thrives in vivid imagery, but also through a narrative discourse that shook all the established perceptions and assumptions on African-American manhood, womanhood, motherhood, and all the mechanisms that intervene in the interactions between black individuals with each other and with others as well. Morrison

calls for narratives that come from the 'marginalized other'; narratives that reject the repertoire of the segregating centre. She brings her community and its concerns from the periphery of the hegemony to the very centre. In her essay "Spaces for Readers: The Novels of Toni Morrison", Mobley Marilyn McKenzie sustains:

Morrison's novels so far challenge the reader to move from familiar to unfamiliar interpretations of life and living. Rendering the novel through a lens of complex narrative aesthetics, she invites readers into the cultural politics of race, gender, class, age and even religion to entertain new readings of the text of their own lives, the nation and the global community. (231)

Morrison's fiction has constantly debated issues related to American history, literature and identity. She believes it is her duty to write a literature that reflects black people's culture and specific context and she also aspires for a criticism that takes into account and not dismiss in anyway the particularity of her literature. She seeks a criticism which does not approach her fiction with standardised visions. In her interview with McKay (1983), she states:

Other kinds of structures are imposed on my works, and therefore they are either praised or dismissed on the basis of something that I have no interest in whatever, which is writing a novel according to some structure that comes out of a different culture. I am trying very hard to use the characteristics of the art form that I know best, and to succeed or fail on those criteria rather than on some other criteria. (425)

Hence, it is not surprising to find in Toni Morrison's fiction styles and structures that transcend Western modes of writing which she judges unfitting for the nature of her fiction, and since the question of black females has always been a major concern in her

literature, she went far to ask for a criticism by black women, more specifically; a criticism which would illuminate stories by and about the black community from deep inside; in this regard she argues once again in her interview with Nellie McKay:

Our - black women's - job is a particularly complex one in that regard. But if we can't do it, then nobody can do it. We have no systematic mode of criticism that has yet evolved from us, but it will. I am not like James Joyce; I am not like Thomas Hardy; I am not like Faulkner. I am not like in that sense. I do not have objections to being compared to such extraordinarily gifted and facile writers, but it does leave me sort of hanging there when I know that my effort is to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music, or in some other culture-gen that survives almost in isolation because the community manages to hold on to it. Sometimes I can reflect something of this kind in my novels. Writing novels is a way to encompass this - this something. (426)

In her fiction, Morrison creates intriguing situations full of ambiguities and paradoxes that are reflective of the African-American context and the complex repercussions of this peculiar context on black people's social and psychological conditions. The multiple forms of oppression black people were subjected to left them in a constant crisis that displays the dual and perpetual struggle they experience in a society that denies them the least recognition as human beings. Their native cultural background crashes with the negative perceptions and stereotypes which the white hegemony imposed on them. The repercussions of such a dilemma are scrutinised in each of Morrison's works:

The interrelatedness of racism, class exploitation and sexism, domination and imperialism; the spirituality and power of oral folk traditions and values; the mythic scope of the imagination; and the negotiation of slippery boundaries, specially for members of oppressed groups, between personal desire and political urgencies. Her work also articulates perennial human concerns and paradoxes: how are our concepts of the good, the beautiful and the powerful related; what is goodness and evil; how does our sense of identity derive from community while maintaining individual uniqueness? (Gates Jr et Mckay 2607)

Therefore, Morrison does not show any discretion in divulging her ultimate conviction of the necessity of writing a literature which addresses issues related to her community, and which is also addressed to her own community; when asked about her position, she answered "Do people ever ask why Joyce wrote for the Irish? Or Dostoevsky for the Russians? Why is it when a black person says he/she is writing for blacks, people respond in furore? (Hoofard et Morrison 91) Morrison joined Alice Walker and other committed black female writers in rising consciousness about the very particularity and uniqueness of the black woman's condition. Morrison comments in regard to her second novel's protagonist Sula, "quintessentially black, metaphysically black...She is the new world black and new world woman extracting choice from choicelessness... improvisational, daring, disruptive, imaginative, modern, out- of- the- house, outlawed, unpolicing, uncontained and uncontainable" (Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro American Presence in American Literature 233). So, it is clear that Morrison creates multifaceted female characters bearing so much ambiguity and paradox to bring into question conventional treatments of the black female cause.

However, *Beloved* remains one of Morrison's most controversial and highly provocative novels, not exclusively for its intriguing and non-linear circular plot, but for the complex narrative discourse and the challenging techniques she employed as multiple perspectives, flash backs, stream of consciousness and free indirect speech, non-clear-cut resolutions, to cite just a few, which made the reading of the text an exciting journey in the realm of paradox and ambiguity. In fact, paradox and ambiguity which initially seem to be complicating things for the reader, turn on, later, to be a good way for a more enlightened insight into the inner life of the character as an individual, and also as part of a complex web of communal, environmental and existential dilemmas. Morrison sustains in her essay "*Memory, Creation and Writing*" (1984):

If my work is to be functional to the group then it must bear witness and identify that which is useful from the past and that which ought to be discarded; it must make it possible to prepare for the present and live it out, and it must do that not by avoiding problems and contradictions but by examining them. (Morrison 389)

The characters' paradoxical, ambiguous and random voices that echo in a seemingly chaotic rhythm stand for a representative metaphor of the perpetual crisis they go through, before they could ultimately achieve a more coherent sense of self and other. These voices are also an attempt to heal the characters' dismembered and distorted bodies and minds. *Beloved* exposes the reader to different kinds and manifestations of love and reveals how maternal love can be of different natures for slave-mothers who might experience atypical and complex maternal feelings. These feelings, actually, require deep attention from the part of both readers and critics as Barbara Hills Rigney puts it: "Morrison's novels are always about love and its distortions, and also about slaughter, often with the blood" (The voices of Toni Morrison 83). Therefore, Morrison's skilful employment of the two

devices of paradox and ambiguity throughout her narrative in *Beloved* creates multilayered reading experience of the dehumanising and traumatic history of slavery and the complexities it engendered on human emotions and behaviours.

In fact, Morrison uses the complex narrative that employs paradox and ambiguity as a means to vocalise the intricate condition of the voiceless and marginalised. In this regard Philip Page in his article *Circularity in Toni Morrison's Beloved* argues:

Toni Morrison's novels are post-modern, not in the sense of extreme self-referentiality or in the mockery of narration, but in their privileging of Polyvocalism, stretched boundaries, open-endedness, and unravelled binary oppositions. In her novels, time is nonlinear, the forms are open, multiple voices are heard and endings are ambiguous because Toni Morrison insists on the necessity of continual and multiple reworking – for characters, narrators, author, and readers. Forming an identity, authoring a text, telling a story, and reading or listening to a text must be ongoing, not fixed in time, place, or position. Since wholeness is illusory and division is endemic, one must explore the fragmentations through multiple visions (34).

Language for her, becomes a means for empowerment and a tool for identity-reconstruction for the marginalised through the process of retrieval of personal and common experiences of black people. Accordingly, Morrison's manipulation of point of view in *Beloved* aims at entwining the complex stories of her round characters. The language of each character in *Beloved* tells a great deal of his gender as well as his socioeconomic, cultural and psychological backgrounds. Moreover, Morrison's integration of

oral tradition remains also a big challenge for both readers and literary critics as she sustains that:

You don't end a story in the oral tradition...You can have the little message at the end, your little moral, but the ambiguity is deliberate because it doesn't end. It's an ongoing thing and the reader or the listener is in it and you have to THINK. (McKay 57)

Hence, it is evident that Morrison accords a great importance to the use of ambiguity in all its forms to make the reader aware about the challenge he is faced with when he encounters her works that require a full engagement of the reader in the interpretation of the text. No information was provided about the fate of Sethe's escaping sons, Howard and Buglar as well as her husband Halle, a matter which creates further ambiguities in the narrative. Morrison' use of ambiguity stimulates the reader's curiosity about all what was blurred in the history of millions of slaves.

Morrison's characters use language that marks their own individuality. She declares in an interview with Tate that: "The way black people talk is not so much the use of non-standard grammar as it is the manipulation of metaphor" (Tate 422). Morrison's language is highly reflective of her community's experiences; however, she is not exclusively preoccupied by the depiction of her people's journeys and all what they went through, she extends her interest to the way her people voice their concerns. In an interview with Charlie Rose, from the Public Broadcasting System, Morrison states:

I'm completely informed by that community, by my extended family the language particularly. Not just the survival, but the way they spoke, you know. The language of average, of poor African-Americans is always discredited as though it was impossible for them to speak, or they were stupid. But there was this incredible merging of new language and Biblical language and sermonic language that created a third thing for me. A third kind of way of expressing myself. They pulled from all the places and that's what I tried to incorporate in my books. (Morrison, An Interview with Toni Morrison)

Hence, Morrison's use of the dichotomy of voice and silence in her characters' ways of expression in *Beloved* highlights the difficulties that black people face in communicating their inner voices and repressed memories of the enduring impact of history on their existence. This, obviously calls for the active response of readers, Morrison continues to argue: "my language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it" (Tate 427).

Morrison reclaims new ways of expression that would extricate and liberate black writers from any form of imperialism, even on the level of language, she declares in her article "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", "There are things that I try to incorporate into my fiction that are directly and deliberately related to what I regard as the major characteristics of Black art, wherever it is" (Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation." Black Women Writers (1950-1980) 341). Language, in this regard, becomes another means of liberation from any ties that would hinder black writers' way for the creation of a literature that carries and reflects their indigenous identity. The philosophy of writing art for pure artistic ends remains far from being a paramount priority for African-American writers who have always felt a strong need and a constant urge for relieving their souls from the painful memories that overburdened their hearts for long decades. Accordingly, literature for them, becomes a real breathing space and a real outlet.

Morrison accords a great interest to the language and the techniques she uses in her fiction for she shares the position of Wayne C. Booth who as quoted in Axel, Nissen's "Form Matters: Toni Morrison's Sula and the Ethics of Narrative" contends "a writer's choice of devices and compositional strategies is from the beginning a choice of ethos, an invitation to one kind of criticism" (Nissen et Morrison 1). Morrison adopts this view in her fiction and more particularly in *Beloved* where she decentres the narrative voice. She does not limit it to protagonist's perspective but extends it to the other characters who are also allowed to voice themselves. Hence, by avoiding a monophonic narrative voice and providing a polyphony, Morrison succeeds to subvert and transcend unidirectional and monolithic perceptions to suggest a rather complex and multi-layered presentation of reality. This reality, in its complexity, is a depiction of the unique condition of Morrison's community and a revisitation of its distorted and blurred history. Morrison is determined not to expose her characters to alterity; she allows access to both her major and minor characters inner worlds which permits to the reader a deep insight into the characters' psychology. The crashing views of characters and their multiple and multilayered perceptions of the various events of the novel and of each other is one of the strategies Morrison employs to create ambiguity and paradox.

Her reliance on a nonlinear narrative structure engenders ambiguity and paradox as the novel shifts constantly in time and perspective transgressing boundaries between past and present, reality and memory and certainty and illusion. This post-modern strategy employed by Morrison aims at highlighting the fragmentation and intricacy that feature the life of her characters who keep fluctuating between their past and present--a feature, that is quite representative of their fragmented perception of their genuine identity, selfhood and even history. Sethe's retelling of the motivation behind her act of infanticide

is constantly filled with new insights each time she comments on it, hence enlarging the scope of the reader's perception of the complexity of black motherhood under slavery. The past, for Morrison, is of great value and a main component of her fiction as Lister points in his book *Reading Toni Morrison* (2009):

For Morrison, one of the most important functions of the novel form is to alert readers to the value and relevance of the past.... The novel functions not only as a site for revising familiar myths and models but also for relativizing official accounts of historical contexts and events. Morrison uses the novel as a vehicle to scrutinize the many ways in which history has been reconstructed through misrepresentations, distortions, and omissions. (19)

Furthermore, the non-chronological articulation of the narrative structure of *Beloved* is a protest against early slave narratives that did not succeed in portraying the condition of slaves in its depth. Therefore, through the strategy of shifting time, Morrison is reclaiming black people's own version of their history and existence as Koolish points out:

Reinstating time, reclaiming it for one's own is not only a narrative device but also a thematic response to dispossession; cut off from their language and history, denied a present which they could call their own, slaves were also denied a future which they could control. Morrison privileges dreams, memory, and imagination in the novel partly because these were among the few possessions which could not be stolen from African American. (430)

2. Intricate Themes and Forms in Beloved

Though this chapter is devoted to the examination of the themes and forms of *Beloved* through the lenses of paradox and ambiguity as a constant stance of our approach, it is, nevertheless, necessary to start with a general presentation of Morrison's literary and critical rationale. Quite apart from stressing the necessity for the emergence of an African American literature that would give genuine voice to a historically marginalized section of the American society, Morrison felt that such literature played a crucial role in making the lives of blacks more visible. She also encouraged the use of the African American cultural heritage and particularly the exploration of the power of language as practiced by the black people as a tool to challenge the dominant narratives.

