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The Perseverance and Fortitude of Black Women in the
Novels of Toni Morrison:
Beloved, Sula, Song of Solomon

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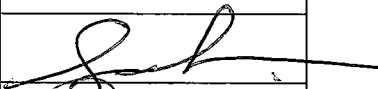
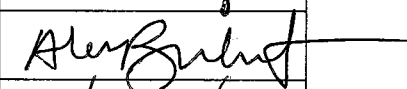
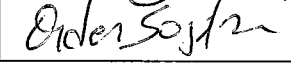
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ÖZ

Bu çalışma siyah kadın karakterlerin güçlü bireyler, cesaret simgeleri olarak tasvir edildiği Toni Morrison'ın üç romanını, *Beloved-Sevilen*'i, *Sula*'yı, ve *Song of Solomon-Süleyman'ın Şarkısı*'nı incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Her ne kadar 'siyah feminist yazar' ünvanını kabul etmese de, bu çalışma güçlü kadın karakterlerin başlıca karakterler olarak göze çarptığı romanlarında, Morrison'ın bakış açısının siyah feminist stratejilerle yakın bir benzerlik içinde olduğunu savunmaktadır. Buna göre, romanlardaki kadın karakterlerin deneyimleri siyah feminist düşünce ile desteklenerek incelenmiştir. *Sevilen*'de Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver ve Ella, *Sula*'da Sula, Nel ve Eva, *Süleyman'ın Şarkısı*'nda Pilate ve torunu Hagar Amerika'daki farklı kuşaktan siyah kadınların temsilcileridirler. Üç boyutlu bir baskı tarafından kuşatılmışlardır: ırk, sınıf ve cinsiyet ayrımı. Çalışmanın odak noktası, Toni Morrison'ın siyah kadın karakterlerinin bütün zorluklara karşı ayakta kalabilmiş olmalarıdır; onlar Amerikan kast sisteminde kendilerini en alt seviyeye indirgeyen düşüncelere karşı ayağa kalkıp harekete geçebilmişlerdir.

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze Toni Morrison's three novels: *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, in which the black female characters are portrayed as strong individuals, as the emblems of fortitude. Although she negates the appellation of 'black feminist writer', this study maintains that in her novels where the strong women characters stand out as the chief protagonists, Morrison's outlook and stance bear close affinity to the black feminist strategies. Thus, the experiences of the female protagonists are examined from the black feminist vantage point. Sethe, Baby Suggs, Denver, and Ella in *Beloved*, Sula, Nel, Eva in *Sula*, Pilate and her daughter-in-law Hagar in *Song of Solomon* are all the representatives of different generations of black women in the United States. They are beleaguered by a three dimensional oppression: race, class, and gender. The focal point of the argument is that Toni Morrison's black women characters are able to survive against all odds; they are able to rise and act defying the assumptions that relegate them to the lowest rank in the American caste system.

PREFACE

Having been acquainted with Toni Morrison's fiction that celebrates the black women's strength, I have decided to do a research upon the anonymous voices of black women in the United States, who have tried to utter "the unspeakable things unspoken." I have discovered that throughout centuries, black women have struggled to give voice to their grievances; many of these black women are not intellectuals but ordinary women who have been trying to grapple with the effects of slavery. It turned out that the era of slavery planted the seeds of oppression that the black women in the United States have striven to overcome. In my thesis, I bring Toni Morrison's three novels, *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* to the foreground. They are significant in my view because in each of the three novels Toni Morrison emphasizes the black women's strength and perseverance along with their dedication to the African heritage, which enlivens their souls. In each of the novels, Toni Morrison depicts the relationships between the black heroines and the community and exposes the fact that in order for the black community to survive, the black women should be independent and assertive individuals.

In the first part, I have examined the origins of the black feminist standpoint and how it proliferated and why I have come to regard Morrison as a black feminist writer. In the second part, I have analyzed *Beloved*, which is deemed as Morrison's tour de force considering its portrayal of the survivor black females. In the third part, I have reflected the feminine voice in *Sula*, at whose center lies female camaraderie. In the fourth part, I have dealt with *Song of Solomon*, in which Morrison delineates the power of the black heroine and her dedication to the African customs and heritage.

This study has been very crucial to me because with the help of this study I have endeavored to satisfy my hunger for literature. I would like to thank all my teachers in the American Culture and Literature Department who have prompted my interest in literature and criticism, I owe my special thanks to Associate Professor Türkan Araz, whose teachings and lectures I always love and remember. Likewise, I owe a

debt of gratitude to Prof. Dr. Ayşe Dilek Erboru, Asst. Prof. Özden Sözüal, Lecturers İpek Babacan, Serpil Tunçer, Nezir Yunusoğlu and the late Baydar Soytekin, under whose guidance I have learnt to appreciate and love literature as art and theory.

I also want to thank my family, whose encouragement and love I have always felt by my side... Had it not been for their trust and affection, I would not have been able to achieve my goals.

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INTRODUCTION

The word “Black” is an oppositional term, which has been employed throughout centuries in order to provide a superior status to the white race. The white race has tried to validate their superiority by several — mostly pseudo-scientific — hypotheses and have regarded the blacks as the Other, the alien. In other words, we can assume that had it not been for the black race, the white race would not be able to relish that higher status. Ironically though, the whites have perpetuated an endeavor to eradicate the black identity, which has rendered them that privilege.

The effort to exterminate the black identity dates back to the era of slavery. Amidst the social upheaval and the violent conflicts, the black women in the United States have been those most subjected to traumatic experiences and cruel treatments. These women have been the victims of a systematic oppression at the hands of the white patriarchal order. In fact they are the outcasts who bear the brunt of the world as the members of the lowest class in the American caste system. Confronted with class, race, and gender oppression, the black women are obliged to fight in several fronts. They have served in the construction of multifarious binary oppositions: Compared to black men, black women are the inferiors in accordance with the centuries-old convention that relegates woman to a lower status. Furthermore, beside the women of the white race, who hold a status inferior to white men, black women are no more than chattels subservient to the white mistress. In her article entitled “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference” Audre Lorde defines the oppressive binary oppositions as follows:

Much of Western European history conditions us to see human differences in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior. In a society where the good is defined in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need, there must always be some group of people who, through systematized oppression, can be made to feel surplus, to occupy the place of the dehumanized inferior. Within this society, that group is made up of Black and Third World people, working-class people, older people, and women. (Davies, 1994:42)

Black women, for being both female and black, have been subjected to dehumanization to such an extent that the word "humanity" has become devoid of meaning to them. Toni Morrison as a black woman denounces the oppression that impinges upon the black women's lives. She is a brave novelist who has given voice to African-American women, celebrating their strength and vitality. She reveals the black women's struggles in her novels focusing on the powerful cultural heritage of African-Americans.

Already, there is a huge group of black women speaking up for the cause championed by Toni Morrison. These women are staunch activists; they are the black feminists who are dedicated to the survival of black women and the black race. It can be said that from the aspect of theory, the main principles of the black feminist agenda underpin the vantage point of Toni Morrison's vindication for women. Black feminists like bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Carol Boyce Davies, Barbara Smith, Barbara Johnson and many others observe the fact that black women in the United States are at the bottom of the caste system, and they revolt against it. These black feminists are convinced that black women do not deserve the relegation and the consequent treatment. Contemptuous of the way the mainstream white feminism takes up black women's issues, they proclaim and defend the cause of black women. They struggle against the multiple oppression and chauvinism of Anglo-centered maleness and whiteness in the country.

In the literary arena, Toni Morrison is the spokesperson of the black women. In her novels that are scrutinized in this thesis, *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, she exposes the American system that has worked to the detriment of the black women. As for the portrayal of the black women's ordeal during and after slavery, Morrison's tour de force *Beloved* is chosen, which depicts the life and experiences of a former slave, Sethe. This woman is an emblem of fortitude, who is able to survive in the aftermath of slavery. Her struggle is a model for the future generations of the black race. Baby Suggs, Ella, and Denver are the other crucial black women characters in the novel, who stand out as figures of resistance among the victims of slavery — "the sixty million and more" — to whom Morrison dedicated her novel. This is not to say

that Morrison is insensible to the case of men in slavery. Indeed, as critic Thomas R. Edwards explains, she understands

...how dreadfully it wounds what for better or worse defines the manhood that most men cherish – physical capacity, pride of dominance, freedom of will and action. *But she knows that it can do something subtler and perhaps worse to women.* (Italics added, quoted in Plasa, 2000: 23)

Morrison's black women characters mostly live in households, which are deprived of a black male figure. Thus, the black female characters generally lack the support of a male counterpart. In *Sula*, Morrison once more lays bare this fact, portraying the situation of black women in the aftermath of World War I towards 1965. Delineating the experience of black women she shows that things have not changed much for them in modern times. As the black women struggle to survive in the antagonistic world of American society, they are left without the help of their men. Eva is Sethe's counterpart in *Sula*, she has to fight for her children and overcome the oppressive forces that hamper her survival and progress. Sula is the only one who chooses to be strong, to lead an independent life as a pariah. Sula and Nel are Morrison's black women characters who are aware of the sheer fact that they are neither white nor male. Morrison's *Sula* is significant on the grounds that it shows two distinct generations of black women, Eva and Sula, one should be strong in order to survive, the other prefers to be strong and independent rebelling against the taken for granted beliefs of the patriarchal world.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison again portrays a survivor figure, a black woman called Pilate, who guides her nephew on the road that leads to the adoption of the African values. Pilate is a nurturer, a redeemer in the novel, who transmits the necessary knowledge to the future generation. The importance of the African values is stressed by Morrison throughout the novel, and the spokesperson that advocates the significance of African culture is a black woman. That is a deliberate choice made by Morrison, which demonstrates to what extent Morrison trusts in the capacities of the black women.

Toni Morrison is regarded as a black feminist writer in this thesis, and in her most significant works — *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* — it is evident that she attaches great importance to the black women characters who are strong, assertive, and able to survive under adverse conditions and circumstances. Her works oppose the sexist, racist, classist oppression prevalent in the United States. Like her black women characters, Toni Morrison stands out as a strong and daring woman who has been able to assert herself staunchly in “a wholly racialized, genderized world.”



1. THE BLACK FEMINIST STANDPOINT

The social history of black women stretches back to the seventeenth century, the turning point in the history of black people. The Africans were forced to leave their motherland behind and were carried away from their lands as slaves. They were therefore set to work in the southern parts of the United States as the property of the domineering white plantation owners. The American slavery was a labor system, which was designed to obtain the maximum amount of profit from reluctant and dependent subjects. The slave system in the American plantation formed a distinct and separate culture, which tied the master and slave in a complicated and interdependent relationship. According to the dictates of this relationship blacks were regarded not only as enslaved people but also as inherently the lowest, the inferior because of their race. The deeply ingrained racism of American culture and American slavery that lasted for centuries worsening the conditions of slaves as the system advanced in time systematically stripped away the racial pride and the personal autonomy among blacks. According to written or unwritten doctrines of slavery, the slave was a chattel, an ordinary piece of property in the hands of the owners; it would be bought, sold at will and would be dismissed whenever the white master ordered. The black slave had no legal rights, under no circumstances could he testify under oath, he could not bear witness against a white person. Slaves had no control over their bodies, which is the primary and crucial sign of self, men and women worked for their masters as a mechanized work force. Since women were more vulnerable than men, they were raped, robbed of their children, were subjected to the most cruel deeds. Only when slavery was abolished, in 1865, did black Americans attempt to attain self-determination over their experiences and lives. Nevertheless, 1865 was not the date that declared the independence of black slaves in every sense. It may be stated that racist language, racist approaches and expressions permeate the air of history.

By the early eighteenth century, slavery had become the dominant vehicle through which social, legal, and racial structures were established. Within this structural

framework encouraged by capitalism, the black female slave's status was precarious; as an African black woman, she was regarded intellectually and morally inferior; as a woman, she was a commodity manipulated to increase the number of the slaves. Not only was she obliged to work in plantation fields alongside black men and on her own in the masters' houses but also she was forced to breed children under the constant threat of slave holders.

Thus, from the beginning of the slavery era up to the recent years, black women in the United States are the lower class. As women are the second-class citizens, black women are chattels. Black women are oppressed in multiple ways by the dominant class. The dominant class comprises the "whites" and the authoritarian characters are primarily white men. Nonetheless, the sole determiners of black women's destiny are not white men; there are other significant characters that should be taken into consideration when one endeavors to ponder upon the oppression of black women. The white women may be considered as the victimizers as well as the white men, they are the upper class and they are the counterparts of white men, they have got the power that emanates from their color, their racial identity. On the other hand, whatever oppression they come face to face with, the black men may be brought to the foreground as the characters that play their role in the victimization of black women. They are powerful due to their gender, they are "men", and therefore have got a superior status to women. As a result, black women are the lowest rank. The African American female writer Zora Neale Hurston's words eloquently delineate the victimization of black women:

Honey, de white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in the ocean where the black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but we see. So de white man trow down the load and tell the nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is the mule uh de world so far as Ah can see. (Hurston, 1991: 19-20)

The black women, as can be deduced from the statements of Hurston, carry the load of the world. There are strict rules regulating their activities. They are mules as suggested by Hurston and like mules they obey the instructions imposed by their

owners. The owners brutally try to absorb their power and in return black women endeavor to do their best, they perform a struggle to do their best. Black men, on the other hand, transmit the load from their shoulders in a sense because they are constantly brainwashed against the black women, the purpose of which will be identified clearly later in this work. According to an old saying uttered by the black grandmothers warning the black females, the black men may be dangerous owing to the constant degradation that they experience, they internalize hatred and this hatred is directed to black women, as the elders indicate, "the black man has learned to hate himself and to hate you even more. Be careful. He will hurt you." (Wallace, 1982: 9)

In response to the cruel treatments, black women struggled to overcome the restrictions placed upon them during and after slavery. The aforementioned oppression is examined by countless researchers, especially black women researchers who are much more aware of the grievances of their sisters. Under the strength of Black feminist movement, black feminism or Afro-American feminism is advanced by key theorists like Barbara Christian, Hazel Carby, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Carole Boyce Davies and many others. The black female theorists have always drawn the attention to interlocking systems of race, gender and class oppression as forming up a triadic relationship of suppression. Their goal is to reveal the facts about the black women's experiences, their grievances, the outcome of the torture that they are subjected to. The black feminists indicate that not only does gender play an important role in the suppression of black women but also race and class are the crucial elements of suppression whose negative force upon black women are undeniable.

It is evident that Afro-American feminism stems from the larger and more complex historical matrix of black and white race relations in North America brought into existence by the institution of slavery. As regards Carol Wayne White's views, "these historical accounts provide insight into an inherent feminist consciousness among black women who had to survive harrowing conditions." (White, 1995: 530) Inherent in the African American, black feminist critique is the white women's liberation and the Black Liberation movements. In the racial struggle towards

freedom, black women fought against the dominant figures alongside black men. As White suggests black women echoed some of the demands of white feminists to redefine the role of women within the family and in the public sphere. Nevertheless, it is an undeniable fact that the movements for blacks and for women partly or never espoused black women's needs. The nineteenth century social reform movements emphasize the first significant opportunities for blacks and women to work toward emancipation. Within these social reform movements, black women encountered conflicting attitudes and these particular conflicts shed light on the plight of black women. The movements for the abolition of slavery and for the rights of women had been closely linked. The abolitionists and feminists were gathered to advocate black and woman suffrage under the umbrella of an organization called "The American Equal Rights Association" (AERA), founded by Elizabeth Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, and Frederick Douglass in 1866. Black women activists here had to make a decision as to whether to support the Fifteenth Amendment, which allowed the vote to black men but not to black women. The indecisiveness of black women arises from the fact that if they supported the amendment in question, they would accept their inferior status once more. They would allow their partners to gain rights leaving themselves helpless, submissive counterparts. Even Frederick Douglass who was known to be a steadfast defender of women's rights declared that it was the "Negro's Hour" and that the despondent situation of the freedmen and the appalling prejudice posed against them made their cause more urgent than women. At this point, the seeds of African American feminism are planted defending the rights of black women by a famous black feminist activist Sojourner Truth. She was the only person and a woman who stood up for those doubly oppressed by race and sex. In a 1867 speech at a AERA convention Truth spoke out on the issue of suffrage:

I feel that if I had to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about the colored women; and if colored men get their rights and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring: because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. (Grant, 1982: 149)

The separatist politics of the social reform movements of the nineteenth century was an awakening for black women who were hitherto challenged to speak for themselves. As a result, staunch activists endeavored to give voice to black women, to whom access was denied, to the leadership in Black Nationalist and Liberation movements, to the mainstream white bourgeois feminism. The activists, therefore, by approaching the issue from different perspectives, advocated the rights of black women and laid emphasis on their oppression. The devoted activist Mary Church Terrell underlined the fact that black women were victimized in the society. Terrell, president of the National Association of Colored Women, contended in 1904:

Not only are colored women...handicapped on account of their sex, but they are almost everywhere baffled and mocked because of their race. Not only because they are women, but because they are colored women. (White, 1995: 531)

Maria Stewart is another activist, an abolitionist believed that black women were the fundamental agency by which racial progress was secured. Maria Stewart is identified as the first American black woman to lecture in public on political issues and she is an example figure for her feminist successors. In 1831 Stewart asks: "How long shall the fair daughters of Africa be compelled to bury their minds and talents beneath a load of iron pots and kettles?" and by focusing on the interconnections of oppressive forces of race, class and gender she pulls her argument further:

Like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans gained themselves a name...while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support...we have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them. (Collins, 2000: 1)

According to Maria Stewart, a genuine black feminist, a great amount of responsibility rests on the black mothers, and they must create in the minds of young girls and boys the thirst for knowledge, the love of virtue, and the cultivation of a pure heart...(Collins, 2000: 2) Stewart curses the institution of slavery and urges black women to "awake, arise: no longer sleep nor slumber, but distinguish

themselves.” (Hine, 1994: 9) She encouraged black women to fight for their own emancipation because in her opinion, it is of no use to await a generation of well-educated men to rise and defend their rights. All the black women have to do, she maintains, by a spirit of virtuous ambition to struggle to raise themselves.

In the nineteenth century the majority of women followed this view. In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper composed a classic text of black feminist ideology, *A Voice from the South*. White notes that defying the assumption that the black problem was represented in the experience of black men, Cooper indicates,

The ‘other side’ has not been represented by one who ‘lives there’. And many can more sensibly recognize and more accurately tell the weight and the fret of the long ‘dull pain’ than the open eyed but hitherto voiceless Black Woman of America. (White, 1995: 532)

Cooper’s societal framework was based upon equality, coexistence, and respect between the races and the sexes. Nonetheless, she considered that this conjecture would not manifest itself until the subordination of women was eliminated in all its forms.

In response to the ideas foregrounded by the aforementioned activists, black women sought ways of freedom. Some of them participated in the woman suffrage movement in order to eradicate the black woman’s peripheral and exploited status. Other women took part in small charitable organizations like The Independent Order of Saint Luke, one of the thousands of mutual benefit societies serving the black communities since the eighteenth century. A great number of black women organized social clubs in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These black clubs incorporated well-educated middle-class females. However, the clubs were not the mere imitations of their white counterparts. One of the members of the club movement Fannie Barrier Williams delineated the fact that they recognized their own low social condition and were strong enough to initiate the forces of reform. The clubs proliferated throughout the Northeast and parts of the South and Midwest.

They joined together in 1896, in the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) to:

(1) Address the social problems of poverty, joblessness, and increasing racial hostility; (2) establish a black female reform network, necessitated by the rejection of black women as equal participants in the reform movement led by white women; and (3) counter attacks on black women promulgated in the popular literature and scientific writings. (White, 1995: 536)

The mission of NAWC was “to furnish evidence of the moral, mental, and material progress made by people of color through the efforts of black women.” The black women’s club movement endeavored to emphasize upon the fact that black women are valuable elements of the black society and that in order for the black race to be powerful, black women should as well be powerful. Therefore, they tried to improve black women’s condition and coaxed them to exert their power. In 1933, Mary McCloud Bethune, a civil rights leader in the cause for black women’s education expressed her observation on the leadership role of black women:

By the very force of circumstance, the part she played in the progress of the race has been of necessity, to a certain extent, subtle and indirect. She has not always been permitted a place in the front ranks where she could show her face and make her voice heard with effect...But she has been quick to seize every opportunity which presented itself to come more and more into the open and strive directly for the uplift of the race and nation. (White, 1995: 536)

It is significant to point out that just as the nineteenth century struggle for equal rights for women was triggered by the struggle to free the slaves, the women’s rights movements of the 1960s were fired by the civil rights and black power movements. In the 1950s and 1960s black women are the pioneering supporters of the civil rights movement, they became leaders, organizers and strategists who worked in the shaping of movement’s direction. In the 1970s the vast majority of black women participated in the movements for Black Liberation, such as the Black Panthers and the Black Muslims. However, they faced disillusionment during those times owing to the black male leaders’ disapproval of their struggles. The black male leaders did not appreciate the power of black women and the antagonistic attitude towards the black

woman created a dilemma and a distressing situation in black male-female relationships. Although the black female and male acted in those struggles side by side, the roles that they should adopt were defined by the black community. In an analysis of black feminism edited by Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *The Black Feminist Reader*, there is an extract taken from a Black Nationalist pamphlet written in the 1970s:

We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness greater,... Women cannot do the same things as men-they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. The value of women and men can be seen as in the value of gold and silver, they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life. (James and Sharpley, 2000: 267)

The Black Nationalist perspective is obviously male-centered and that is why it has always been difficult for the black women to decide their standing in it. The Black Liberation movements do not urge black women to defend their rights; rather the leaders of the movements want the black woman to disregard her gender, not to be a traitor to her race and just fight for the causes of her race. In the aftermath of the civil rights movement, in the 1970s, a remarkable alteration occurred among black women. As Carol Wayne White observes with regard to an analysis made by a black anthropologist Diane Lewis (1977):

...as the bulk of the higher-status, authoritative positions meted to blacks went to black men, a number of black women, particularly in the middle class, became more sensitive to the obstacle of sexism and to the relevance of the women's movement. (White, 1995: 538)

There were several groups gathering around the mission to deal with black women's concerns and problematic, the names of which were, Black Women Organized for Action (BWOA), The League of Black Women (in Chicago), Black Women Concerned (in Baltimore), National Black Women's Political Leadership Caucus (in Detroit) and Sisters Getting Ourselves Together (in Davis, California). It is suggested

by White that when the first conference of the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) convened in New York in 1973, it was the first black women's organization that used the term *feminist*. A member of the organization stated the crucial awareness of the agenda claiming that while the black women share with their men a history of toil and dignity, it is categorically different to be black and a woman in the United States than it has been to be black and male.

The underlying principles of the Black Nationalism mentioned above and the attitude of the black males appear to hamper the development of a black feminist consciousness and power. It may be pointed out that the narrow-minded views of the black males stem from the theological doctrines that validate the servitude of black women. According to the black feminist critics like Jacquelyn Grant, one of the problems that has restricted black women is the problem with Black Theology. It is evident for Grant that the status of black women in the community parallels that of black women in the church, and she explains her opinions in her essay titled "Black Women and the Church." The Black Theology, while being one of the most significant sources of power that encourage black people to struggle against antagonistic forces, neglects the plight of black women. Black women are regarded as the "backbone" of the church and with respect to Grant's analysis the backbone image, in disguise of a compliment, represents the secondary status of black women. In other words, black women are relegated to the background. They are kept in the back rows and they are labeled as mere support workers. There is an inherent sexism in the Black Theology and it is not disclosed by the members of the church except for a small number of theologians like James Cone. Grant indicates that Cone's speech has broken the silence:

The Black Church, like all other churches, is a male-dominated church. The difficulty that the black male ministers have in supporting the equality of women in the church and society stems partly from the lack of a clear liberation-criterion rooted in the gospel and in the present struggles of oppressed peoples... It is truly amazing that many black male ministers young and old can hear the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism but remain deaf to a similar message in the context of sexism. (Grant, 1982: 145)

Jacquelyn Grant advocates the idea that there is not a clear demarcation between the black theology and the white theology as it should be. By neglecting the special problems of black women and acting as if they do not exist, the black theology appears to have the same qualities as the white theology, which claims "to reject precisely because of its inability to take account of the existence of black people." (*Ibid*, 146) Grant associates the attitude of the black theologian with that of the black male activist and draws the critical gazer's attention to the affinity between the standpoints of these two groups of people. She seems to imply that there is a notable affirmative action taken by these two black male groups. The black women, while playing an important role in the Black Power movement, are acknowledged as mere assistance and they are not allowed to make a suggestion or act as the leaders of the movement. Grant focuses upon the irrefutable fact that notwithstanding all the arguments, which identify the central problem of black women as related to their race not to their sex, all evidence supports the contrary dimension. She contends that "it is only when black women and men share jointly the leadership in theology and in the church and community that the Black Nation will become strong and liberated." (*Ibid*, 149) It may be maintained then, sexism impinges upon the survival strategies of black women in the community.

It is comprehensible that, as it is mentioned before, black women's cries and struggles are not reinforced by other black liberationist movements, which uphold their arguments and principles concurrently. The 1960s and 1970s inaugurate a period of high expectations. Those years are important in the sense that people of every color, race, class and gender embark upon a major program of human rights, women's rights, etc. It is apparent that black women give out their high-pitched voice as well as the other groups of people who are in an urge to take their share from the turbulent atmosphere of movements following each other. Amidst the confusion as it is perceivable, black women are the lonely figures. As already explained, black women's rights are not advocated and their principles are espoused by neither black men nor by white women. The major source of difficulty in black women's political work is that they are not trying to fight oppression on one front or two. They do not have racial, sexual, or class privilege to rely upon. There is a very low value placed

upon black women's psychology in the society. They are psychologically traumatized as well as materially dispossessed; yet they are aware of the obligation to struggle in order to change the condition of all black women. In "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood", Michele Wallace puts forward a realistic assessment:

We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle-because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world. (Wallace, 1982: 12)

Michele Wallace alludes to the classic isolation of black women in every arena. In the feminist arena, as well, black women are left without succor. Having to fight the world, black women know the actual meaning of oppression, oppression in the hands of an angry owner, oppression in their own community by their men, oppression residing in the hypnotized psyches of their sisters who have accepted the notions of the dominant culture. The black feminist critics like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins indicate that because of the reasons mentioned their point of view as feminists are very different from the whites and that their theory covers a very different area from the white feminist theory. As Donovan observes (1997: 295), most of the black feminists like Maria Stewart, and Frances Beale – author of "Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female" (1969) – agree that black women are beleaguered by a double jeopardy; on the one hand they are under pressure due to their gender like all women, on the other hand they are suppressed due to their racial identity like other black males and minority groups. They demonstrate on the basis of significant factual data that the middle-class white women who patronize the feminist movement fail to take notice of the ordeals of black women. Their cultural and material backgrounds constitute a tremendous discrepancy. Hence black women and other women of color deal with this deliberate ignorance or dissipation of divergent backgrounds in the feminist arena. It is because of this reality that many black women who support the ideas of the feminist movement do not want to be labeled as feminists like Toni Morrison and like Alice Walker, who prefers to call herself womanist instead of feminist.

The pioneering figures of second wave feminism, the important white literary critics and their much-quoted texts are the objects of the black feminist critics. The appreciated white feminist Betty Friedan particularizes the diversity of oppression by identifying the gist for many white women. She is thought to have paved the way for contemporary feminist movement with her famous phrase "the problem that had no name" in her well-known work *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). This phrase describes the condition of women in the American society referring to the amorphous sense of many 1950s suburban housewives that there was something unfulfilling and unsatisfying about their lives, despite the "experts" and the media, advising women that the way leading to female fulfillment was through being a successful wife and mother. The plight of these women is their boredom; they suffer from intense boredom owing to the leisure time they have got. They are bored with shopping and having to be occupied with everyday activities. Like Catherine Beecher Stowe before her, who questioned 200 friends in 1846 about the origin of their psychosomatic illness, Friedan interviewed 200 Smith College graduates about their dissatisfaction with urban life. Friedan gives voice to the middle and upper class women: "We can no longer ignore the voice within women that says: 'I want more than my husband and my children and my house.'" They want more than they possess. The book appealed to the majority of American women, and is regarded by many as primary impetus for the second wave of the women's movement. Nevertheless, the lack of attention to the lives and experiences of other women is reflected in her statement that the problems American women were facing "cannot be understood in terms of the age-old material problems of man: poverty, sickness, hunger, cold. The women who suffer this problem have a hunger that food cannot fill." (Friedan, 1983: 26) As bell hooks points out she ignores the existence of all non-white women and poor women. It is obvious for the critics like bell hooks that white women such as Friedan who dominate the feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experiences of women as a collective group. Friedan's assertions that all women detest being stuck in the unfulfilling role of the housewife, fails to address black women. The major concern of a vast majority of white women is to pursue their careers or to attain equal rights with white men or like Virginia Woolf to have the rooms of their own to be able to

write in peace. Nancy Chodorow's and Carol Gilligan's studies are also the sources that are targeted by the black feminists. These two classic products of white feminism, Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) and Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) involve the notion of a generic woman who is white and middle class. The "cultural feminist" approach adopted by these two representatives of white feminism has been the target of attack. They have been criticized because of their unsubstantiated generalizations about the social construction of gender, put forward without regard to cultural, racial, class, and other particular differences. Their much criticized works, Chodorow's for instance, ground her claims on the idea that women's mothering or primary child-rearing is accountable for the particular construction of gendered identities in the society, Gilligan's study on the other hand emphasizes a proposal reflecting that men and women have divergent attitudes to morality. Gilligan's analysis asserts that whereas men are interested in individual rights, justice, independence and autonomy, women are concerned about relationships, and connection with others, etc.

Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* is another product of white feminist movement. Her theory of patriarchy is focused upon in her work which is again regarded as an influential text of second-wave feminism. According to Millett, "patriarchal power is ubiquitous." (Humm, 1994: 44) There is a deeply entrenched politics of sexuality, beginning with the reproduction of patriarchy through psycho-social conditioning in the family, which operates in all cultural structures. Millett in her work *Sexual Politics* uses critical techniques to analyze gender differences in historical and contemporary discourses, but eludes the racial issue. So have done the significant feminist theorists before Millett like Friedan and Simone de Beauvoir who was severely criticized by the black feminist critics and some of the white critics due to her "universalizing" the idea of oppression reflected upon women. De Beauvoir published her much-acclaimed text *The Second Sex* in 1953 (originally published in French in 1949) de Beauvoir's work is best known for her two arguments. The first one is that de Beauvoir reflects women's subservient position in terms of how they are seen as "the Other", that is the opposite of men. She assumes that culture and nature universally constitute a dichotomy and that culture is identified with males

whereas nature with females. Thus the former is regarded as superior to the latter. The second conviction of de Beauvoir is her frequently quoted statement: "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." She means that "woman" is a cultural construction not a mere product of biology. Her views and other white feminist theorists' opinions upon motherhood are other objects of black feminist critical attention since they consider maternity and economic independence as incompatible. According to de Beauvoir's argument on motherhood, conception is usually the result of failed contraception, pregnancy is an unpleasant period, birth is traumatic, as a result the child is left in the hands of a neurotic woman. The black feminist critics emphasize on the situation of the black woman who has to work and rear her child because of the economic necessities, there is mostly no choice between work and childrearing. Only the privileged, particularly white woman can separate childbirth and work. De Beauvoir's theories have been criticized by black feminists on the premises that the theories are essentialist in assuming that all women around the world share a commonality with regard to their gender that transcends other important differences among them, particularly the ones based on race and class. Supporting this view, Lucinda Joy Peach indicates that early feminist analyses of oppression tended to assume that all women were similar and by taking her cue from Elizabeth Spelman's essay (1991) on Simone de Beauvoir titled "Simone de Beauvoir and women: just who does she think 'we' is?", she tries to examine these assumptions. As Peach analyzes, Spelman describes that de Beauvoir's account of women's oppression is accurate only with respect to a small group of women: white, middle class, heterosexual, Western women.