Morrison's, novels, it must be stressed, feature innovative and deeply rooted cultural expressions that have for long been blurred or tamed by the hegemonic culture. Another no less significant aspect of her literary rationale is her challenge of traditional historical narratives that distort the experience of African Americans, and so she believed that literature could be a means of reimagining history from an African American perspective, providing a more accurate portrayal of the past. *Beloved*, as a fictional revisitation of the historical experience of the horrors of slavery is a perfect example of her approach. *Beloved* as well as other novels delves into the enduring impact of racism and the legacy of slavery, and reaffirms Morrison's belief that literature could help confront and denounce the violence of these inhuman practices and their effects on individuals and communities. Morrison's adoption of multiple and complex narrative strategies that include paradox and ambiguity, among other post modernistic features, stems precisely from her belief that they contribute to convey a deeper understanding of the complexity of the African American experience. Her introduction of dualities and contradictions as

well as her employment of multiple perspectives and narrative voices are meant to create ambiguities that force the reader to engage more deeply with characters and explore them from different angles. Thanks to the interplay of these narrative devices Morrison crafts characters who are resistant to easy categorization and challenges the stereotypes often associated with female black characters.

In this context, it is essential to reconsider Morrison's standpoints and positions concerning such issues as the function of literature, art and politics, the perception of the black woman by the dominant culture as well as well as black writers. Equally important is to raise fundamental questions as to Morrison's insistence on revisiting African-American history and culture by delving deeply in the souls of black slaves both men and women; the trauma they suffered during slavery as well as its legacy on generations of black people. Though not neglecting men, Morrison chose to voice the tragic experience of black women throughout a number of generations and highlight their condition by challenging and deconstructing established assumptions and stereotypes associated with them. As a result, Morrison succeeded to project a genuine image of black identity and culture through the experience of fascinating black female characters in her novels.

Morrison believes that the function of literature should not be limited to the creation of beautiful art that translates the very personal and subjective imagination of the writer. She rather believes that literature should also be committed in the sense that it should mirror the socio-political preoccupations of the writer as both an individual and also as a part of a specific culture and community. She argues:

If anything, I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write), isn't about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not

interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams - which is to say yes, the work must be political.... It seems to me that the best art is political and you ought to make it unquestionably political 11 and irrevocably beautiful at the same time. (Gates Jr et Mckay 2094)

In her fiction, Morrison scrutinizes the predominant social conditions of the black community with a special attention to the particular and unique context of the African-American woman. The multiple forms of oppression black women were subjected to, made of them the most victimised section in the African-American community as bell hooks put it in her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*:

No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group "women" in this culture. (7)

Morrison's discourse aims at dropping the veil on the deplorable state of black females in a racist and sexist hegemony and their quest for identity and sense of self. In his article *Negotiating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels*, Parvin Ghasemi states:

Historically, the characterization of black women has been basically depicted in terms of their maternal role, a defined role which has been imposed on women as their sole source of identity by society. Toni Morrison's novels, in the tradition of most contemporary novels authored by women, are woman-centered and revolve around women's lives, problems, and search for identity. Motherhood, a dominant

concern of many contemporary African Ameri- can women writers, is a recurrent theme in Morrison's fiction. (235)

The slave regime emasculated black men who could no longer protect their mothers, sisters, wives and daughters from the multiple forms of physical and moral abuse, this was accordingly a strong motive for African-American writers to generate more positive and assertive black female characters who display a certain resistance and power. Morrison resisted the prevailing image of black women who are: "schooled in the art of obedience to a higher authority by the tradition of her society was probably seen by the white male slaver as an ideal subject of slavery." (Hooks, Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism 17) The deprivation of black men of their manhood pushed black women to develop their own mechanism of self-defence for relying on their male counterparts was not any longer a good option. The psychologist Harriet G. McCombs argues: "For black women ... the struggle ... is one of necessity and not of choice" (McCombs 76). Morrison aligned herself with other African-American women writers as Alice Walker, Cellestine Ware, Barbara Smith to cite just a few, who believe that the only way for giving a voice for silenced women is by depicting them in realistic portrayals. The surrealistic representations of black women with supernatural powers that populated literature written by black male writers did not serve the question of African-American women. Mary Helen Washington asserts:

We need stories, poems, novels, and biographies about black women who have nervous breakdowns not just the ones who endure courageously; stories about women who are overwhelmed by sex; wives who are not faithful; women experiencing the pain and humiliation of divorce; single women over thirty or forty trying to make sense out of life and perhaps not being able to; ... until the sacred cow is killed, these stories cannot and will not get told. (2)

This quote displays the wide scope of what needs to be made available to the writer interested in the black woman question. As a matter of fact, this is precisely what Morrison set herself to achieve in her fiction and which finds full expression in her masterpiece *Beloved*. Morrison's female representations carry a great deal of realism, even her mother figures display how black motherhood in its particularity could never be uniformed. Parvin Ghasemi contends in this regard:

One of the great merits of Morrison's portrayals of mothers is their realistic depiction. As complex and diverse as life itself, the likes of Mrs. McTeer (The Bluest Eye), Eva, Helene, Hannah, Nel (Sula), Pilate, Ruth (Song of Solomon), Baby Suggs and Sethe (Beloved) attest to the uniqueness and individuality of mothers. However, Morrison insists that what makes these women remarkable individuals rather than types are their actions and reactions in the time of adversity. (Negociating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels 239)

Beloved is Morrison's fifth novel for which she won the 1993 Nobel prize for literature. In this outstanding work of fiction, Morrison examines emphatically issues related to the mechanisms and consequences of the barbaric system of slavery which as Deborah Horvitz puts it "the text is so grounded in historical reality that it could be used to teach American history classes" (158). Through the cast of characters of the novel, Morrison endeavours to tackle a complex web of themes associated with race, sex and gender. She succeeded in elucidating the deep frustrations of black women. Her treatment of these themes engages a close reading of the traumatising effects of slavery,

segregation and patriarchy on African-Americans in general and African-American women in particular. M. S. Mobley comments:

Unlike the slave narratives which sought to be all-inclusive eye-witness accounts of the material conditions of slavery, Morrison's novel exposes the unsaid of the narratives, the psychic subtexts that lie within and beneath the historical facts. (20)

Beloved, then, is an attempt for voicing the crypts of silenced trauma. It reveals the lives of characters who struggle to a present for themselves while still pulling desperately their minds and hearts out of the ruins of their bitter and sombre past.

The claim that Morrison employs a discourse of paradox and ambiguity in her fiction seems well founded for she has always proclaimed that she calls for the active participation of the reader in the making and interpretation of her texts. She declares:

My writing expects, demands participatory reading, and I think is what literature is supposed to do. It's not just about the story, it's all about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even the color, some of the sound. Then we (you, the reader, and I, the author) come together to make this book, to, feel this experience (Tate 125)

Hence, by creating a discourse of paradox and ambiguity in her fiction and in the treatment of her characters, Morrison stimulates the reader's critical thinking through the intriguing situations that build up her plots and their impact on the characters' stances and reactions. In this context, Cynthia Davis argues:

Morrison always uses her structure and technique to lead the reader to the substance of her theme. She wants her readers to "see" her stories. She often uses a strange

event to plant intrigue in a reader's mind, then tells a story that provides the knowledge that makes an encompassing understanding possible. (330)

Morrison's characters are credited a great deal of contradictions, duality, moral uncertainty and ambiguity. Binaries are subverted to ambivalence; Morrison insists on the importance of inconclusiveness as a way of enabling freedom of perception in the reader. She makes this clear in an interview with McKay:

The people in these novels are complex. Some are good and some are bad, but most of them are bits of both. I try to burrow as deeply as I can into characters. I don't come up with all good or all bad... There is always something more interesting at stake than a clear resolution in a novel... I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about. (420)

Treating things from deep inside, Morrison ends up creating paradox and ambiguity as a counter-discourse that resists rigidity and superficiality of interpretation. She favours a discourse of relativity that brings into question prejudice and stereotyping. She transcends the binary of black/white to explore more meticulously the grey zone in her characters' personalities.

Though centring the plot of *Beloved* around the black female condition during the period of slavery, Morrison does not exclude male characters from her concern. The emasculation experience of Paul D and Stamp Paid remains also one of the most crucial issues tackled in *Beloved*. The novel offers different portrayals of black man and women which invite the reader to revisit the conventional representations of black manhood and womanhood promoted by the racist and patriarchal hegemonic discourse.

Being set in 1873, *Beloved* portrays the painful memories of characters before emancipation, it stresses the cruel nature of slavery and the horrors which it inflicted on the black community. The novel is said to be one of the most distinguished literary works that overtly and explicitly dared to investigate the institution of slavery and divulge its crucial impact on the African-American community. Morrison challenges the reductive images that define African-Americans. In this context, Cynthia Davis asserts: "Morrison uses her narrative technique to demonstrate that first impressions and external appearances are often inaccurate and based on untrue assumptions" (330). Morrison delved deep and profoundly penetrated the psyche of slaves, both men and women and explored delicately the repercussions of racism on them. Themes as trauma, disruption of family ties, commodification of slaves, violence against slaves and denial of their identity and humanity were at the core of her novel *Beloved*.

Upbrought in an environment that believes in superstition, Morrison has always heard stories about ghosts. Her family often used a 'dream book'; a book for the interpretation of dreams; thus, it is not astonishing that Morrison grants interest to the use of folk superstition and magic. Morrison recognises the great impact of her social background on her literature. She is inspired by the stories of women of her community. Nellie McKay comments:

Morrison's parents told thrilling and terrifying ghost stories, and her mother sang and played the numbers by decoding dream symbols as they were manifest in a dream book that she kept. She tells of a childhood world filled with signs, visitations, and ways of knowing that encompassed more than concrete reality. (212)

Many critics believe that Morrison's use of magic like the ghost character Beloved, for example, stems from the legacy of slavery. Black people have always spoken about their murdered husbands, stolen children and abused wives and daughters. The notion of the black tormented souls is part of black people consciousness. This is actually valid when considering Baby Suggs refusal to move to another house for she believes all black people houses contain ghosts.

Morrison based her novel *Beloved* on a true story of infanticide which was discussed in the newspapers of 1856. She was inspired by this event which was published under the title "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child" in the American newspaper on *The American Baptist* on February, 1879. Margret Garner was a slave who escaped a Kentucky plantation with her children to spare them the horrors of slavery. She was unfortunately caught and this engendered a terrible tragedy. When Margret Garner saw her master with a group of agents, she felt a big panic which led her to attempt to kill her children to prevent her owner from bringing them back to the plantation. She picked a trowel and cut her three-years old daughter's throat, Apud Rushdy narrates:

Margaret Garner, seeing that her hopes of freedom were vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and, with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best. She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work. (569)

Blessedly, her attempt to kill the other two boys was in vain. Margret Garner was imprisoned and later on given back to her owner. There are many versions to what happened to her after the trial but the most recurrent of all reports says that she threw

herself with her little daughter in Ohio River when her master was taking her back to the plantation. Morrison made some changes in the plot of her novel. *Beloved* is a fictional work and not a book of history, so, Morrison preferred to leave Sethe alive contrary to Margret Garner who committed suicide.

In the novel, the narrative is set in the period just prior to and during the early Reconstruction era. The plot of the novel revolves around the story of a black female slave, Sethe, and her desperate attempt to protect her offspring from the fatality of slavery and the repercussions of her decision to kill her children. This weird and extreme choice has a drastic impact on the lives of the other characters as well; like Denver, Baby Suggs and Beloved. The novel portrays the complex condition of black women and their vulnerability in a hostile and brutal society that persecutes them just because they are black and females. The novel meets the interrogations of how could a black mother survive in an environment that does not acknowledge her belonging to the human race. Similarly, it unveils the impact of memory on characters who though no longer literally enslaved continue to suffer from their painful memories and flashbacks that perpetually tingle their wounded hearts. Multiple voices and lengthy fragmentary dramatic monologues add to the ambiguous nature of the narrative. Therefore, Morrison's discourse, characterisation, themes and techniques all contribute in putting together the puzzle that displays the true plight of black women and their quest for a decent life. In this context Ghasemi claims:

Morrison presents the complexity of black maternity in a unique way which allows for the display of the ambiguity and ambivalence surrounding this conventional role.

Morrison's mother figures transgress and transcend the boundaries of the traditional

and patriarchal stereotypes of motherhood to instigate their own distinct individuality. (236)

Therefore, relying on a true historical event in the construction of the plot of *Beloved* allowed Morrison to expose people to an unconventional side in the personality the black female slave which advocates a new approach to the perception of black motherhood in the special context of slavery. Atypical slave mothers did not figure out before in Slave Narratives and *Beloved* came with a challenging mother figure that brought into question the all-encompassing and all-embracing figure of the 'Mammy' as Amanda Putnam puts it:

Racially exploited, sexually violated, and often emotionally humiliated for years or decades, certain black female characters within four of Toni Morrison's novels make violent choices that are not always easily understandable. The violence—sometimes verbal, but more frequently physical—is often an attempt to create unique solutions to avoid further victimization. (25)

3. Polyphony as a Reflection of Paradox and Ambiguity in Beloved

One of the techniques that created paradox and ambiguity in Morrison's novel and especially in *Beloved* is the technique of polyphony which is a term first introduced by by Mikhail M. Bakhtin; one of the most acclaimed literary theorists in the Twentieth Century. This writing technique is best associated with Doestoevksy's novels. The polyphony relies on the use of juxtaposed perspectives resulting in multi-voiced narratives. Morrison adopted this technique as a strategy in her discourse to create a multilayered representation of her themes and characters. According to David Lodge," a

polyphonic novel is a novel in which there are different voices and different truths, which are not dominated by the single voice of the author." (128) Thus, Morrison' narrative is not conveyed through the lenses of a single consciousness; characters are not used to voice the author's perception only. They are allowed to speak their own thought, feelings and even memories. Morrison's adoption of polyphony stems from her consciousness that the traditional European homophonic mode does not match with the nature of her themes and the objectives of her writing. She has always endeavoured to challenge the hegemonic discourse which tend to present black men and women in a standardised way and with extreme superficiality.

Hence, Morrison opted for the technique of polyphony to portray the condition of black people in its complexity and diversity. The paradoxes and ambiguities that underly the complex and unique condition of black people are conveyed through a multi-voiced narrative where there is place for every character's voice. Morrison decentered her authority as an author to give perspective to her characters to express more genuine versions of their internal lives and this is how she breaks conventional ways of writing. In this regard, Bakhtin sustains, "In every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self- consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalising, second hand definition." (15)

Morrison relies extensively on dialogue which is made up of multiple voices that coexist to create multifaceted perspectives in *Beloved* where events lack chronology and logical sequences of past and present. Past and present are intertwined with no separating boundaries. The characters voices and their pieces of fragmented memories all echo together to make an exceptional form of polyphony in *Beloved*. One of the best examples

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is when Morrison mixes the voices of Sethe, Beloved and Denver in the second part of the novel in a speech that resembles a poem in its form and rhyme:

Beloved

You are my sister

You are my daughter

You are my face; you are me

I have found you again; you have come back to me

You are my Beloved

You are mine

You are mine

You are mine

I have your milk

I have your smile

1 will take care of you

You are my face; 1 am you. Why did you leave me who am you?

I will never leave you again

Don't ever leave me again

You went in the water

I drank your blood

I brought your milk

You forgot to smile

I loved you

You hurt me

You came back to me

You left me (232)

In all her works, Morrison's characters end by displaying some sort of contradiction and complexity. They are most of the times problematic, difficult to define in terms of explicit and sharp binaries. Polarities such as good/evil in the nature of Morrison's characters are subverted to ambiguity and ambivalence through Morrison's multi-vocal narrative technique that dismantles any precipitated judgments or anticipated prejudice. Morrison spared her narrative discourse univocality to avoid the reproduction of the hegemonic rituals in presenting life and reality from one perspective. In the Bluest Eye, the reader is presented with the characters of Cholly and Pauline Breedlove as irresponsible parents who abandoned and even abused their daughter Pecola. However, when Morrison shifts the perspective of the novel and gave them voice, the reader came with new insights about them through the paradox and ambiguity that underlined their nature and their perception of reality.

Morrison, made a more innovative use of polyphony in Beloved. While the novel revolves around one major event which is the horrific act of infanticide committed by the novel's protagonist; Morrison allowed Sethe, Denver, Beloved, Paul D and members of the black community in addition to the omniscient narrator to tell the story from different angles to defy oversimplifications, and to articulate the complexity condition of black people in their diversity. With each voice, the reader widens his scope of interpretation. Furthermore, the narration remains unreliable to some extent adding ambiguity to the text since the reader is encountered with a variety of interpretations of the same events by different characters of the novel. This ambiguity is by no means a source of confusion to the reader; on the contrary, it contributes in deepening his understanding of things and questioning his precipitated conclusions.

The Characters' complex web of interpersonal relationships is a key preoccupation in Morrison's fiction. Thus, a thorough understanding of her fiction requires a meticulous scrutinization of her characters' personalities, actions and reactions and their sense of self which Morrison defines as: "a relative concept, decentred rather than alienated, relational rather than objectifying" (Rigney 45). By interweaving characters' stories and memories, and by creating interpersonal relationships that keep oscillating between attraction and repulsion, Morrison endeavours to display the complexity of the human nature. This complex human nature manifests itself more palpably within black people who experience the dilemma of 'double consciousness' which accompanies the whole process of their journey towards self-assertion and identity-construction as Du Bois puts it: "One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideas in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (11).

In *Beloved*, the reader is encountered with two version of Sweet Home experience; one by Sethe, and the other by Paul D. This serves as a significant illustration of how Morrison relies on multiple perspectives to articulate the relativity of perception from a character to another. Relying on this strategy of polyphony added a great deal of ambiguity and paradox to the narrative and characters of the novel because each character can be mirrored and reflected in the other through their simultaneous crossing and crashing views. McCallum argues in this regard: "the double narrative provides two opposed points of view, a device that Morrison employs recurrently in her works because it undermines the assumptions built by the first perspective and forces the reader to see the events in a new light" (88).

Morrison relies on many techniques for the creation of her discourse of paradox and ambiguity and the dialogisation of her characters is one of these strategies. Her characters are dialogised through the use of multiple perspective and polyphony which spare them stagnation and allow them dynamism all along the novel. Moreover, characters appear to be strongly interrelated and cannot be defined in isolation. Characters in *Beloved* have common experiences and their divergent and convergent interpretations and reactions to these shared experiences display an interplay of similitudes and disparities that justifies my claim of paradox and ambiguity at work in the representation of characters in Morrison's fiction. This strategy allowed characters complexity and profundity which raises critics and readers' curiosity to delve deep in them and their worlds. In this regard Zappen sustains: "polyphony is a process of creating and testing ideas, a process that engages the author and the readers as well as the characters in the polyphonic novel" (55).

Moreover, the narrative strategy of double focus that Morrison used in *Beloved* generates ambiguity and paradox in her narrative discourse; a significant example of the effect of this technique is when Morrison exhibits the two opposed voices of Sethe and Beloved. Sethe's voice is the one of the guilty, and Beloved's voice is the one of the victims. Thus, relying on the antagonistic positions of Sethe and Beloved in the novel widens the scope of the interpretation of the story from opposing views that do not necessarily crash all the time; sometimes they seem to be fused together to speak the 'complex and unusual' in the history of slave mothers and daughters. Furthermore, the two voices of Sethe and Beloved convey the ambiguous voices of the 'alive' and the 'dead'. However, it is important to notice that Sethe's voice sometimes seems to speak of her as a dead mother who finds no pleasure in being alive due to the torturing feelings of guilt she constantly feels. Beloved, on the other hand, carries the voice of a living

person who has the power to torture her family and the whole black community around her as an expression of heavy trauma as Otten contends:

Beloved is both Sethe's doomed infant and one of the "Sixty Million and more," a victim both of Sethe's "rough love" and the manifest cruelty of slavers. What is more, she becomes a demonic force returned to punish and to redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to free Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price; she is on one hand "an evil thing," on the other a Christ figure come to save. (660)

Therefore, by employing polyphony as a major narrative strategy which reflects the paradox and ambiguity underlying her character's perception of themselves and their existence, she also aims at displaying that black people share some collective memory in regard to their experience of slavery. The horror of the institution of slavery has not affected black people individually but it was extended to many generations which affected tragically their relationships and interactions with each other. Hence, reality cannot be enclosed in individualistic and subjective interpretations of people in isolation but it has to be reflected genuinely through a multi-vocal narrative that embraces the voices of men and women, mothers and daughters, and even the voice of millions of dead slaves drown in oblivion. Therefore, polyphony serves Morrison's objective of highlighting that reality in the life of black people is inclusive and multifaceted. Paradoxically, reality becomes more consistent and coherent when reflected in ambiguity and indeterminacy.

4. Sethe and the Subversion of the Binary of Male/Female Gender roles in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison brought into question many established beliefs about gender roles and more particularly the notion of black motherhood, that actually appears to be complex within the context of African-American community especially under the condition of slavery. In all her novels, Morrison presents her readers with a large range of female characters that challenge reductive assumptions about the black female condition. In this regard Parvin Ghasemi comments:

A revisionist, Morrison challenges the validity of the historical documentation of black culture and especially the role and significance of women in constructing this culture. Her revision of the concept of black motherhood is a major step toward correcting the historical records concerning black maternity, which are just another form of the victimization of the black woman, society's exploitation of the mother-child bond. (238)

Morrison started her struggle against black female stereotyping since her publication of her first novel *The Bluest Eye* by creating different mother-figures namely Mrs. Breedlove, Mrs. MacTeer and Geraldine who have strikingly completely different personalities and stances. Their mothering experience was controversial, a matter which conveys Morrison's ambivalent treatment of black motherhood. With *Sula*, Morrison pushes the argument further by complicating more and more the dynamics of gender roles and motherhood by creating a web of complex relationships between daughters, mothers and grandmothers. In *Sula*, Morrison was more audacious by showing the paradox that features black motherhood, where violence can be an extreme expression of love.

Beloved, on the other hand, displays Morrison's deconstruction of conventional gender roles through the character of Sethe who subverts the traditional roles of the wife and the mother.

Morrison relies on paradox in *Beloved* to challenge and revisit conventional gender roles through the binary opposition of Sethe and Halle. Sethe refused to be the breeder and was rather decisive in her attempts to free herself and her children from Schoolteacher. She challenged the patriarchal code that encloses women and denies them autonomy. Sethe, contrary to Halle, was determined to put an end to her life as a slave and to struggle for a life of dignity for herself and for her children. In a marking passage in the novel, Morrison highlights Sethe's inner feelings when she asserts that she is quite desperate and that death perhaps might be a benediction, but she has to be alive to give life to her unborn baby,

I believe this baby's ma'am is gonna die in wild onions on the bloody side of the Ohio River. ... And it didn't seem such a bad idea, all in all, in view of the step she would not have to take, but the thought of herself stretched out dead while the little antelope lived on – an hour? a day? a day and a night? – in her lifeless body grieved her so she made the groan that made the person walking on a path not ten yards away halt and stand right still. (Morrison, Beloved 41)

Sethe was deeply concerned about the future of her children and she plays the role of the protector in the family; a role her husband Halle could not assume. Sethe was both the mother and the father for her children. Halle could not intervene and protect his wife from the brutal rape she experienced with Schoolteacher's nephews. When he saw

Sethe's back savagely lashed to form the scar of a big tree, he just went mad because he was emotionally vulnerable to bear such a reality;

"If he is Alive and saw that, he won't step foot in my door."

"It broke him, Sethe." Paul D looked up at her and sighed. "You may as well know it all. I last time saw him he was sitting by the churn. He has butter over his face". (Morrison, Beloved 69)

In the absence of a true father-figure, both Sethe's sons did not learn about duties toward the family. When harassed by the baby ghost, they just escaped from the house without any feelings of responsibility towards their mother or sister. They just acted the way their father did.