In *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (1988), the white feminist critic Elizabeth Spelman maintains that additive criticism, for which she coins the term "ampersand problem" in the feminist thought, briefly and easily adds race to gender and disregards the interrelations of oppression. (Spelman, 1988: 14) According to Spelman, ampersand thinking ignores how black experience and culture, rural or urban, basically transform the experience of living a gender. It may be deduced that the failure of Simone de Beauvoir, which is recognized by Spelman and Peach is that Beauvoir tends to perceive women having the same experiences

associated with oppression. However, as Karen Dugger suggests, false universalization (regarding women's similarities) also sets up white women as the norm against which women of color appear to be deviant. (Dugger, 1991: 38)

The negligence of the white activists, like the black male activists, dates back to the earlier phases of the movement. Many theorists highlight the fact that the needs of the working-class and black women were ignored since the emergence of the women's movement. The Seneca Falls Convention, which was organized by prominent feminists Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony in 1848, may be cited as an example. No black women were present at the convention and Stanton is known to have uttered a number of racist statements. The feminist socialist scholar Angela Davis (1981) and Joan Hoff-Wilson (1991) reinforce in their work the argument that "The National American Woman's Suffrage Association", a woman's group which was organized to fight for women's rights in the early phases of twentieth century, did not take into consideration the appeals of black women for a resolution to overturn the Jim Crow laws which substituted slavery in the South with segregation. "The similarities outweigh the differences" motto is followed by all the white feminists working in the socialist, political or in the literary arena. (Peach, 1998: 56-57)

The situation began to fall apart in the 1980s when black women such as Toni Cade (editor of the pioneering anthology *The Black Woman*), Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, June Jordan came to assert that women of color faced radically different experiences from those of white women. Audre Lorde describes the difference between white and black women and the huge gap between their lives in her essay called "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference", she contends in her work:

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each one of us within our hearts know 'that is not me.' In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within society. Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different,

and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing. By and large, within the women's movement today, white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore the differences as race, sexual preference, class and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not, in fact exist. (Lorde, 1998: 71)

Within the analysis of the inequalities between the sexes, white feminists do not hesitate to compare women with blacks, as both being the oppressed groups. This analogy lays bare the implicit whiteness of the academic feminism. As Rosemarie Buikema declares, "if women are the niggers of the world as John Lennon expressed it, then what is the position of black women?" (Buikema, 1995: 4-5) The affinity between the women and the blacks obstructs the variant kinds of oppression and it also relegates black women to invisibility. Black women as it appears true throughout history have been relegated to invisibility or the simple solution of ostracism. With regard to the views of Alice Walker, white women do not want to see black women as "women" and therefore they do not attach importance to them. She highlights the fact strikingly:

It is, apparently, inconvenient, if not downright mind straining, for white women scholars to think of black women as women, perhaps because 'woman' (like man among white males) is a name they are claiming for themselves, and themselves alone. Racism decrees that if they are now women (years ago they were ladies, but fashions change) then Black women must, perforce, be something else. (While they were ladies, Black women could be 'women' and so on.) (Walker, 1982: 44)

The cult of true womanhood accompanying the traditional family ideal suggested that white middle-class women should aspire to those taken for granted virtues. Those qualities that were suitable for "true women" were not applicable to black women. True women possessed four cardinal virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. They are associated with "the Madonna", the idealized, prominent examples of women. The women identified with the Madonna image are sentimentalized as pure, good, modest, virginal and maternal. It may be contended that these were controlling images, which dictated the lives of white women, and white women absorbed them, internalized the images and struggled to fulfill the ideal

that was conjectured by white men and the dominant ideology. The controlling images were different for black women. They were the instruments of another branch of oppression that was designated to the detriment of black women.

The stereotypical images attached to black women have caused the relegation of black women to a subordinate place. Specific and various controlling images are applied to black women, which originated during the slavery era; they have been the apparatuses for settling ideological proceedings. As regards to the view of Patricia Hill Collins,

Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interests of a group of people and within U.S. culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic, namely as natural, normal, and inevitable. (Collins, 2000: 5)

Hence, Collins suggests many examples of the controlling images, which have been working to cause deleterious effects on black women. Mammies, jezebels, breeder women of slavery, the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous black prostitutes. In stark contrast to the image of the Madonna, the black women are regarded as “whores”, regardless of whether they are mothers, or not. These negative stereotypes projected onto black women have been inimical to the development of them, constructed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and different sorts of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of daily life. Moreover, as is stated by Hazel Carby, “the objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations.” (Carby, 1987: 22)

The first of these images may be defined as “mammy image”, which is an image of black woman who is an obedient faithful domestic servant. The mammy, by looking after the white children, having been occupied with nursing, even loving them seems to have accepted subordination. She appears to be an ideal black servant, resembling a slave living at the time of slavery. The mammy, as Collins underlines, symbolizes the dominant group’s perceptions of the ideal black female relationship to elite white

male power. It is designed to convey the impression that all was well in the plantation South. The purpose of the mammy image is to influence the black maternal behavior. It is a fact that as a result of the manipulative actions of the authoritarian figures, the idea of subordination internalized by black mothers will be transmitted to the black children. This evidence, the attitude of the domineering characters in the society exposes to what extent the system calculates the consequences of the controlling images.

The second image used against black women in order to maintain control over them is "the image of black matriarch". Prior to the 1960s, black communities contained higher percentages of families maintained by single mothers than the white ones. The female-headedness is expressed as a negative situation by the white people who have noticed that the strength of black women would turn out to be threat to them. The black family is painted as deviant, pathological, in being overly matriarchal and these tendencies were bolstered by the publication of the famous Moynihan report in 1967 as a result of which many black liberationists advocated that the black family remake itself along patriarchal, middle-class lines; they urged black women to take a step back from public activism into merely supportive roles. Collins reflects that even black scholars like William DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier proclaimed a connection between the black poverty and the female-headedness. These scholars are criticized by her. She says:

Ironically, black scholars such as William DuBois (1969) and E. Franklin Frazier (1948) described the connections among higher rates of female headed households in African American communities, the importance that women assume in black family Networks, and the persistence of black poverty. (Collins, 2000: 75)

The mammy figure, thus, is a good mother because it portrays a submissive and frail black woman, an asexual nurturer whereas the matriarch represents the bad black mother because she is strong, independent and a danger in a sense for the society. It is strongly defended by many black feminist intellectuals that the controlling image, black matriarch, is employed by white feminists as weapons, as instruments to destroy the intellectual energies of black feminists. The image of "super strong black

mother or black woman” is used to justify the pseudo fact that black women do not need an agenda like feminism because they are already strong and powerful. Undoubtedly, for a reasonable thinker it is clear that this power arises from the tribulations of black women. In other words, black women strive to be powerful in order to survive in a rather antagonistic society.

bell hooks mentions this issue in her work *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. She criticizes the fictitious image by maintaining her argument that white women perpetuate their hegemony in this way. The mythical power that is projected onto black women causes white women to develop a false image of themselves as powerless, passive victims, and hooks blames white feminists as follows:

Racist stereotypes of the strong, superhuman black women are operative myths in the minds of many white women, allowing them to ignore the extent to which black women are likely to be victimized in this society, and the role white women may play in the maintenance and perpetuation of that victimization. (hooks, 2000: 15)

Thus, amidst the considerations of African American feminism is to debunk the negative images that victimize black women. Black feminism challenges and tries to overthrow the myth of this emasculating matriarch inherently suggesting that the social problems residing in black communities are endangered by black woman’s dominance over black men. It was mentioned in the first pages of this thesis that black men are brainwashed and transmit their hatred towards black women. The system designates the brainwashing of black men showing evidences that black women should be held responsible for the problem of unemployment that tortures the psyches of black men. However, even though black women appear to be powerful, they do not want to repress their men, they perform the necessary duties for the good of the black community. Political analyst and black feminist Toni Cade Bambara also reprehends Western/European egalitarian system. In her opinion, it is the conduct of the European system and by the way American system, which should be regarded as blameworthy. The system does not want the minorities, the black race to be invincible. Hence, the intriguing forces are imposed upon black people. Bambara astutely contends:

There is nothing to indicate that the African woman, who ran the market place, who built dams, who engaged in international commerce and diplomacy, who sat on thrones, who donned armour to wage battle against the European invaders and the corrupt chieftains who engaged in the slave trade, who were consulted as equals in the affairs of the state – nothing to indicate that they were turning their men into faggots, were victims of penis envy...there is nothing to indicate that the Sioux, Seminole, Iroquois or other 'Indian' nations felt oppressed or threatened by their women, who had mobility, privileges, a voice in governing of the commune. There is evidence, however, that the European white was confused and alarmed by the egalitarian system of these societies and did much to wreck it, creating wedges between the men and women. (Quoted in Bell, 1989: 240)

The image of matriarch is designed to hamper the power of black women and to restrict their capabilities. It is obvious in the American society as well as in the novels of Toni Morrison that aggressive and assertive women are penalized. As Patricia Collins has deduced they are abandoned by their men, in addition to being stigmatized on the pretext of being unfeminine. Black men's understandings of black masculinity has also been affected, as a result of which many of them reject black women as marital partners, claiming that black women are less desirable than white women owing to their assertiveness. (Collins, 2000: 77)

There are many other images employed to devalue the black mothers, black women in general, ranging from "welfare mothers" who are exposed as lazy, drug-addicted, with too many children, dedicated to the exploitation of the U.S. government to the jezebels, sexually immoral black women - the hoochies. The welfare mothers rely on the public dole, content to take the money provided by the state making use of the social welfare benefits, to which they are entitled by law. With regard to Collins' analysis welfare mothers are also bad ones. They are not aggressive as matriarchs. They are portrayed as being satisfied to sit and collect welfare, inevitably passing their bad values to their offspring. The jezebels are the sexually aggressive women; they are the emblems of the deviant black female sexuality. As Angela Davis (1981) and Deborah White (1985) reveal, jezebel's function is to justify the widespread sexual assaults of white men that were reported by the black slave women, positing a powerful rationalistic explanation for their deeds. Her coerced breeding, the illegality

of her marriage and as a product of her own immorality the fragile bond between mother and child, her half-naked torture as a result of whipping – all have been justified by the use of this aggressively carnal image.

The repressive images almost everywhere occur and torment the minds and psyches of black women. In the literary arena, undoubtedly, the black woman faces the belittling approaches of the white and black male writers. The white male writers or academics have considered the black woman or the black writer as inferior, as reflecting their lower intellectual capacities. Their remarks typify the extremely negative ways in which African American women have been illustrated in literature, scholarship, and the popular media. The male writers do not attempt to conceal their disdain for black women. An example of this attitude can be found in a literary work that is considered as an American masterpiece. William Faulkner in his novel *Light in August*, uses words that are disdainful of black women in a description of a painted sign:

But now and then a negro nursemaid with her white charges would loiter there and spell them (the letters on the sign) aloud with *that vacuous idiocy of her idle and illiterate kind*. (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982: xviii)

Black women have been defined as inferior in intellect by white-male academics, like Schockley and Jensen, too. Their inquiries stress on the overt remarks that a being who juxtaposes two mentally deficient biological identities (black and woman), cannot do anything with her intellect. Lorraine Bethel concisely underlines this dilemma:

The codification of Blackness and femaleness by whites and males is seen in terms of 'thinking like a woman' and 'acting like a nigger' which are based on the premise that there are typically black and female ways of acting and thinking. Therefore, the most pejorative concept in the white/male worldview would be that of thinking and acting like a 'nigger woman.' (Hull, Scott, Smith, 1982: xxiv)

Barbara Smith in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" exposes the sexist treatments of the black and white male critics and she perceives Ishmael Reed as a

misogynist writer, contemptuous of the black female writers' energies. She states that Reed's remarks are in perfect agreement with the values of a society that invokes the hatred of black people, women and black women. She brings the comment of Reed upon the low sales of his new novel to the fore as follows:

...but the book only sold 8000 copies. I don't mind giving out the figure: 8000. Maybe if I was one of those young *female* Afro-American writers that are so hot now, I'd sell more. You know, fill my books with ghetto women who can *do no wrong*....But come on, I think I could have sold 8000 copies by myself. (Smith, 1982: 162)

Taking into consideration the views of the white feminists, white or black male writers, it may be pointed out that only a black feminist, pro-woman perspective that acknowledges the crude reality of the interlocking oppressions of race, class and gender can fully reflect the situation of black women and work for their betterment. Toni Morrison, as the epitome of a black feminist consciousness, will be scrutinized in this thesis. As for the portrayal of the experience of the black women under the impositions of race, class and gender, this study is going to put forward Morrison's three novels: *Beloved*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*. The black women characters in these novels are living in a society that is totally adversary, that is constantly in an urge to create a black vortex to victimize them. In that kind of world the black women characters of Morrison endeavor to survive, in order to survive they try to stand high. They appear to be the lonely figures mostly without the help of the black men around. They are the outcasts who are forlorn as indicated before. This loneliness and the interconnections of oppressions make them strong. They turn out to be strong women to endure the tormenting incidents. It may be advocated that they reject the values of the society that despise them, they defy the norms of the domineering attitude of the ideas related with race, class and gender. The characters in these novels are therefore epitomes of powerful black female dissenters. They are the lowest rank, however they make an effort to find a way out, out from the restrictions of the world that is characterizing them as animals without any sense.

1.1. Toni Morrison As a Black Feminist Writer

Toni Morrison will be regarded as a black feminist writer in this thesis even though she negates the idea that she is a feminist writer. It may be clearly understood that she supports the black feminist cause by dealing with the lives of black women at the focal point of her works. The female hero is the central character in *Beloved* and *Sula*, in *Song of Solomon* it seems that the male character is the focal point of the novel but underneath the plot of the novel Morrison says a lot about women.

It is obvious though; Toni Morrison is not the only writer who is occupied with the black women's relegation to the lowest rank. There is a huge anonymous background of black voices, black activists, orators, and eager women, devoted to defend their cause, the existence of which is brought forth in the very first chapter of this thesis. The dominant ideologies of the whites have attempted in every way to hide or suppress the tradition of black women.

Morrison as a black female writer reflects that white Americans easily gain themselves a name, and the world turns around them. Portraying tormented female and male characters in her novels, she shows that life is not that easy for blacks. Her female characters strive to protect their children from the assaults of the enemies while desperately trying to protect themselves against the multifold attacks upon their racial and gender identities. The fact reiterated in every part of this thesis – that black women are the most injured group of people vulnerable to everything – is reinforced by Toni Morrison. She is also aware of the huge discrepancy between the experiences of black and white women and she defends the idea in an interview with Claudia Tate, the editor of the work titled *Black Women Writers At Work* that “black women write differently from white women.” (Tate, 1983: 122) For her, there is an enormous difference in the writings of black and white women. As an example, she maintains that aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women.

Black women appear to be able to juxtapose “the nest and the adventure.” They do not think these fields as conflicting as do white women. She says:

White women often find if they leave their husbands and go out into the world, it is an extraordinary event. If they’ve settled for the benefits of housewifery that preclude a career, then it’s marriage *or* a career for them, not both, not *and*. (*Ibid*)

In the political arena, as well, Morrison’s opinions as a black female writer are different than those of the white female or male writers. Toni Morrison like her black feminist colleagues thinks that many black women do not respect bourgeois white women and could not imagine defending a cause that would be for their good. In her article, “What the Black Woman Thinks about Women’s Lib,” (NYT magazine, August 22, 1971) Morrison clarifies the fundamental incompatibility between the life styles of black women and their white counterparts:

Black women have been able to envy white women (their looks, their easy life style, the attention they seem to get from their men); they could fear them (for the economic control they have had over black women’s lives); and even love them (as mummies and domestic workers can); but black women have found it impossible to respect white women...Black women have no abiding admiration of white women as competent, complete people, whether vying them for the few professional slots available to women in general, or moving their dirt from one place to another, they regarded them as willful children, pretty children, mean children, but never as real adults capable of handling the real problems of the world.

White women were ignorant of the facts of life-perhaps by choice, perhaps with the assistance of men, but ignorant anyway. They were totally dependent on marriage or male support (emotionally and economically). They confronted their sexuality with furtiveness, complete abandon, or repression. Those who could afford it gave over the management of the house and the rearing of the children to others. (It is a source of amusement even now to black women to listen to feminist talk of liberation while somebody’s black grandmother shoulders the daily responsibility of child-rearing and floor-mopping, and the liberated one comes home to examine the housekeeping, correct it, and be entertained by the children.) If Women’s lib needs those grandmothers to thrive, it has a serious flow. (Quoted in hooks, 2000: 51)

The reality of the black women's lives led many black feminists like Toni Morrison and Alice Walker to believe that feminism as the white women's agenda is not applicable to their own people. As a result, Alice Walker calls herself as a "womanist." In her acclaimed volume of essays, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," Alice Walker (1983) introduces four meanings of the term "womanist." According to Walker's first definition, a "womanist" is "a black feminist" or "a feminist of color". Thus, on some basic level, Walker uses the terms as being virtually interchangeable. Like Walker, many African American women see little difference between the two since both support a common agenda of black women's self-definition and self-determination. Her multiple definitions of the term shed light on the issue of why many African American women prefer the term womanism to black feminism. Walker sees womanism as rooted in black women's concrete history in racial and gender oppression. Taking the term from the Southern black folk expression of mothers to female children "you acting womanish", Walker indicates that black women's concrete history fosters a womanist worldview accessible primarily and exclusively to black women. "Womanish" girls act in "outrageous, courageous, and willful ways attributes that free them from the conventions limiting women. Womanish girls want to know more and in greater depth than what is considered good for them. They are responsible, in charge, and serious. Walker's term "womanish" encourages black women on the premises that they should be strong in order to survive and overcome the detrimental effects of slavery. The strong and independent women are concerned as performing abhorrent behavior. Nevertheless, Alice Walker celebrates these features.

According to Walker, a womanist is "who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually. She appreciates and chooses "women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength." A womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female..." (*Gardens*, xi-xii) Her last definition is "a womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender," setting up womanism as a privileged term and feminism as a mere duplicate. This is a difference allegedly stemming from black and white women's different histories with American racism. Moreover, womanism appears to provide avenue to foster strong relationships

between black women and black men. This attitude is compatible with many black women who criticize white feminists' inimical attitude towards men. In other words, many black women perceive feminism as a movement that is exclusively for women, dedicated to attacking and eliminating men. Nevertheless, black women do not want to eliminate men. They want to search for the problems, lay bare the complicated and mistaken approaches and hence to solve them. Sherley Williams takes this view when she notes that in contrast to feminism, "womanist inquiry...assumes that it can talk both effectively and productively about men." (Williams, 1990: 70) Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender oppression without attacking black men. It celebrates the passage of wisdom between women and men, for the sake of survival, in the white world, in the black community, and with men.

Alice Walker declares that all black women should take a political stance and defend the cause of black women. She emphasizes upon the importance of political activism as follows:

To the extent that black women dissociate themselves from the women's movement, they abandon their responsibilities to women throughout the world. This is a serious abdication from and misuse of radical Black herstorical tradition: Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, and Fannie Lou Hamer would not have liked it. (Walker, 1982: 42)

Toni Morrison, unlike Alice Walker, does not demonstrate directly that she is a feminist. According to Morrison, in order to be as free as she possibly can, in her own imagination, she cannot take positions that are closed. She states in "The Salon Interview" that it is off-putting to her readers, who may think that she is involved in some kind of feminist track. It seems true that Morrison denies that she is a feminist because she does not feel at home in the mainstream feminism like Alice Walker, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Hazel Carby, Barbara Smith and many other black feminists. She suggests: "I would never write any 'ist' novels. I don't write 'ist' novels." She explains why she does not like the term feminist in the interview mentioned above:

I think I merged those two words, black and feminist, growing up, because I was surrounded by black women who were very tough and very aggressive and who always assumed they had to work and rear children and manage homes. They had enormously high expectations of their daughters, and cut no quarter with us; it never occurred to me that that was feminist activity. You know, my mother would walk down to a theater in that little town that had just opened, to make sure that they were not segregating the black population-black on this side, white on that. And as soon as it opened up, she would go in there first, and see where the usher put her, and look around and complain to someone. That was just daily activity for her, and the men as well. So it never occurred to me that she should withdraw from that kind of confrontation with the world at large. And the fact that she was a woman wouldn't deter her. She was interested in what was going to happen to the children who went to the movies-the black children-and her daughters, as well as her sons. So I was surrounded by people who took both of those roles seriously. Later, it was called "feminist" behaviour. I had a lot of trouble with those definitions, early on. (Salon Interview, 6)

Toni Morrison seems to imply that feminist coinage for the tough and aggressive women who are in charge of their home, their children and work at the same time is needless. She has juxtaposed those two concepts, 'feminist' and 'black' because as it may be deduced from her utterance, she regards the feminist attitude as natural for black women. Black women have always had to be outrageous and rebellious in the community so as to protect themselves and their children from the antagonistic dominant culture. As a matter of fact, black women do not need a coinage like feminism. Morrison's black women ancestors are inherently feminist. That is the way they have hitherto lived, of necessity, in the society. Her mother and many other black women have struggled to fight against segregation of all kinds.