However, Morrison remains quite ambivalent in her presentation of the character of Halle. She incorporates some paradoxical features in his personality to challenge easy categorisations of black men. Though displaying weakness while failing to protect his wife, Sethe, Halle shows a strong devotion towards his mother. He sacrificed long years of his life working very hard to assure his mother's freedom and this was the main reason for Sethe to choose him to be her husband,

Halle, of course, was the nicest. Baby Suggs 'eighth and last child, who rented himself out all over the country to buy her away from there...Maybe that was why she chose him. A twenty-year-old man so in love with his mother he gave up five years of Sabbaths just to see her sit down for a change was a serious recommendation. She waited a year. And the Sweet Home men abused cows while they waited with her. She chose Halle and for their first bedding she sewed herself a dress on the sly. (Morrison, Beloved

Thus, Morrison holds a nuanced position towards male slaves as she did not totally condemn Halle. She aims at portraying a serious issue in the history of slavery which is the emasculating effect on male slaves who find themselves completely disarmed in front of the brutality of slave masters. Male slaves were denied the status of human beings, so claiming rights over their wives and daughters remained a very far-fetched dream for them. In her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism,* bell hooks makes a significant comment on the complex condition of male slaves:

Assuredly, the sexual assault of black women had an impact on the psyche of black male slaves. It is likely that the black male slave did not feel demoralized or dehumanized because "his" women were raped, but that he did feel terrorized by knowledge that white men who were willing to brutalize and victimize black women and girls (who represent no great threat to their authority), might easily have no qualms about totally annihilating black men. Most black male slaves stood quietly by as white masters sexually assaulted and brutalized black women and were not compelled to act as protectors. Their first instincts were toward self-preservation. (35)

Therefore, having a superficial reading of the character of Halle is not evident. Halle, after all, was deeply affected by his feelings of powerlessness in front of the cruelty of his masters. This has traumatised him to the point of getting crazy and completely isolated from his family and community. This is a further proof of his sincere feelings towards his wife, but unfortunately, this was not enough for him to act as a protector. Thus, in this regard, Halle defies conventional standards of patriarchy where males are the strongest links.

The life of a slave is completely different from the life of white people. The rhythm of long-hours work distorted family relationships. Halle and Sethe could barely see each other. They met only in the daylight on Sundays. They could only enjoy some intimacy once a week. So, they could not actually understand their relationship or what they are doing together. They could not even understand each other as it is described in this passage from the novel:

Halle was more like a brother than a husband. His care suggested a family relationship rather than a man's laying claim. For years they saw each other in full daylight only on Sundays. The rest of the time they spoke or touched or ate in darkness. Predawn darkness and the afterlight of sunset. So looking at each other intently was a Sunday morning pleasure and Halle examined her as though storing up what he saw in sunlight for the shadow he saw the rest of the week. And he had so little time. After his Sweet Home work and on Sunday afternoons was the debt work he owed for his mother. When he asked her to be his wife, Sethe happily agreed and then was stuck not knowing the next step. There should be a ceremony, shouldn't there? A preacher, some dancing, a party, a something. (22)

Furthermore, Morrison makes a significant statement on the dehumanising aspects of slavery. Though Sethe and Halle had the opportunity to choose each other as partners thanks to relative kindness from the part of the Garners, they still do not give them the status of human beings who have the right to marry and live in intimacy. When Sethe naively asked Mrs. Garner if she will have a wedding party "Mrs. Garner put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, "You are one sweet child." And then no more" (19). This shows the discrepancy about how Sethe perceives herself and her marriage with Halle and how the Garners perceive this marriage

as simply a natural or an animalistic union for more producing more slaves. The Garners have not even thought of providing them with a space where they can celebrate the first night of their marriage in intimacy and in dignity:

Sethe made a dress on the sly and Halle hung his hitching rope from a nail on the wall of her cabin. And there on top of a mattress on top of the dirt floor of the cabin they coupled for the third time, the first two having been in the tiny cornfield Mr. Garner kept because it was a crop animals could use as well as humans. Both Halle and Sethe were under the impression that they were hidden. Scrunched down among the stalks they couldn't see anything, including the corn tops waving over their heads and visible to everyone else. Sethe smiled at her and Halle's stupidity. Even the crows knew and came to look. Uncrossing her ankles, she managed not to laugh aloud. The jump, thought Paul D, from a calf to a girl wasn't all that mighty. Not the leap Halle believed it would be. And taking her in the corn rather than her quarters, a yard away from the cabins of the others who had lost out, was a gesture of tenderness. Halle wanted privacy for her and got public display. Who could miss a ripple in a cornfield on a quiet cloudless day? He, Sixo and both of the Pauls sat under Brother pouring water from a gourd over their heads, and through eyes streaming with well water, they watched the confusion of tassels in the field below. It had been hard, hard, hard sitting there erect as dogs, watching corn stalks dance at noon. The water running over their heads made it worse. (21)

Another aspect of Sethe's personality and which challenges stereotypical images of black mothers is her strong will to move whatever are the obstacles. While pregnancy is portrayed as a hindrance in the way for women's mobility, it was for Sethe a source of motivation and power. Pregnancy for her, was not a source of weakness and immobility;

it was rather a source of empowerment. Hence, the image of the vulnerable pregnant woman is subverted by Sethe who, thanks to her pregnancy, developed supernatural powers to resist against all the horrors she encountered in her journey for freedom. Pregnancy did not weaken her; it rather made her robust as a man on a battlefield.

To conclude, Morrison, through the perspective of her narrator in *Beloved* provides a more realistic portrait of the life of slaves and the way they were denied the least consideration as human beings which might justify their distorted emotions and relationships. How can a man who is deprived the least dignity, not even allowed to have his sexual life in intimacy, develop a normal relationship with his wife and behave as a real husband? Thus, Morrison by relying on paradox in her portrayal of gender roles in the couple of Sethe and Halle makes a statement on the complex condition of slaves which affects and even destroys their sense of self and identity. Black men and women under slavery cannot all the time fit the conventional standards of gender roles.

5. Sethe and the Deconstruction of the Myth of the 'Mammy'

Negative stereotypical presentations of black women are abundant in the mainstream literature and even in some early slave narratives; however, the cliché of the docile 'mammy' populated largely literary works and cinema screens for long decades. Linden Peach provides a significant definition of this stereotypical representation of the black woman, "legendary figure of sentimental novels and popular films; obedient, obliging cheerful, resilient and resourceful" (Toni Morrison 14). The presentation of the black female as a loyal servant who is ready to make anything to protect all the members of her master's family was recurrent in many literary works like Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind*. The 'Mammy' is portrayed as a solid woman with a supernatural ability

to bear all the exhausting tasks given to her with a constant smile on her large face, as Judith Wilt puts it, "the myth of the black earth mother, indestructible under the heaviest load" (135). The mammy plays the role of the breeder for her master's children and for an important commodity which is the institution of slavery. She assumes the role of the mother in the household by providing white children with physical and spiritual support to grow in peace and harmony; the character of Dilsey in William Faulkner's *The Sound end the Fury* is one of the best illustrations in this regard. Dilsey is the loyal servant of the Compsons who never left them even at moments of extreme hardships. She assumes the role of the mother for their children with big heart and even manages to solve all the misunderstanding between the members of the family.

However, revisiting the history of black females brings into question this romanticised version of the black woman's condition, particularly within slavery; the most dehumanising institution in the American history. In her book *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, bell hooks makes a significant comment in this regard:

Breeding was another socially legitimized method of sexually exploiting black women. I mentioned earlier that white men in colonial America defined the primary function of all women to be that of breeding workers. Advertisements announcing the sale of black female slaves used the terms "breeding slaves", "child-bearing woman", "breeding period", "too old to breed", to describe individual women. (40)

It is actually quite questionable to admit that a female slave who suffers from all forms of physical and moral torture in the plantation to be as serene as she tends to appear in books and screens. Morrison has always portrayed the issue of African-American women in its complexity by providing an ambivalent representation of black womanhood

and motherhood with all its paradoxes and ambiguities. In this regard Ghasemi sustains, "True to life and challenging the socially idealized roles of mothers, Morrison's mothers are not passive, but face the bitter realities of racial existence, which is much too present in Morrison's novels" (Negociating Black Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Novels 239). Through the character of Sethe in *Beloved*, Morrison provides a counter discourse to the white hegemonic one. Sethe, is not the ravished mammy who enjoys serving the children of her white master at the expense of her own. Sethe is not the mammy who accepts to be deprived of her children to celebrate her motherhood with the white children of her owner.

For Sethe, being a mother is not limited to biological ties. It is rather the right to claim ownership of her children and decide upon their fate. She refused to abandon her children and let their destiny in the hands of her master; in an act of self-assertion as a mother, she decides to send her children to live with their grandmother and to escape from the plantation to join them. She challenged all the hindrances that stood in her way and tried to escape though she was in a difficult physical and moral conditions due to her pregnancy on the one hand, and her loneliness on the other hand. Sethe resisted all the horrors she encountered in her harsh journey to Cincinnati just because she wanted the baby in her womb to see light. She endured the terror and the pain just to join her children and fulfil her duties as a mother. Sethe considers her children her 'best thing', she prefers to see them dead than let them live the dehumanising and terrifying experience of slavery as she sustains "How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. (200) In this regard, Ghasemi goes further to clarify, "Given the background of their

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hardships and depravity, and faced with very limited choices or none at all, black mothers even consider infanticide and abandonment as preferable options under the pressing circumstances". (241).

Sethe could not accept to let her children live with Schoolteacher who denies black people humanity; she heard him speaking of her in a very derogatory way referring to her as an animal with many animalistic features. He considers her a "mare" or a "cow which only serves at reproducing more and more slaves for the plantation. Her children are merely a property to be sold. The dehumanising discourse of Schoolteacher has influenced his nephews who, not only raped Sethe, but took milk from her breasts in a shocking scene. This was the most terrifying experience for Sethe; the fact that they took her children's milk traumatised her for the whole of her life. It is noticeable in the following passage how is Sethe affected by the fact that they took her milk more than any other harm she felt. She narrates the event to Paul D:

"After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it. I told Mrs. Garner on em. She had that lump and couldn't speak but her eyes rolled out tears. Them boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still."

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (20)

So, Sethe is the antithetical figure of the Mammy who does not reclaim her motherhood and who simply accepts passively the separation from her children to 284

worship her mistress's children. Milk, in this regard, symbolises the maternal link Sethe wants to have with her children. She accords much importance to the act of sucking which is more than an act of nurturing for Sethe. For her, it is an intimate moment between the mother and her children; a moment of affection and care. Sethe voices all her bitter frustration:

"I had milk," she said. "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar. Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. I told that to the women in the wagon. Told them to put sugar water in cloth to suck from so when I got there in a few days she wouldn't have forgot me. The milk would be there and I would be there with it". (19)

Sethe knew little about her mother who was hanged because she attempted to flee, it is perhaps the reason behind her thirst for strong ties with her children in an attempt to compensate what she lacked with her own mother. She did not bear to feel the same frustration with her children; she was deprived from her mother and could not bear to be deprived once again from her children. She prefers to see them dead than to let them feel the same frustration she experienced years ago as a child of a slave mother. In this regard Mock gives a heartbreaking account of Sethe's maternal feelings:

Deprived of a mother's milk and bonds, knowing the ravenous void in her belly and in her heart, Sethe wants better for her children. She vows her children will never know that hunger. She claims ownership of her children, despite their enslavement and her own. They will have milk of their own. They will never have to share, they will have their own time to suckle and she will be their provider. (119)

Breaking the emotional and physical bond between slave mothers and their children is a constant practice during slavery. Sethe's mother was allowed to nurse her for few days before brutally taking her to the white children's nursemaid. Sethe, later, could no longer recognise her mother. It is paradoxically the nursemaid that presented Sethe's mother as a slave working in the plantation and this how Sethe is reminded of her own mother. In a moving passage from the novel, the reader is encountered with the perspective of Sethe's mother who unveils the pain she exposed herself to in a desperate attempt to bond once again with her baby daughter; she insists on the importance of nursing one's baby:

Sometimes he sucks. Not to fulfill a hunger- but a need just the same. A need to be drawn close. A need to take just a taste of my body, a bit of milk. A reassurance that I am here. Til always be here. He sucks and starts the milk that spews out in a stream when he pulls his mouth away. Sometimes he sucks long after there is no milk left. The doctor says he is fulfilling his sucking reflex, developing and strengthening muscles. I say he is fulfilling an emotional need. I let him stay at my breast, although it is painful and his belly, I know, is full. My nipples are tender and sore, becoming chapped. I let him stay, though. He is my child. This hunger is important too. (Morrison, Beloved 74)

The double consciousness experienced by of Sethe both as a slave's daughter and a slave mother affected deeply her reactions and accentuated her sensitivity towards the notion of nurturing and its importance for the baby as well as for the mother. She did not want her children to experience the same frustration she lived "There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is to be without the milk that belongs to you; to have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell Beloved about that; she'll understand. She, my daughter." (247) Sethe was determined to nurse her children under any conditions. Even after being savagely raped and painfully sucked by the monstrous nephews of Schoolteacher, she nursed Denver "Sethe was aiming the bloody nipple into the baby's mouth. . .. So, Denver took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister". (187)

Contrary to the 'Mammy' figure, Sethe displays a strong will to gather with her own children under the same roof to feed them physically and spiritually. The household she aspires to have is the one which embraces her own black family. She refused to be enclosed in the white master's kitchen serving his children. Sethe, is different from Pauline in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*. Pauline who denied her own daughter to enjoy mothering the white daughter of her master. Sethe, in sharp opposition with Pauline does not enjoy the luxurious house of her master, she rather looked for a shelter where she can share her breath with her children. Contrary to Pauline who blamed her daughter for being raped by her father, Sethe preferred to murder her daughter to protect her from rape, one of the biggest horrors of slavery as it is asserted by the white female humanist Lydia Maria Child commenting on the condition of black women slaves:

The negro woman is unprotected either by law or public opinion. She is the property of her master, and her daughters are his property. They are allowed to have no conscientious scruples, no sense of shame, no regard for the feelings of husband, or parent: they must be entirely subservient to the will of their owner on pain of being whipped as near to death as will comport with his interest or quite to death if it suits his pleasure. (10)

Those horrors inflicted on slaves made Sethe see in death a real benediction for her children. So, "Sethe was not a bad mother; she was a slave mother who, when faced with an attack upon her motherhood, decided to empower herself by taking the life she gave. She willingly chooses to deconstruct the traditional role of mother by committing the crime of 'love murder" (Watson 161)

Moreover, while sexual exploitation is the bitterest forms of dehumanisation for women; Sethe, nevertheless, in an extreme expression of love, sold her body to the engraver to have the word 'Beloved' engraved on her baby daughter's tombstone. In a heartbreaking scene, Sethe tells Denver about the terrible circumstances in which she buried Beloved's corpse. The engraver mercilessly blackmailed her; ten minutes sex for the engravement of one word. She wished to engrave 'Dearly Beloved' on the headstone but she was two exhausted for twenty minutes sex. So, she could only have one single word; 'Beloved':

Ten minutes for seven letters. With another ten could she have gotten "Dearly" too? She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible--that for twenty minutes, a half hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered. She thought it would be enough, rutting among

the headstones with the engraver, his young son looking on, the anger in his face so old; the appetite in it quite new. That should certainly be enough. Enough to answer one more preacher, one more abolitionist and a town full of disgust. (Morrison, Beloved 5)

It is important at this stage to examine how Sethe described the sexual relationship she had with in engraver. She associated it with 'rutting' which actually has a significant connotation; the verb is used to describe animals engaging in the rut which is the annual period of sexual activity for mammals. Sethe could not help not perceiving herself a mere animal in this dehumanising scene. What increased the ugliness, meanness and disgust of the situation is, in fact, the presence of the engraver's son who witnessed the whole show. The narrative voice keeps on revealing more and more horrors on this experience and how Sethe lived this degrading moment of her life:

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent pressed up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil. (6)

The moment was just terrible for Sethe; the few minutes she spent with the engraver were an eternity for her. It is also important to consider here the physical and psychological torture that Sethe let herself live just to make an identity for her daughter.

She was determined to have a name on her dead daughter's tombstone at any price; and it really costs her much. Hence, this is once again a feature in Sethe's personality that clashes with the stereotype of the mammy who never displays any concern for her own children and who tends to impersonate the role of the mother of her white master's children.

Besides, it is important to highlight the discrepancies of the 'double standards philosophy' of the white hegemonic discourse concerning motherhood. A good mother according to the hegemonic culture is the one who is completely devoted to the wellbeing of her household and children; the one who protects her children at all costs and preserves the unity of the family, the black mother, however is automatically excluded from these standards for slavery imposes on her radically different conditions. When Sethe tried to behave under this same ideology standards, she was perceived by Schoolteacher as a crazy woman. He could not understand the lengths to which Sethe will go to protect her children just because she is a black mother. Nevertheless, Sethe, once again, challenged this perception and showed Schoolteacher what she is capable of doing to protect her children from his perverseness. Unfortunately, Sethe was torn between the paradoxical ideologies of her community that sacredly values motherhood and condemns mothers who abandon their children, and the ideology of her white master who perceives her as abnormal when she tried to behave according to the standards of ideal motherhood. Sethe, in this regard deconstructed the stereotype image of black women whose "nature was more primitive and less refined than that of white women; they were not 'civilized' - not really 'attached' to their children" (Wolff 107). Sethe insists on her firm position:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself any more. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own... Whites might dirty her all right but not her best thing... And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused--and refused still. (251)

6. The Paradox of Baby Suggs' 'Thin Love' vs Sethe's 'Thick Love'

Black women remain the most victimised section in American history, their behaviours and the stances they take to survive in dehumanising conditions as slavery are most of the times problematic because they underscore the dilemmas they live in as blacks and females. Morrison attempts to reflect these dilemmas in her novel *Beloved* by articulating the paradoxes that feature black females' experiences as women and particularly as mothers. The major event in the novel's plot revolves around Sethe's desperate actions to spare her children from the horrors of slavery. However, Morrison left room for the other characters as Baby Suggs, Beloved and Denver to voice their perspectives. The novel invites the reader to wonder about the manifestations of love under different circumstances. The opposing views of Paul D and Sethe concerning love create a sort of problematic in the novel; while Pauld D considers Sethe's love 'too thick', she believes 'thin love ain't love at all'. Morrison's position towards the act of infanticide remains ambiguous also for she makes the reader feel her sympathy with Sethe but at the same time questioning the legitimacy of taking such a decision by Sethe. Morrison

succeeds in portraying the tragic ambiguities that Sethe experienced in a situation where the freedom of choice seems impossible.

To expose her readers to the complex mechanism of motherhood under slavery, Morrison created the binary of 'Sethe's thick love' and 'Baby Suggs' thin love' to underscore the multifaceted condition of black female and the multiple strategies to survive. Though the shifting perspectives of the novel and the unstable timeline, the reader is provided with some background about the two characters of Sethe and Baby Suggs which allows him to have a multilayered vision about them. Morrison adopts this strategy of double focus to display the different stances taken by her mother figures which seem converting and diverging at the same time.

In another passage from the novel, through the perspective of the narrator, the reader is given a backward glance at the life of Baby Suggs as a slave. Baby Suggs' life predates the events of the novel by almost fifty years; this life "busted her legs, back, head, eyes, kidneys, womb and tongue." (Morrison, Beloved 87). The narrator provides more background about her life in the following passage:

In all of Baby's life, as well as Sethe's own, men and women were moved around like checkers. Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought out, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized. So, Baby's eight children had six fathers. What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children. (Morrison, Beloved 23)

Baby Suggs experienced the atrocities of slavery just like Sethe but seems to have a different approach to life and motherhood. Contrary to Sethe's radical stances, Baby Suggs tried to negotiate a little bit with slavery to be able to survive "she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart – which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honour before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher" (87). She adopted some mechanisms of defence to protect herself from the devastating effects of the cruel practices of slave owners. Baby Suggs was raped many times and got pregnant from different men "Baby's eight children had six fathers." (23) So, besides the fact that she did not have the right to choose her partner, she was tragically and inhumanely victimised by her slave master who sold all her children except Halle. She was deprived from seeing them growing in front of her eyes even as slaves, at least, near her in the same plantation. All what remains for her are vague and distant memories which narrator evokes along the description of her deplorable state:

What was left to hurt her now? News of Halle's death? No. She had been prepared for that better than she had for his life. The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn the features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their heads when they walked. (Morrison, Beloved 137)

However, Baby Suggs tried, in sharp opposition to Sethe, to rationalise everything around to be able to survive sanely. Even the presence of the ghost of Beloved in the house was just normal for her. She told Sethe that she has to feel lucky to have only a

baby ghost in her house; it remains far better than having a more spiteful ghost of a murdered adult. Sethe relativises everything by convincing Sethe to moderate her feelings and reactions. When Sethe and Denver suggested to move to another house to get rid of the tormenting ghost, Baby Suggs judiciously answers:

"What'd be the point?" asked Baby Suggs. "Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband's spirit was to come back in here? or yours? Don't talk to me. You lucky. You got three left.

Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don't you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody's house into evil." Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. "My firstborn. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember". (7)

Moreover, Baby Suggs did not allow herself emotional connection with her children. It is also a mechanism of defence she adopted and which reflects her philosophy of 'thin love'. It is the safe zone she chose to protect herself from the 'thick love' which ruined Sethe's life and regrettably the life of her children as well; Beloved was murdered, Denver was imprisoned in the haunted house in complete isolation from the community, and Bulgar and Howard who deserted the house without a comeback. For Baby Suggs:

It wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that: held a little foot, examined the fat fingertips with her own- fingers she never saw become the male or female hands a mother would recognize anywhere. She didn't know to this day what their

permanent teeth looked like; or how they held their hands when they walked. Did Patty lose her lisp? What color did Famous' skin finally take? Was that a cleft in Johnny's chin or just a dimple that would disappear soon's his jawbone changed? Four girls, and the last time she saw them there was no hair under their arms. Does Ardelia still love the burned bottom of bread? All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking too hard at that youngest one? (139)

Morrison relies on paradox in portraying Baby Suggs and Sethe's perception of motherhood to underline the dilemma black mothers live under slavery. While Sethe might seem somehow selfish in committing the act of infanticide just because she could not bear the agony of separation from her children; Baby Suggs also might be seen as selfish as well in disconnecting emotionally from her children to spare herself the pain of separation. So, while Sethe and Baby Suggs appear to be the opposite of each other, they can also be perceived as one person with a split personality; a mother who murdered her children to protect herself and them from the sorrow of separation and the other who murdered her motherhood to protect herself and her children. This paradox and ambiguity in the two mother's approaches to motherhood highlight Morrison's presentation of the issue in its intricacy. The dichotomy of Sethe's 'thick love / Baby Suggs' thin love is subverted to fusion rather opposition; they both represent how black motherhood can be distorted under the condition of slavery. Besides, Morrison provides such a complex portrayal to involve her reader in moral ambiguities; should he blame Sethe for her brutal love or rather blame Baby Sugg's for her little love? Who is better than whom? Is the immoral act of infanticide more horrible than the act of abandoning one's offspring?

Moreover, Morrison presents another paradoxical situation in the novel. The only child Baby Suggs could preserve is Halle; the only child she got from a black man whom

she sincerely loved. Ironically and paradoxically, for Baby Sugg's to be freed, her beloved son has to imprison himself in the plantation working day and night far from his mother to buy her freedom. This, also, is a tragic reality in the life of slaves; Baby Suggs was lucky to have a son who freed her, but it was only a physical liberation for she remained enslaved since she could not practice her most legitimate right of mothering. Regrettably, this freedom did not mean a lot for her for she was not allowed to enjoy familial bonds with Halle.

However, Baby Suggs, though tragically victimised by slavey through the loss of eight of her children, she, nevertheless, succeeded in generating generous motherly feelings towards the other children of her community. She was also a loving and sustaining mother for Sethe who remembers with nostalgia many affectionate and warm gestures of Baby Suggs:

Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just out anything they were doing to massage Sethe's nape when, especially in the early days, her spirits fell down under the weight of the things she remembered and those she did not. . . . If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs' just as she did the good hands of the white- girl looking for velvet. (98)

Morrison uses paradox in portraying Baby Suggs who could coldly moderate her maternal feelings towards her own children and at the same time embrace and love the other children of her community. However, Morrison aimed at underscoring a very important aspect of black cultural heritage which is the notion of othermothering. Black

mothers can practice othermothering as an act of solidarity with each other and this was what Baby Suggs has exactly done. Baby Suggs becomes the voice of wisdom in her community; she calls black people to love themselves and to love each other for she believes that love has the magic of healing;

"Here," she said, "in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You got to love it, you!" (Morrison, Beloved 88)

Baby Suggs's love for her community might be interpreted as a positive step towards her community but it can also be perceived as a way for her to free herself from pangs of guilt. This guilt is the burden of abandoning her seven children without the least attempt of resistance. The reader is informed about the diplomacy with which Baby Suggs behaved with her white master. She chose silence as an ideology which would guarantee her survival. Silence, in this regard, is left for the reader to perceive either as an act of power and resistance for survival or an act of selfishness and cowardice. What is sure; however, is the fact that Baby Suggs succeeded in being a holy mother for Sethe sustaining her physically and morally through her prayers and preaching which helped Sethe to survive.

However, Baby Suggs positive stances towards life faded soon after the horrific act of infanticide her daughter-in-law committed. She came to realise that her sermons were not as effective as she thought. She could no longer believe in her words after realising how traumatising can be the experience of mothering under slavery for certain members of the black community. Baby Suggs fell under severe depression and was severely sick after she "proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping-room bed roused once in a while by craving for colour and not for another thing" (89). She was extremely desperate to the point that she became extremely passive. When Howard and Bulgar tried to desert the house because of the ghost or because they were afraid their mother would kill them also one day, she did not intervene to prevent them from going;

It was a wonder to her that her grandsons had taken so long to realize that every house wasn't like the one on Bluestone Road. Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn't get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present-intolerable--and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color. (4)

Therefore, Baby Suggs psychological state and the radical alteration in her stances raise in the reader's mind further ambiguities about the most rational way of practicing mothering under the condition of slavery, and to what extent do Sethe's and Baby Suggs' approaches of 'thick love' and 'thin love' prove to be true! Morrison stresses the terrible effect the act of infanticide had on the whole family and even the community. Baby Suggs' house which used to be the spiritual refuge for the community, a place for union and compassion, where they are taught how to survive "before it had become the playing of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful buzzing house, where Baby

Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed, where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there where children tried on their shoes." (88) Baby Suggs' house becomes an isolated haunted house "shut down and put up with the venom of its ghosts" (89).