Anxious though Morrison is so as not to restrict her point of view and imagination as a writer, it may be declared that she makes her borderline clear having been occupied with depicting the ordeal of women, the predicament of the black female. In the novels that will be exemplified in this thesis, *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, there are aggressive, tough and powerful women who work hard so as to rear and protect their children and this behavior of them is regarded as feminist behaviour for the majority of feminist critics. It may be stated that Morrison does not wish to be constrained by only the words of the academia and the intellectuals. Nonetheless, her vantage point is very close to the black feminists who advocate the non-academic but

true-to-life utterance of Sojourner Truth. As it is known and reflected in the early pages of this thesis Truth is an ardent black woman. Her opinions show that she was firmly ready to adhere to the views of the black feminists. She is a nineteenth century black feminist activist who could neither read nor write. Collins also mentions Truth's words on the term "woman" in her work to support her argument that many of the black activists were not highly educated intellectuals. Truth's words are memorable as an echo from the 1800s:

The man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into the carriages, or over mud puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed, and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain't I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man-when I could get it- and bear the lash as well! And ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most all sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman? (Collins, 2000: 14)

Her views bear similarities with Morrison's views and these views find evidence in Morrison's novels, the black women characters such as Baby Suggs and Sethe in *Beloved*, Eva Peace in *Sula* are the representatives illustrating this kind of ordeal. Sojourner Truth like Morrison reflects her critical attitude to the taken for granted standards. She asserts that there is a double standard in the term "woman". The meaning of the term is very different for white women. As it is contended by Truth and reinforced by Morrison in her aforementioned article, white women are familiar with certain gentle actions whereas black women are familiar with being tough and trying to be powerful. For black women the concerns are quite divergent. They bear the toil of the world by carrying the load of slavery and in the aftermath of slavery by shouldering the weight of being a woman, being a black.

Once more it would be meaningful to mention Toni Morrison's article "What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib", because in that article, she refers to the bathroom signs that differentiate black women and white women, that are emblematic of white women's familiarity with gentle treatments in contrast to the subjugation of black women's interests. The pair of signs that distinguish segregated

public facilities said: “White Ladies” and “Colored Women” is eminently satisfactory to propose the sheer distinction between them. Morrison, by emphasizing upon this simple information, reflects that her position is unique and her viewpoint is exclusively African American alluding to black women. Therefore, she seems to indicate that she has to display the facts about ‘the demarcation’ by narrating the examples of different experiences of black women.

It is crucial at this point to trace the origins of the black female literary tradition, the predecessors of Toni Morrison, in order to understand how Morrison and her colleagues have come to attain a unique and realistic vantage point in rendering the predicament of black women, and in what ways the black female writer’s styles converge at the cross-roads of a street welcoming the black female voice.

1. 2. The Black Female Literary Tradition

Bernard Bell underscores in his work *The Afro American Novel and Its Tradition* that black female writers have got a specifically female language and with regard to the pioneer essays on black feminist criticism written by Barbara Christian and Deborah E. Mc Dowell, and the interviews between the black women writers and Claudia Tate gathered in the work called *Black Women Writers at Work*, Bell demonstrates that as illustrated in their fiction the majority of black women novelists employ the following signs and structures:

(1) Motifs of interlocking racist, sexist, and classist oppression; (2) black female protagonists; (3) spiritual journeys from victimization to the realization of personal autonomy or creativity; (4) a centrality of female bonding or networking; (5) a sharp focus on personal relationships in the family and community; (6) deeper, more detailed exploration and validation of the epistemological power of the emotions; (7) iconography of women's clothing; and (8) black female language. (Bell, 1987: 242-243)

Barbara Smith, on the other hand, another staunch black feminist critic, supporting the views of Christian and McDowell, pinpoints the factual data that “thematically, stylistically, aesthetically, and conceptually Black women writers manifest common approaches to the act of creating literature.” (Smith, 1982: 164) At the core of the affinities between the writings of these black women writers lie the specific political, social and economic experience that they have been obliged to share. In her essay, “Toward a Black Feminist Criticism”, Smith, having analyzed the writings of significant black women writers and their literary works, underlines the fact that the way Zora Neale Hurston, Margaret Walker, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker handle the traditional black female activities of rootworking, herbal medicine, conjure, and midwifery into the stories that they create should not be set aside, nor is their delineation of a particular black female language to lay bare their own and their characters’ thoughts coincidental. Smith states:

The use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books by Black women about Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary structures. The black feminist critic would find innumerable commonalities in works by black women. (*Ibid*)

In *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, Alice Walker defines Zora Neale Hurston, the essayist, folklorist, anthropologist and novelist, as a great predecessor, her writings as the embodiment of a specific and distinct literary tradition of black women. After Alice Walker's allusions to her work in the 1980s, her works have started to receive attention; *Mules and Men* (1935) defined as a folklore collection and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), her much quoted and popular novel. Hurston is known as the most famous writer of the Harlem Renaissance, which is an upsurge of interest in black culture, a return to the folkloristic sources of African American writing. In her essay titled "Strangers and double self-consciousness: feminism and black studies" included in the work called *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, edited by Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik, Pamela Pattynama claims that women writers of the Harlem Renaissance defied the negative images which the white public nurtured to the detriment of blacks. The struggle against stereotypes and reductive images is the cause of the writers in order to attain self-confidence and a separate voice. Yet, in the early phases of the black female tradition, the focal point of the writers like Frances E.W. Harper is, as Buikema and Smelik defend, a white audience. In her literary works, *Iola Lorey* and *Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Harper does not appeal to the black community, but the white audience by portraying her heroines as the ideal black prototypes which would be admired by white women: nice, kind, gentle – a lady after all. Her purpose is to eradicate the stereotypical images by showing her characters as basically equal to whites.

Zora Neale Hurston, for instance, does not implore for the equality of blacks and whites but emphasizes upon "the black difference." Moreover, she does not write to "uplift her race", because in her opinion her race is already uplifted, she is not abashed to depict her characters as a mixture of good and bad, strong and weak. However as Pattynama indicates the writers of the Harlem Renaissance endeavor to

address a white audience as well, so as to focus on and raise the problematic of race in the minds of whites. They take a double stance; on the one hand they endeavor to reflect that black women are not male bitches but real women and as a result they depict the female characters compatible with the taken for granted standards of femininity, on the other hand, the black women heroines are not fully conforming to the white model, their attitude exhibits features of independence and obstinacy. (Pattynama, 1995: 140-141)

Although up to the 1950s, except from Hurston, black women writers do their best to give a white identity to their characters, the situations change with writers like Gwendolyn Brooks, who in her work, *Maud Martha* (1953), depicts a true-to-life, authentic, at the same time a positive black character. After the 1960s, with the effect of the Civil Rights Movement and the movements for black liberation, rebellious "Black Power" and "The Black Arts" movement, a shift of focus has occurred in the literary arena, the black people are regarded as the real audience of the black literature. The black female writers such as Maya Angelou and Toni Morrison like their forebear Zora Neale Hurston are excellent examples of the black feminist writers who speak for black women. In her four-volume autobiographical work, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) to *The Heart of Woman* (1981), Angelou sustains her distinct voice. The publication of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is also in 1970, in which she portrays the tormented life of a young black girl, beleaguered by a world of white power in a shattered black community fraught with indifference, incest and rape. Angelou's and Morrison's and Hurston's, Walker's messages become a celebration of all black people and of black women in particular.

The works of many other black female writers like Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker have been influential in creating a black female literary tradition. As Claudia Tate declares, these writers, being both black and female, write from "a unique vantage point." They "with one penetrating glance cut through layers of institutionalized racism and sexism" and they lay bare the source of social contradictions. (Tate, 1983: xvi) Self-esteem and self-affirmation are the core themes in the works of these women. Their goal is to persuade women to "strengthen

their self-esteem by learning to love”, applaud themselves and “to celebrate their womanhood.”

The displacement of stereotypic images with realistic ones by the black woman writer Toni Morrison is applauded by the black feminist critics Mary Helen Washington and Barbara Christian. Her portrayal of complex and rebellious black heroines is appreciated and the fact that her novels are political signals is irrefutable. Her juxtaposition of black oral traditions and the Western writing tradition shows that her colleagues and she “stand at a crossroads where lines of gender, race, class and sexuality affect each other.” (Pattynama, 1995: 144)



2. BELOVED: BLACK WOMEN'S STRENGTH AND FORTITUDE

Toni Morrison's black feminist standpoint may well be examined in her novel *Beloved*. She was awarded the Nobel Prize for this work in 1993. It may be pointed out that her realistic rendering of the plight of black people and the black women in particular paved the way for her success. *Beloved* may be regarded as her *tour de force* because she renders it "political" and "irrevocably beautiful at the same time." (Plasa, 2000: 5) Morrison as a black woman writer emphasizes the importance of the political stance in a work of art. She highlights the fact that she attaches importance to art that is informed by political vision. She supports her argument in her essay published in 1984 and titled "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" as follows:

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 must have that as its thrust. That's a pejorative term in critical circles now: if a work of art has any political influence in it, somehow it's tainted. My feeling is just the opposite: if it has none, it is tainted. (Quoted in Walker, 1991: 132)

As it is obviously stressed by Morrison, her work does not accomplish its task if it is not political and in her work *Beloved*, she juxtaposes beauty and politics. By excavating "the thoughts of the women of 124, the unspeakable thoughts, unspoken," (*Beloved*, 199) through the use of "black female language" which reflects the black folkloric elements like the oral language/the story telling, Morrison succeeds in achieving her goal. The novel is beautiful because it has "a blues tone" (Grewal, 1998: 113) and "the language attempts to articulate the matrix of the slave woman's pain as mother, as daughter." In *Beloved*, Morrison tries to grapple with racism, classism and gender issues and she confesses that, when she wrote the novel, she was fearful that it would be her least read book because:

...it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember, I mean, it's national amnesia. (Bowers, 2000: 228)

Beloved depicting the story of an emancipated slave woman called Sethe, the epitome of the oppressed black women in the United States, persists in remembering. The novel is an ambitious attempt of Morrison to grapple with slavery, the tenacity of its legacy and the oppressive forces torturing black people.