Though a minor character in the novel, Sethe's friend Ella has a significant role in the novel. Her experience with mothering is quite representative of Morrison's endeavour to present the divergent approaches of black females towards motherhood especially during the dehumanising institution of slavery. While joining the community in condoning Sethe for murdering her daughter, the reader is informed later in the novel that Ella bears a heavy secret that makes her not less horrific than is Sethe. Raped by her master and his son and locked in a room for long moths, Ella got pregnant. When she finally delivered, she refused to feed her white baby daughter. In a depressive state, she subjected her daughter to the torment of hunger for five days with no mercy, which caused her death. The narrator reveals this striking detail in the following passage, "She had delivered, but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound" (Morrison, Beloved 258). The paradox lies in the fact that Ella judges negatively Sethe though she had made almost the same thing; she only succeeded in hiding this secret from her community which considers her a good black Morrison, once again highlights the complex condition of female slaves confronting sexual assaults, raising a crucial question as to whether a female slave can accept, love and mother a baby that is an outcome of a dehumanising and oppressing act of rape. Morrison, once again remains ambivalent towards the character of Ella for she gives her perspective through the narrator who tells her condition "Her puberty was spent in a house where she was shared by father and son, whom she called "the lowest yet." It was "the lowest yet" who gave her a disgust for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities. A killing, a kidnap, a rape--whatever, she listened and nodded. Nothing compared to "the lowest yet" (212).

The impact of the traumatising experience of slavery continued to haunt black people even after gaining freedom for the repercussions are very heavy. The legacy of slavery touched many generations of the black community and this is shown in Denver's perpetual fear from her mother. Morrison stresses the paradoxes and ambiguities that mark child-mother relationships under slavery where maternal love, instead of standing for moral stability and emotional security, become a terrorising threat. Through this passage from the perspective of Denver, Morrison clarifies how maternal love can be distorted:

I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it. she missed killing my brothers and they knew it, they told me die-witch! Stories to show me the way to do it, if ever I needed to.... There sure is something in her that makes it all right to kill her own. All the time I'm afraid that the thing that happened that made it alright for my mother to kill my sister could happen again... I don't know what is it, who is it but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. (242)

7. The Paradox of the Pretty and Hellish Sweet Home

The themes of memory and trauma are key issues in *Beloved*. Morrison displayed how memory and trauma played a central role in the lives of all the characters of the novel mainly Sethe and Paul D. The fragmented narration that Morrison uses in addition to the nonlinearity of the plot of story helped the novel to unfold the characters' inner lives and

thoughts fluctuating between their past and present without any demarcating boundaries. The manifestations of trauma are abundant and they almost accompany the perspectives of all the characters throughout the novel. In many significant passages in the novel, memory manifests itself in intriguing ways underscoring signs of trauma. Morrison highlights in many passages in the novel how repression was a mechanism of defence for many characters as a manifestation of trauma and psychological troubles.

One of the most striking examples in this regard is the way Sethe remembers Sweet Home. Morrison relies on paradox and ambiguity in displaying the mechanisms of Sethe's memory and the signs of her trauma. The coming passage describes Sethe's state and how she is struggling to keep painful memories far from her mind. A task that remains impossible sometimes for Sethe for trauma and memory have their own power over her consciousness. While she was trying to appreciate the company, the stubborn memories about Sweet Home interrupted offensively and abruptly her very brief instances of peace:

Nor was there the faintest scent of ink or the cherry gum and oak bark from which it was made. Nothing. Just the breeze cooling her face as she rushed toward water. And then sopping the chamomile away with pump water and rags, her mind fixed on getting every last bit of sap off--on her carelessness in taking a shortcut across the field just to save a half mile, and not noticing how high the weeds had grown until the itching was all the way to her knees. Then something. The plash of water, the sight of her shoes and stockings awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It

never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world. It shamed her--remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys. Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time and she could not forgive her memory for that. (8)

Sethe's memories about Sweet Home remain curiously pretty somehow blurring momentarily the prevailing ugliness of life in bondage. They actually transcend any superficial interpretation. Sethe is clearly conflicted with her reminiscences about both her boys and her life in Sweet Home. How does the ironically called Sweet Home come to figure out as beautiful in Sethe's eyes! It is important to consider the paradox in this short passage: "and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty." Sethe's bears a paradoxical and ambiguous perception of Sweet Home that displays the complexity of her psychological state. She goes further to assert that Sweet Home "never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too". She associates Sweet Home with hell but at the same time wonders if hell would seem as pretty as Sweet Home. This intriguing association of Sweet Home with hell and its contradictory assimilation with prettiness remains highly ambiguous and paradoxical and it illustrates fully the distorted subconscious of Sethe who appears to be strangely ambivalent about her memory of Sweet Home.

What is more sticking is the fact that Sethe remembers people hung from a tree there and could only identify the type of the tree which is the sycamore but not people in clear shape and features. Sethe seems conscious that her memory is not functioning logically

but cannot help changing things; she desperately tries to jog her memory to recall images of her sons but what comes out was only the pictures of the sycamore tress firing any shadow of the boys. This tortures Sethe who could not tolerate her chaotic and indifferent memory.

When Sethe was just leaving the field, she suddenly saw a man, she directly recognised him. It was Paul D, a former slave of Sweet Home plantation.

When the last of the chamomile was gone, she went around to the front of the house, collecting her shoes and stockings on the way. As if to punish her further for her terrible memory, sitting on the porch not forty feet away was Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men. And although she could never mistake his face for another's, she said, "Is that you?" (9)

It is important to note that Morrison employed the expression 'as if to punish her further for her terrible memory' as a reminder that memory for Sethe is not simply the faculty by which the mind stores and remembers things but it is a torturing experience; Paul D reminds her of the horrors she experienced in Sweet Home.

Paul D answers:

"What's left. "He stood up and smiled. "How you been, girl, besides barefoot?"

When she laughed it came out loose and young. "Messed up my legs back yonder. Chamomile." (9)

He made a face as though tasting a teaspoon of something bitter. "I don't want to even hear 'bout it. Always did hate that stuff."

Paul D's reaction when Sethe mentioned Chamomile displays his feelings toward all what reminds him of Sweet Home plantation. Since Chamomile is associated with Sweet Home, it only stimulates in him sensations of bitterness and disgust. Sethe considers him Chamomile for he is for her a source of hope and affection, but he refuses to be labelled as such because he still does not want to remember anything associated with Sweet Home. He still suffers from feelings of guilt for not helping the other people in Sweet Home. Even when he said "what is left" we can deduce that life has taken a big portion of him and what Sethe is seeing is just the little reaming part. These few passages from the novel serve just as an illustration of the manifestations of trauma and memory as an important legacy of slavery. These manifestations are actually abundant in the novel and are at the core of the narrative. Morrison exhibits how the act of remembering remain s very difficult for black people especially slaves. Sethe that is representative of many other slaves considers remembering as dangerous because she has seen the repercussions on the other members of her community "If she could just manage the news Paul D brought....Not develop some permanent craziness like Baby Suggs' friend...who's food was full of tears. Like Aunt Phyllis, who slept with her eyes wide open. Like Jackson Till, who slept under the bed" (100).

8. Beloved: The Paradox of Destroying and Healing

Toni Morrison has always asserted in her interviews that one of her paramount priorities was to 'speak the unspeakable' and to bring to life the stories of the 'six million blacks' lost in the midway on slave ships. The story of the 'dead girl' is one of those stories blurred in oblivion. So, Morrison aimed at bringing into question the myths about black people promoted by the patriarchal culture of the canon for long years and also

revisit the distorted history of black people especially women who were subjected to all forms of oppression by white and even black counterparts. The character of Beloved in the novel stands as the symbol of collective memory and collective trauma. She stands for the millions of slaves lost in the Middle Passage as Wyatt asserts:

Beloved assumes a double role: on the personal level, Beloved is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in *Beloved*, the ghost represents-as the generic name Beloved suggests-all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships. Beloved gives an account of this experience, dislocating historical linear barriers of time and place. (479)

The character of Beloved in the novel is an important part of Morrison's agenda for the revisitation of the history of all African-Americans silenced voices. Ashraf H. Rushdy notes that "Beloved is more than just a character in the novel...She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolises what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly" (23).

Beloved is the incarnation of the past. Sethe and Denver assume that she is the tormented ghost of Beloved that is coming back in flesh. Beloved's return paradoxically gives some hope for Sethe who now starts dreaming of re-bonding again with her children and reconstructing the family she has always dreamt of. She aspires for the return of her two sons also to reunite with their sisters. Beloved was described as a new-born baby with her new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands. Her skin was flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn

under the hat. The girl is thirsty and drinks cup after cup of water, as though she had crossed a desert. (Morrison, Beloved 51)

Sethe and Denver soon accepted Beloved and started to behave with her as a real member of the family. Sethe felt released for the moment she has always dreamt of has finally come. Now, she can unburden herself and explain to her beloved daughter why she has murdered her:

I'll explain to her, even though I don't have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tender her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. (200)

Sethe, paradoxically felt "unexpected pleasure" (60) in retrieving her memory though deep discussions with Beloved revealing many past events in her life and memories about her own mother; a thing she has always disliked and avoided to do. She started to speak the 'unspeakable things unspoken':

She is surprised at her own willingness to talk about something she had always avoided previously because "everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable...Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it...the hurt was always there - like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left. (61)

While Paul D seems anxious and suspicious of the nature of Beloved, Sethe starts feeling very affectionate towards her. Thery held long discussions especially about the past where Sethe tried her best to explain things for Beloved. Beloved knew many details

about past events in the life of Sethe which made her convinced more and more that she is really her daughter. However, Beloved appears to have other plans; she wanted Sethe only for herself and she soon got rid of Paul D by ruining his relationship with Sethe by seducing him. Morrison, indirectly influences the reader to perceive Beloved as a living body that has the ability to expel people. Paul D starts to feel uneasiness in Sethe's house and he could not help resisting this feeling anymore; so, he left "realizing the movement was involuntary. He wasn't being nervous; he was being prevented" (118). However, for Sethe, Beloved becomes everything "whatever is going outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room" (183). Beloved succeeded finally in isolating Sethe causing her separation from Paul D.

However, Beloved's way of seducing Paul D is quite significant. In their intimate contact she insisted that he touches her intimate parts and pronounce the word Beloved. He refused at the beginning but later on "she moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it...when he reached the inside part he was saying, "Red heart. Red heart, over and over again" (118). Paul D's tobacco tin in symbolically the box where he hid all his memories of the miserable and traumatising life of a slave "Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest" (111). The contact with Beloved and the tobacco tin which became a red heart is a metaphor on how this encounter and close contact with Beloved have given life to his heart which was, in an act of repression, a mere tobacco tin "which nothing in this world could pry it open. The tin this buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (113). This is another instance of

Morrison's insistence that all the characters in the novel should face their memories with all their traumatising experiences they hold. She relies on the paradox of making the ghost of Beloved alive to awaken the ghostly history and memories of the other characters. For Paul D, now a contact with Beloved brought to life his rigid tobacco tin. His tobacco tin is full of images of "Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food...stole from pigs, slept in trees in the day and walked by night...Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on" (62).

However, this contact between Paul D and Beloved though morally considered as a betrayal of Sethe, it was also the only way for Paul D to face his traumatic memories. Pamela E. Harnett explains that "without this nightmare experience, Paul D would not be able to overcome his numbing defence mechanisms or perform the necessary exorcism" (423). His close contact with Beloved allowed him to know about Sethe's act of infanticide and this is how he left Sethe's house.

After Paul D's departure, the three women enjoyed life together; Sethe was delving deeper and deeper in her past memories but now chronologically revisiting each event in her life. This symbolically means that Sethe's memory is finally able to function coherently and the holes and fragmentations in her speech are fading. These were the first signs of healing from the trauma she suffered from for long years and which was so palpable in her inability to tell Paul D about her act of infanticide before the return of Beloved in flesh, Sethe seemed completely incapable of telling things in a coherent way. However, what remained suspicious in the relationship between Beloved and Sethe is how Beloved was getting complete control over Sethe fully absorbing her. Beloved wants to compensate the long years of separation from her mother, she was insatiably thirsty to

her mother's care and affection. She consumes Sethe; the more she gives her the more she gets greedier "Anything she wanted she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire. She wanted Sethe's company for hours to watch the layer of brown leaves waving at them from the bottom of the creek, in the same place where, as a little girl, Denver played in the silence with her" (239). Sethe was desperate in attempting each time to justify and convince Beloved that she killed her because she wanted to protect her. Beloved controlled Sethe to the point of impersonating her and it was almost impossible for Denver to differentiate them:

Dressed in Sethe's dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tracking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who. (241)

Beloved did not accept Sethe's justifications and was constantly blaming her and directing harsh accusations. She took advantage of her mother's weakness:

She took the best of everything--first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children, waving away flies in grape arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to. None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her...Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to—that she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time and

had the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved wasn't interested. Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. (244)

Sethe was in a deplorable condition due to Beloved torturing her day and night, this is what led Denver to be suspicious about the identity and her true intentions. She could understand that Beloved is evil. She decided to intervene to rescue her mother "She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help" (245). Denver's strong feelings of love towards her mother pushed her to take a very important decision in her life; facing the community and getting out of the 124 prison was the most difficult step Denver dared to take during her whole life of isolation. She asked for a job to sustain her mother who was fading day after day "Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child, for other than those times when Beloved needed her, Sethe confined herself to a corner chair. The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became; the brighter Beloved's eyes" (247). News about the degrading state of Sethe spread in the neighbourhood "Sethe was worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes and generally bedeviled. That this daughter beat her, tied her to the bed and pulled out all her hair" (248). It was Ella who finally succeeded in convincing the other coloured women to go and rescue Sethe in a collective act of exorcism. Ella is a logical woman, she could not accept at a given time that a mother murders her daughter, and she also could not accept that a daughter kills her mother.

Morrison relies on paradox and ambiguity in exhibiting how the destructive relationship between Beloved and Sethe was also a helpful one. Beloved, though

subjecting Sethe to devastating psychological pressures by torturing her through retrieving the past, nevertheless, gave an opportunity for Sethe to speak the 'unspeakable in her life'. Sethe could finally restore all what has been rejected in a desperate act of repression caused by the trauma caused by the atrocities of her life in Sweet Home. O'Reilley makes a pertinent comment in this regard:

Sethe, in Beloved, learns to live with the past and to accept herself through psychic journey of remembering. And it is the daughter who enables the mother to remember, accept, and forgive. Thus, the mother-daughter relationship both represents and achieves an identification with, and an acceptance of, the past. Thus, in and through her relationship with Beloved, the embodiment of the African American motherline, Sethe finds her own lost motherline. (65)

However, Morrison points to the dangers of being enclosed in the past. When Sethe completely surrenders to Beloved, she lost her present and risked her future. By having Sethe rescued by Deven with the help of Paul D and the other coloured women, Morrison makes a statement on the importance of revisiting one's history but for the sake of moving on and healing. Morrison stresses the importance of facing trauma for repression is destructive; it leaves the person imprisoned, fragmented and incoherent. So, by creating the character of Beloved that stands for the atrocities and the traumatic cruelties Sethe lived, Morrison invites her black community to face the past with all its darkness to be able to reconcile with the present and build the future. Morrison questions Sethe's belief that "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42) ends the novel with a spark of hope through the character Denver. Denver did not accept to be a prisoner of the past like her mother, she took some positive stances and liberated herself and rescued Sethe from the haunting past. Hence, Sethe lost Beloved in slavery but gained Denver in

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freedom. Paradoxically, the death of Beloved brought the life of Denver; the horrific act of infanticide committed on Beloved was what allowed Denver to live in freedom. It is the blood of Beloved that Denver sucked with the milk of Sethe that gave life to Denver.

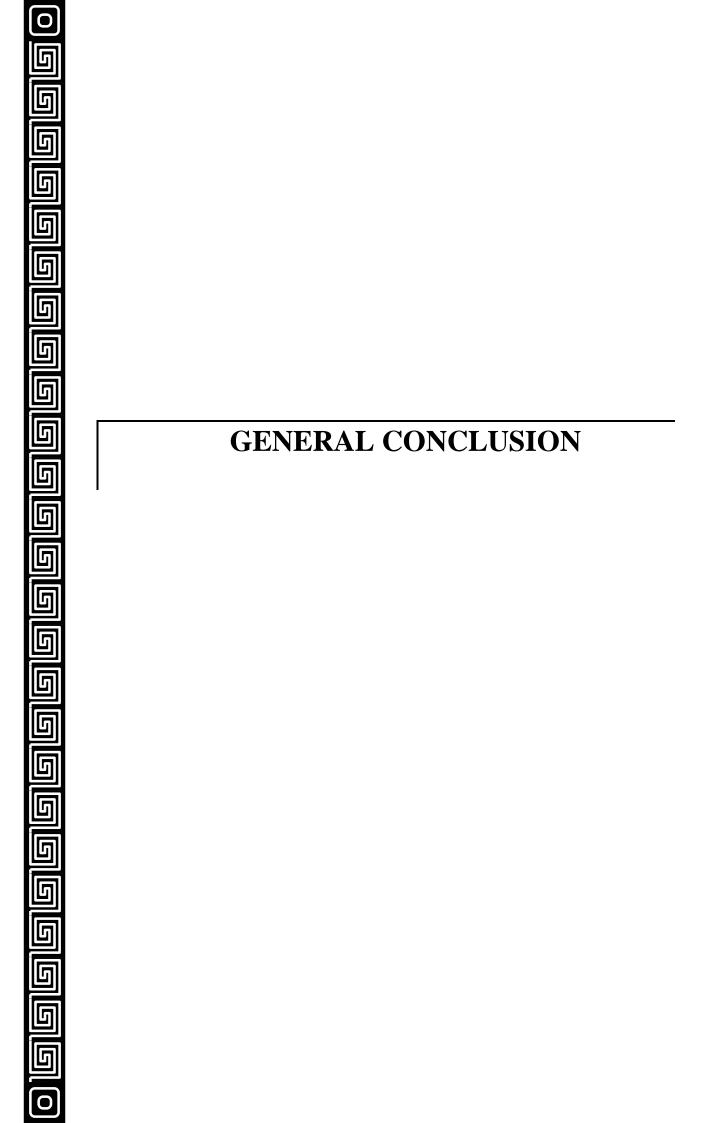
Conclusion

This chapter examines the complex issue of slavery and its legacy on generations of African-Americans. It scrutinises the repercussions of such a dehumanising experience on black males and female more particularly during and even after freedom. Morrison adopted a complex narrative to portray the intriguing condition of black females and especially mothers under slavery. To tackle themes related to the distortion of black American history and the ambiguities and the paradoxes that feature black motherhood under slavery, Morrison modelled her narrative in postcolonial and post-modern moulds to convey her ambivalent views. The first parts of this chapter attempted to revisit Morrison's stances regarding history and the importance of restoring what was buried in oblivion.

A deep examination of her interviews as well as some critical responses to her works was quite insightful in investigating Morrison's perception of the function of literature in raising questions about the validity of the discourse of the canon which stereotyped black males and females for long decades. Moreover, the chapter presents some of the post-modernistic techniques that Morrison employed in her novel *Beloved* to sustain our claim of her use of paradox and ambiguity as the main components of her narrative discourse. Furthermore, the chapter discussed the paradoxes and ambiguities that underlie maternal love during slavery and even after through a close analysis of the main events of the plot and the reference to the most significant incidents of the novel. The chapter deals with Morrison's employment of paradox and ambiguity in exhibiting how slavery distorted child-mother and male-female. It also insists on Morrison's constant endeavour to deconstruct the negative stereotypes about black people that populated mainstream literature for long.

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Besides, the chapter underscores the paradoxes and ambiguities that feature the manifestations of memory and trauma through a close reading of the different characters of the novel and their interactions with each other. The character of Beloved is endowed centrality in this research for being is an outstanding example of Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity as well as an embodiment of Morrison's elaborate counter discourse to the hegemonic one which blurred the history of the 'Six million Slaves' lost in the Middle Passage. *Beloved* is a tribute to all the dead girls whose stories are not 'stories to pass on'.



General Conclusion

Stated in the introduction as paradox and ambiguity at work in the representation of black female characters in her three novels entitled *The Bluest Eye (1970)*, *Sula (1973)*, and *Beloved (1987)*, the dissertation proposed to proceed to the examination of the thesis topic according to the following outline which consists in the division of the work in four chapters.

The first chapter was devoted to a review of the literature concerning the notions of ambiguity and paradox and their use in literature. This covers a period starting from antiquity and running through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Elizabethan Age to the Modern Age with a selection of the most representative authors who have defined or made use of these devices in their works. This was achieved with the purpose of showing the age-old interest accorded to the employment and reliance on these literary tools to achieve the desired effects by their users, and at the same time point to the sophisticated developments that ensued those innovative uses. Thus, dealing with Morrison's representation of black female characters in the light of the devices of paradox and ambiguity in the mentioned novels, required a background against which to highlight the wealth of her innovative uses of these devices and the multilayered dimensions they take in her narrative.

With *The Bluest Eye (1973)*, her first novel, chapter II puts forward the argument that by opting for female-centred plots, Morrison, to shed light on the dilemmas they face in their quest for identity and self-realisation, relied on the devices of paradox and ambiguity to approach the black woman's question. It is argued that quite apart from being an underlying characteristic feature of her narrative strategy in dealing with the black

woman's condition, it is also a means by which Morrison challenges the hegemonic white discourse which has produced images of black women reducing them to the long held stereotypes of docile mammas, domineering matriarchs emasculating their husbands, hypersexual creatures, irresponsible mothers, and unfeminine women to cite just few of the prevailing clichés conveyed by white racist ideology. Centring her plot on a multiplicity of female characters of different ages, status and condition, the chapter insisted on Morrison's inclusive choice of women and the notion of the diversity of its component to disable reduction and categorisation.

Moreover, the research stressed that Morrison's employment of ambiguity and paradox, serves among other things, to insist on differences and even contradictions with regard to the black women's quest for self-definition and life prospects. In this context, the chapter displays Morrison's depiction of multiple instances in which her female characters experience complex existential dilemmas adopting ambivalent ways and responses to resolve them. The multilayered use of paradox and ambiguity, in this context, is shown to illustrate a comprehensive portrayal of black womanhood that resists stereotypical uniformity. It is also destined to provide a new perspective on black womanhood in its diversity. The analysis highlighted elements of Morrison's narrative strategies by which she displays paradox and ambiguity and these include shifts of point of view, deconstruction of binary oppositions, multiplicity of voices, and contradictions resulting from the tensions of race and gender and engendering what WEB Dubois called "double consciousness."

Chapter Three which pursues the stated problematics of Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity in the representation of black female characters has examined her novel *Sula* (1973) to continue the development of the argument. It also set itself to underscore

and discuss whatever related innovative trends the author introduces in her narrative strategies. The research asserted equally that the novel explores paradoxes and ambiguities in various ways extending the analysis of their use beyond characters to themes and narrative structure.

Focusing on the elements of plot whose centrality concerns the tumultuous aspects that characterise the friendship of the two black female protagonists Sula and Nel, the research, began with an analysis of the prologue, pointing to the tricky character of the genesis of the Bottom as evidence of a first instance of Morrison's use of paradox through the inversion of top and bottom of the hill, hence signalling the dubious character of the narrative. The focus of the narrative, then shifted to the two young black female protagonists to illustrate Morrison's use of paradox and ambiguity in her representation of Sula and Nel who, though issued from totally opposed backgrounds, share sameness and difference. Although the plot of the novel is shown to revolve around fundamental aspects of the girls' family environments and their developing friendship, it does not give them centrality of concern.

Morrison, it is argued, being keen on widening the scope of her black female characters extends her cast to mothers and grandmothers. The inclusion of Sula's grandmother Eva as well as the significant part she takes in the plot as a mother and a patriarch after having been abandoned by her husband with three children to feed and no money exemplifies the use of ambiguity of and paradox. This is revealed through the climactic event of the novel when Eva decides to put an end to her drug addicted son Plum by burning him "out of love" to save his dignity. Similarly, Sula's refusal to intervene when her mother Hannah was catching fire raises further interrogations regarding the complex issues of love and motherhood.

Thanks to her adoption of an all-inclusive approach to the black woman's experience, Morrison was able to deal with a rich tapestry of themes and motifs which include female friendship, self-discovery and identity, autonomy and independence, family relationships and households, love and motherhood, and further issues related to the tensions created by societal norms and expectations. Sula's sexual affair with her best friend's husband, her dumping of her grandmother Eva into an old people's home run by whites, and Nel's late epiphanic revelation of her affection for Sula at her grave strike Morrison's reader with unusually hard unresolved questions inviting him to respond to these issues by himself instead of offering him her own alternative as a conclusion. In short, the chapter insisted on the multiple ways Morrison dealt with the black woman's question and her constant reliance on paradox and ambiguity as positive devices that best enabled her to dive deep in the black woman's psyche By such highly post-modernistic strategies Morrison succeeded not simply to give voice to a fairly representative section of the black female's component but equally to reveal its diversity and deconstruct the long held and narrow stereotypes established by the white dominant culture.

Being the third novel dealt with in last chapter of the dissertation, *Beloved* can be viewed as the core of this research for the wealth of the themes that it explores and in which the condition of the African American woman occupies a central place. Unlike *The Bluest Eye and Sula, Beloved* is characterised by Morrison's adoption of complex narrative forms which derive to a great extent from the sophisticated concepts of post modernism and post colonialism. The chapter reiterates the concern of the research and insists on carrying out the analysis of the work through the stated focus of paradox and ambiguity as fundamental axes of Morrison's narrative strategies with regard to her treatment of issues involving the condition of the African American woman. After an

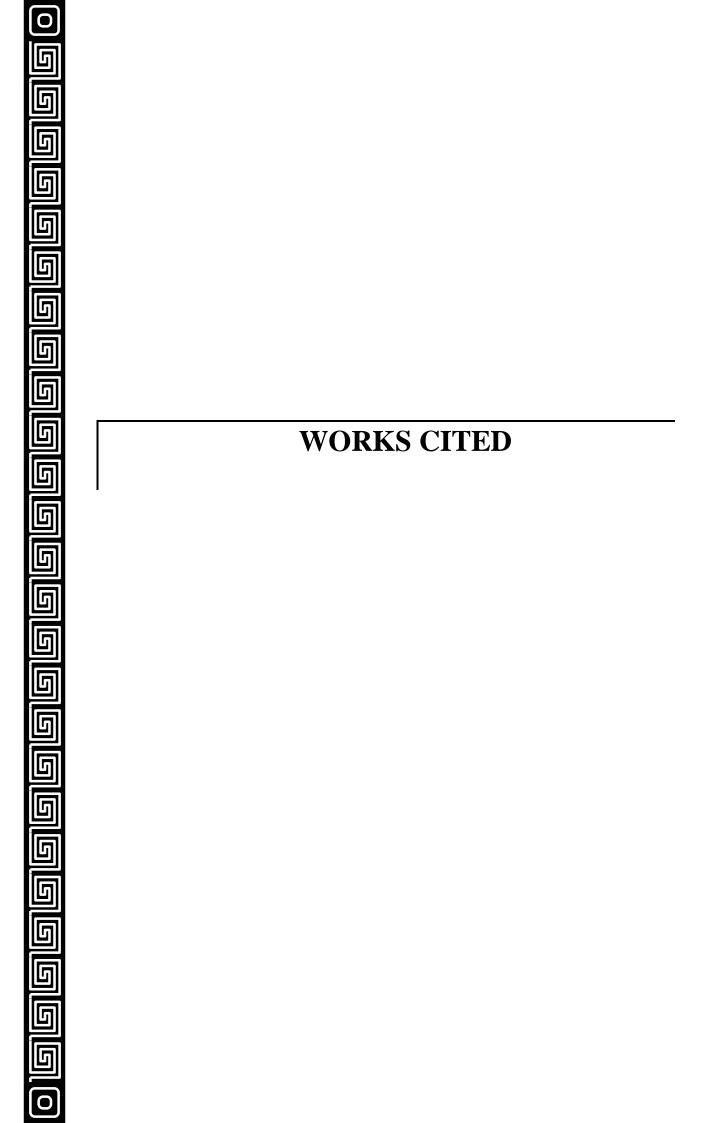
introduction presenting essential characteristics of Morrison's aesthetics, notably her reclamation for a literature that would voice "the unspeakable unspoken" and her emphasis upon the necessity to revisit America's canonical literature with the aim of breaking marginality and imposing a space for the full and genuine expression of African American culture.

For Morrison, attempting such a task imposes the subversion of the mainstream literature through making articulate the "silenced voices, 'speaking the unspeakable' and 'retrieving the suppressed'. This is, indeed, what Morrison set herself to achieve in *Beloved* by initially setting her plot and characters during the slavery era before following their destinies after emancipation. Her novel which attempts a revisitation of African American history under slavery centres her approach on black women whom she perceived as the most vulnerable and victimised section of the black community.

Morrison's choice of female characters as the very core of her novel enabled her to approach the related issues of motherhood under the inhuman circumstances of bondage and their traumatic effects upon husbands and children. In this context Morrison resorts to the devices of paradox and ambiguity to account for some of the most absurd and tragic situations that are experienced mostly by black female slaves. Morrison employs nonlinear narrative techniques to move character and reader through objective and virtual time and presenting shifting situations in which time past and time present become hardly distinguishable.

Moreover, Morrison provides her novel with a re-definition of the function of memory as a compartment of the human personality in which are deeply stored the horrors of the experience of slavery and the trauma they have generated during generations.

Morrison postulates a reconciliation with self, community and history by allowing expression for the repressed memories as a means to achieve healing of the deeply buried scars of the black people.



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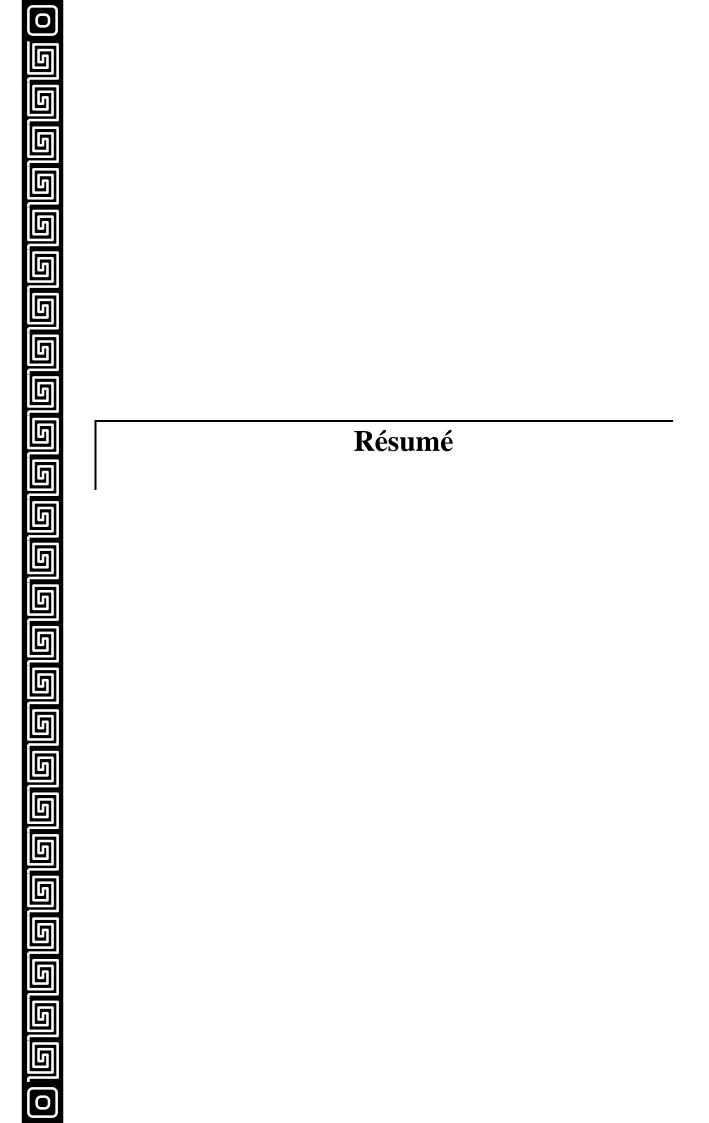
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Intitulée Paradoxe et Ambigüité à l'oeuvre dans les Représentation de Personnages Féminins Noirs dans la Fiction de Toni Morrison, cette recherche examine un ensemble représentatif des romans de l'auteur que sont The Bluest Eye (1970), Sula (1974) et Beloved (1987) pour traiter de la question de sa représentation complexe des personnages féminins noirs. Le sujet explore l'emploi par Morrison des procédés narratifs du paradoxe et de l'ambiguïté comme trait caractéristique sous-jacent à sa stratégie narrative dans son traitement de la question des femmes noires. En donnant la parole à chacun de ses personnages, Morrison vise à montrer la complexité de leur condition ainsi que leurs attentes face à une existence dans une société hégémonique blanche qui les a privés de leurs droits fondamentaux et a brouillé leur identité. Dans ce contexte, cette étude cherche à mettre en avant l'argument selon lequel l'utilisation par Morrison de l'ambiguïté et du paradoxe, sert à illustrer les différences et même les contradictions concernant la quête des femmes noires pour l'autodéfinition, l'identité sociale et les perspectives de vie. A cet effet, l'auteure procède à la représentation des multiples dilemmes de ses personnages féminins à travers les intrigues tragiques de ses romans à différentes phases de l'histoire afro-américaine. Son penchant pour les oppositions non résolubles illustre son utilisation d'un discours narratif qui cherche à offrir une vision plurielle des conditions et des préoccupations des femmes noires. L'adoption par Morrison d'un discours narratif qui repose sur l'affichage de personnages contraires mais complémentaires dans une multitude de contextes vise à déconstruire les images stéréotypées des femmes noires façonnées par les blancs. Afin de rendre compte de ces questions, il m'a paru utile et perspicace de m'inspirer des théories du féminisme et de la psychanalyse. Une attention particulière est également accordée à l'usage par Morrison des caractéristiques du Postmodernisme et du Postcolonialisme. Ces concepts analytiques me paraissent déterminants pour des écrits que Morrison consacre dans leur globalité à la question de la femme noire et son vécu aux U.S.A. Il en résulte qu'en procédant ainsi, Morrison réussit à construire un ingénieux contre-discours narratif qui rétablit la femme noire dans un contexte libéré des préjugés de la rhétorique blanche.

Mots clés : paradoxe, ambiguïté, femmes noires, Morrison

ملخص

تحت عنوان المفارقة والغموض في العمل في التمثيلات النسائية في رواية توني موريسون، يتفحص هذا البحث مجموعة تمثيلية من روايات المؤلف(The Bluest Eye (1970 و Sula (1974)و (1987) Beloved المعالجة مسألة التصوير المعقد لـ شخصيات نسائية سوداء. يستطلع الموضوع استخدام موريسون للأدوات السردية للمفارقة والغموض كسمة مميزة تقوم عليها إستراتيجيتها السردية في معالجتها لمسألة النساء السود. من خلال إعطاء صوت لكل شخصية من شخصياتها، تهدف موريسون إلى إظهار مدى تعقد وضعهم بالإضافة إلى توقعاتهم للكينونة في مجتمع أبيض مهيمن يحرمهم من حقوقهم الأساسية ويطمس هويتهم. على أساس هذه الخلفية، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى تعزيز الحجة القائلة بأن استخدام موريسون للغموض والمفارقة يعمل على توضيح الاختلافات وحتى التناقضات فيما يتعلق بسعى النساء السود لتعريف الذات والهوية وافاق الحياة. تحقيقا لهذه الغاية، تتقل الكاتبة إلى تمثيل المعضلات المتعددة لشخصياتها النسائية من خلال المؤامرات المأساوية في رواياتها في مراحل مختلفة من التاريخ الأفريقي الأمريكي. ويمثل ميلها للمعارضات غير القابلة للحل مثالا على استخدامها للخطاب السردي الذي يسعى إلى تقديم رؤية تعددية لظروف ومخاوف النساء السود. يهدف تبني موريسون لخطاب سردي يعتمد على عرض شخصيات متعاكسة ولكنها متكاملة في العديد من السياقات إلى تفكيك الصور النمطية للمرأة السوداء التي شكلها البيض. من أجل تفسير هذه التساؤلات، بدا لي مفيدًا وثاقب أن أستلهم من نظريات النسوية والتحليل النفسي. يتم إيلاء اهتمام خاص أيضًا لعرض موريسون لاتجاهات ما بعد الاستعمار ما بعد الحداثة في سردها. تبدو لى مثل هذه المفاهيم التحليلية فعالة في التعامل مع الكتابات التي تكرسها موريسون في مجملها لمسألة المرأة السوداء وتجربتها في الولايات المتحدة الأمريكية. نتيجة لذلك، لقد نجحت

موريسون في بناء سرد مضاد بارع يعيد إرساء المرأة السوداء في سياق خالٍ من تحيزات الخطاب الأبيض.

كلمات مفتاحية: المفارقة، الغموض، النساء السود، موريسون