The reason of labeling this work as a feminist, a black feminist novel is the underlying aims of the novel, that is to say, rendering the ordeal of black women. The focus of the novel is on female characters; Sethe, her mother-in-law Baby Suggs, Sethe's daughters Denver and Beloved. Morrison in this novel emphasizes the fact that a black woman should act as a strong woman in order to survive in the midst of antagonistic forces. The antagonistic forces suppressing the black women may be identified by analyzing the African American history and Morrison's *Beloved* is a narrative form of history delineating the facts about African Americans and the experiences of African American women. As it is contended in Gurleen Grewal's work on Morrison's novels :

The seeds of the novel were planted back in the 1970s when Toni Morrison undertook the editing of *The Black Book*, 'a collection of original raw material documenting our (black) life'; in the process she discovered many painful incidents of black history, including the infamous story of Margaret Garner. (Grewal, 1998: 98)

Margaret Garner is the black woman who gave Morrison the inspiration to write *Beloved*. She is one of the seventeen slaves from Kentucky, who took a sled and two good horses belonging to their master, and drove to the frozen Ohio River. When Garner and her children's places were found out by the slave catchers, she murdered her little daughter with a butcher knife, and she was hampered before she could complete her desperate work. (Lerner, 1992: 60) *The Black Book* models, as indicated by David L. Middleton (2000), an uncensored exposure of brutality through newspaper clippings and photographs of lynchings and burnings of black people,

juxtaposed with the celebration of African American strengths, achievements and folkways. Essentially, *The Black Book* models the remembering of African American experience. Grewal's analysis of Morrison's researches involves a citation mentioned by Morrison from an article titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother Who Killed Her Child", published in the American Baptist in 1856:

She (Margaret Garner) said that when the officers and slave holders came to the house in which they were concealed, she caught a shovel and struck two of her children on the head, and she took a knife and cut the throat of the third, and tried to kill the other-that if they had given her time, she would have killed them all- that with regard to herself, she cared but little; but she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done.

I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I now am; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, than have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered by piecemeal. (Grewal, 1998: 98)

According to black feminist scholars' analysis, the act of infanticide committed by Margaret Garner is a component of "female slave resistance", through which the female slaves resist and defy sexual exploitation. The female slave does not accept the oppression of the white master and as a result, struggles against exploitation through such means as sexual abstention, abortion, and infanticide. Therefore, they are opposing their vital economic function as breeders. It is made evident by Darlene Clark Hine that the occurrence of the act of infanticide was not an issue that could easily be undermined. The slave parents or the female slave who take their children's lives perform the horrific murders out of a higher form of love and a clearer understanding of "the living death" that await their children under slavery. The female slave's engagement in infanticide, specifically, expresses her negation of her role in the maintenance of the slave pool. (Hine, 1994: 32-33)

In Morrison's novel Margaret Garner is brought to life in Sethe's character and the quotation above lays bare the facts about the murderous action of Sethe. Rather than allow her children to be returned to slavery, she attempted to kill all of them,

succeeding only in killing the baby girl. It is a summary execution put into action by a slave mother who did not want to see her children suffer behind the bars of slavery.

Having touched the issues that had long been left untouched, Toni Morrison should be regarded as a brave African American feminist writer. She indicates that as a writer, being "black and a woman", she has got some crucial responsibilities. She sums up the limitations imposed on the nineteenth-century writer of the slave narrative by stating that:

it was extremely important that the writers of those narratives appear as objective as possible- not to offend the reader by being too angry, or by showing too much outrage. They had to be careful not to be inflammatory. (Grewal, 1998: 99)

Contrary to the views of nineteenth century writers, Morrison embraces a different and a more courageous point of view. She states:

For me, a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, not much more than a hundred years after Emancipation, a writer who is black and a woman- the exercise is very different. My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over 'proceedings too terrible to relate.' (*Ibid*)

The proceedings too terrible to relate are depicted by Morrison in *Beloved*, the target of these "proceedings" is women. *Beloved* makes brutally clear that aside from the equality of oppression that black men and women suffered, as Angel Davis and a vast majority of aforementioned black feminist critics point out "black women were also oppressed as *women*." (Davis, 1981: 3-29)

In the novel, the protagonist Sethe's near-recapture follows the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, part of the Compromise of 1850, which stated that escaped slaves, as property, could be tracked down across the state lines and retrieved by their old masters. The novel opens with a date-1873, in medias res, the ex-property Sethe lives in 124, a house in rural area close to Cincinnati, with her daughter. They are ostracized from the community because of Sethe's past and as it is understood in the following pages of the book, her pride. In bits and pieces accomplishing the novel's fragmentary

structure, the reader obtains the information that eighteen years have passed since Sethe escaped from slavery at a farm bearing an ironical name "Sweet Home". Sweet Home was managed by a cruel man known as Schoolteacher, the former master Mr. Garner's brother-in-law, who dominated the house as well as the slaves living in that house. Schoolteacher is portrayed as a brutal man who considers the slaves as animals and thus treats them as such. The actions of Schoolteacher serve as a catalyst for the escalation of violence that was never practiced by the former ruler of the house, Mr. Garner. Throughout *Beloved's* narrative, moving quickly between past and present, frequently shifting forward and backward in time and through the memories of characters the reader observes the oppressing incidents. The narrative technique of Morrison displays the powerful continuity between the past and the present, and the horrifying events of the past constantly intrude into the present. It is via the intrusion of these unpleasant remembrances, Sethe's experience is reflected. The first shocking occurrence is Sethe's crime of infanticide. It is a horrific action, which is by no means associated with motherhood. Committing infanticide is the last thing that may be expected of a mother. Nevertheless, this brutal deed is portrayed by Morrison as a heroic act of resistance, one among many that constituted the quotidian experience of slaves. Sethe's killing of her child is not presented as an anomaly. She defies the view that identifies a slave woman as not compatible with the term motherhood, she chooses to rise and act: "to remove her children from the reach of evil to try to carry them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them." (*Beloved*, 163) It is the approach of Morrison to Sethe that is the focal point of the argument. Morrison does not represent Sethe as a ruthless murderer; instead she seems to sympathize with the agony she had to grapple with. Shari L. Thurer also advocates this standpoint when she is trying to reflect the images of new/independent motherhood, she describes mothers as not angels, admits the fact that they make mistakes; they are not wholly fulfilled by their experience. In sum, she states they are real. According to Thurer, the reader is able to find these "real" mothers in Morrison's novels, she says,

In *Beloved*, for example, the black mother Sethe murders her child. Yet Morrison has the reader understand that the murder is an act not of

barbarism, but of mother love – Sethe is protecting her daughter from slavery. Morrison avoids a simplistic maternal characterization. She pays careful attention to the maternal perspective. She does not blame Sethe, but applauds her endurance. She is a latter-day Neolithic goddess. She is no one's bad mother. (Thurer, 1998: 248-249)

Sethe is portrayed by Morrison as a strong black woman who is able to do anything for her children, exchanging a ten minutes sex for her baby's grave, ten minutes for the seven letters, which, she thinks, should be there on the epitaph. "Beloved" is the word that Sethe wishes to see on the epitaph of her "crawling already baby." Constantly described as having eyes of iron, Sethe is reflected as an embodiment of determination. Her eyes "did not pick up a flicker of light" resembling two wells, in Paul D's words, "into which he had trouble gazing. Even punched out they needed to be covered, lidded, marked with some sign to warn folks of what that emptiness held." (*Beloved*, 9) The eyes are empty, suggesting the power of the individual, at the same time the agony that she had to go through. Her eyes are iron; they are the incarnations of her strength. She is a woman who bears the brunt of slavery and has to deal with the callous disregard for humanity. Her strength arises from the impact of severe pains that reside in her psyche.

It is irrefutable that Toni Morrison, throughout her writing career, has created black women characters that are robust and making vigorous efforts to overcome the nightmarish situations. Marsha Darling justifies this opinion in an interview that she makes with Toni Morrison by posing a question upon the subject of black women's power in her work *Beloved*. She directs her question to Morrison: "...the women characters you create are intense, strong, active presences. In this novel they talk to us from the nineteenth century. But you are obviously saying things about the here and now. Could you elaborate on that?"

In reply to which Morrison enlarges upon her idea by referring to the concept of black motherhood,

The story seemed to me to yield up a persistent struggle by women, Black women, in negotiating something very difficult. The whole problem was

trying to do two things: to love something bigger than yourself, to nurture something; and also not to sabotage yourself, not to murder yourself...One of the nicest things women do is nurture other people, but it can be done in such a way that we surrender anything like a self. You can surrender yourself to a man and think that you cannot live or be without that man; you have no existence. And you can do the same thing with the children. It seemed that slavery presented an ideal situation to discuss the problem. That was the situation in which black women were denied motherhood, so they would be interested in it-everybody would be interested in making, holding, keeping a family as large and as productive as could be..... (Quoted in Plasa, 2000: 34)

Sethe is a black woman to whom motherhood is denied. However, she does not want to accept this vexatious truth. She performs a subversive activity by committing infanticide and demonstrates that she cannot admit the taken for granted belief which insists on the idea that a slave woman cannot claim ownership of her children under any circumstances. As Thomas R. Edwards suggests:

In *Beloved* Morrison means to help thoughtful black people, especially women, to create or re-create an imagination of self that 'white history' or 'male history' has effectively denied them, even while showing them how easily such an imagination can become self-defeating. (Plasa, 2000: 25)

Imagination, motherhood, womanhood, being and living as a human being are unacceptable and prohibited. Sethe is subjected to the horrifying cruelties that occur in Sweet Home. Like the majority of the slave women who were routinely subjected to rape, Sethe is also violated by the cruel white master. As Gurleen Grewal suggests, "Morrison is explicit about the rape of the maternal body." (Grewal, 1998: 100) Sethe tells the story of her brutal experience to Paul D, an ex-slave who was living in Sweet Home like Sethe, she tells Paul D about the tree on her back, a cluster of scars in the shape of a chokecherry tree. She hardly puts it into words that Schoolteacher's nephews took her milk, and when she told Mrs. Garner about it Schoolteacher found out and responded by having one of the boys whip her. In *Beloved*, the ghastly incident is depicted in Sethe's words, she describes her experience as having her milk stolen from her by the nephews of her slave master as the ultimate brutality, even worse than the savage beating she received just before escaping. In one of the pages of the novel, she remembers the brutality of the event and utters these words:

"They handled me like I was the cow, no, the goat, back behind the stable because it was too nasty to stay in with the horses" (*Beloved*, 200). Susan Bowers employs Angela Davis' observation on black women to support her argument and it is essential to emphasize her words at this point as well. Angela Davis indicates:

Slave mothers were not recognized as mothers having bonds with their children but considered only 'breeders' and workers. Thus slave owners had no scruples about selling children away from their mothers: Their infant children could be sold away from them like calves from cows. (Bowers, 2000: 216)

Sethe is not recognized as a mother, she is treated like an animal, like a cow, her feelings are not taken into consideration. After Schoolteacher and his nephews steal Sethe's milk, they place her face down on the ground providing a hole for her pregnant belly, and then lash her back. They do this in order to protect their property, the unborn baby-slave. Thus, she is whipped and maimed like a horse. Nevertheless, Schoolteacher's attempts to save the future-slave-baby turn out to be vain. Having hunted after Sethe with the hope of retrieving his property, Schoolteacher is bewildered, not only because of the human wreck he has created, but also due to his realization that the children – his precious properties which he had hoped to take back to Sweet Home – are all bleeding as a result of Sethe's attempt to murder all of them. Schoolteacher observes the scene and ruminates over his economic loss:

Right off it was clear, to Schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim. The three (now four-because she'd had the one coming when she cut) pickaninnies they had hoped were alive and well enough to take back to Kentucky, take back and raise to do the work Sweet Home desperately needed, were not. Two were lying open-eyed in sawdust; a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one- the woman Schoolteacher bragged about, the one he said made fine ink, damn good soup, pressed his collars the way he liked besides *having at least ten breeding years left*. But now she'd gone wild, due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think-just think-what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. (*Beloved*, 149, italics added)

In the eyes of the white slave master, she is a mere breeder without any emotions. Her attempts to surmount the difficulties are unacceptable owing to the fact that she

has to comply with the regulations. Not only is she obliged to be submissive and obedient, but also she has to be productive, a healthy, fecund slave.

Morrison's Sethe is a disobedient slave; she does not want to accept the rules as they are. She defies the rules and regulations of slavery. She defines herself as mother in defiance of the near-impossibility of that role, notwithstanding the lack of a mother-concept in the era of slavery. As a result of her rebellious attitude towards the taken for granted standards, she comes face to face with the cruel treatments. She takes a great risk by attempting to claim ownership of her children. It is that risk which Paul D alludes to in his mind, he thinks:

Risky...very risky. For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous. Especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew was to love just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one. (*Beloved*, 45)

Morrison characterizes Sethe as powerful, courageous and therefore she takes the risk, by jeopardizing her life and her children's life. As mentioned above, she is a different character, an unconventional slave, a revolutionary slave. Even though, she knows that mother love is dangerous, she jeopardizes everything for her love. She is aware that "unless carefree, motherlove is a killer." (*Beloved*, 132) Her persistent demeanor highlights her innate sovereignty. She is a black woman who is portrayed by Morrison as constantly endeavoring to go beyond the limits. Deviating from the norms that are binding for other slaves, she wishes for a wedding ceremony, for instance. When Halle, her future husband, asked her to be his wife, the first thing that crossed her mind is that there would be a wedding ceremony. She thinks: "There should be a wedding ceremony, shouldn't there? A preacher, some dancing, a party, a something." (*Beloved*, 26) She has got rather refined tastes for a slave woman. Since she and Mrs. Garner are the only women at Sweet Home, Sethe makes a decision to ask about the wedding ceremony to Mrs. Garner. When she asks and Mrs. Garner responds her "childish" remark by laughing a little and touching her head, saying, "You are one sweet child" but nothing more, Sethe faces the disappointing fact that a slave woman should not have refined tastes, though wishing for a

ceremony is not regarded for white women as a refined taste but a 'must.' Moreover, she does not yield; she makes a dress for herself on the sly. It may be pointed out that by underlining this sort of wish, Morrison both tries to reflect Sethe as atypical, different, and she tries to show the presence of the tremendous gap between white women and black women. White women can have wedding ceremonies, because they are 'women', however black women cannot due to the fact that they are only breeders, and it is not significant whether they are wedded or not. It should be put forward that the white woman's attitude towards Sethe when she hopes for a wedding ceremony to be held stresses her classist and racist demeanor. Mrs. Garner implies that Sethe cannot have such a ceremony, because she is not white and she is the member of a lower class.

Sethe is an unorthodox and talented slave. She makes the ink that the white master uses in order to list her animal characteristics; the ink made by her skillful hands turns out to be an instrument of torture for her. It is ironical that Schoolteacher needs Sethe's gifted hands so as to analyze the slaves and put his pseudo-science into theory. Throughout the novel, Sethe remembers and reflects Schoolteacher and his strange questions, his scientific measuring of the slaves' body parts. One day, while she is working in the yard, she overhears him telling his nephews to list Sethe's human characteristics in one column and her animal characteristics in another column. She is horrified and is somehow ashamed. Overhearing Schoolteacher's categorization of her human and non-human characteristics is one of the most painful experiences of Sethe's life, perhaps as important as losing her milk or the beating she receives from Schoolteacher's nephews. The experience causes a strange pinching and itching of her head, a precursor to the beating of birds' wings she felt before she murdered her baby. According to Mrs. Garner and Schoolteacher's lexicography, a characteristic is "a thing that is natural to a thing." (*Beloved*, 195) Schoolteacher poses his questions in order to naturalize his definitions. He describes a set of properties as "natural" and ascribes them to the disturbingly human bodies he has before him. The "experiment" the pupils/nephews perform on Sethe, which Schoolteacher condones, shows them playing out these contradictory descriptions on her body. Under Schoolteacher's tutelage, the pupils learn to turn people into

animals. The pseudoscience of Schoolteacher expresses one of the ways the blacks were objectified and dehumanized by whites. Schoolteacher is a crucial epitome in reflecting the attitude of the whites and the white masters toward the blacks. He regards himself as the superior self and therefore indicates that he has got the power to contend, "definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined." The stark contrast between the white race and the black race is laid bare by Schoolteacher through the use of this statement.

Sixo, a slave at Sweet Home, has stolen and eaten a pig when Schoolteacher begins to restrict the diets of the slaves. Sixo argues with Schoolteacher that, because he is Schoolteacher's property, eating the pig is improving that property, making it work in the fields and the farm better. The justification is acknowledged as "clever", "but Schoolteacher beat him anyway to show that definitions belonged to the definers not to the defined." (*Beloved*, 190) It is evident that the clever manipulation of language by Sixo must be punished; otherwise the white man's control of speech is threatened. Schoolteacher is the embodiment of the white man's consciousness that labels blacks as incapable of intelligence. Sethe tells Denver that what "tore Sixo up...for all time" was not the beatings but rather the brutal questions that Schoolteacher asked them, as part of his research considering the animal nature of the slaves. Erlene Stetson underscores that the relegation of Blacks to non-human category dates back to 1776. As Stetson points out,

After 1776, given the agitations of human rights, the ideology of then popular Great Chain of Being was enlisted as a moral and religious justification. The Great Chain of Being established a hierarchy of life forms within the universe. (Stetson, 1982: 73)

She notes one contemporary writer's view regarding black slaves; whose remarks expose the deterministic attitude of the white men towards black men and the harsh gap between the two races. The writer comfortably assures the inferiority of the black race:

If the order of nature was divinely appointed, any attempt to subvert that order must run counter to the providential order explicit in the nature of

things. Thus any attempt to alter the present condition of Negro, which was ordained by providence, would destroy the very fabric of the universe. If the Negro was, as strongly suspected, a form of being mediate between the higher animals and man, his enslavement was justified and the social order of the South was the only social order in which was shown the will of the Divine Creator. (*Ibid*)

Following these assumptions David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson, the crucial figures of the Age of Enlightenment reflecting their scientific racism, had also documented their deductions that the black race was incapable of intelligence. Schoolteacher in *Beloved* is represented as a caricature of rationalistic thinking. His pseudo-empirical scienticism is an example of what Morrison considers to be the language of control and surveillance.

More specifically identifying the Black female slave, philosophers, scientists, lawmakers, scholars, physicians, and laymen all endorsed the notion that the acclaimed position of Blacks between man and the higher animals (i.e., apes) was borne out in the Black woman. As proposed by Stetson:

They agreed that orangutans showed a special attraction to the black woman; that at some unspecified point in history the black woman and the orangutan had mated. This notion, which was used to explain the creation of the Black race, was popularly expressed by Thomas Jefferson, who, in citing 'the preference of the orangutan for the Black woman over those of his own species', justified this coupling of animal intelligence and human form as desirable eugenics maintaining that the circumstance of superior beauty is thought worthy attention in the propagation of horses, dogs and other domestic animals, why not in that of man?" (*Ibid*, 73)

The animal imagery, which appears throughout the novel, affects Sethe tormenting her deeply. Paul D, the last of Sweet Home men and the lover of Sethe, reproaches her in a hurtful way, which recalls the aforementioned racist stereotypes. When Stamp Paid, who is an important person trying to help the slaves by enabling them to pass the borders via an organized abolitionist activity named the "Underground Railroad", tells Paul D how *Beloved* died by showing him the newspaper clipping, Paul D does not want to believe the news and he chooses to ask Sethe whether the clipping reflects the reality or not. Sethe confirms the truth of the events and Paul D

at this stage cruelly reminds her: "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" and as a consequence a forest springs up between them which is "trackless and quiet." (*Beloved*, 165) Paul D exposes that he has internalized the taken-for-granted dictates of the whites that associate blackness with animal savagery and moral depravity. However, Morrison indicates that if there is a question of violence or animalistic instinct, in fact she does not support the idea; it is the white people who must be blamed considering the issue. Stamp Paid gives voice to Morrison's ideas:

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for sweet white blood... But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to his place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them everyone...The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (*Beloved*, 198-199)

Hence, unable to accept Sethe's past and her attitude, unaware of the whitefolks' jungle tormenting her deeply, unable to appreciate her love which is "too thick", Paul D leaves 124. For Sethe, it is what the condition of love must be. She indicates that love should be thick, "love is or it ain't. Thin love ain't love at all." (*Beloved*, 164)

The significance of love is emphasized by Morrison in *Beloved* through her depiction of another powerful female character Baby Suggs. She is called by the townspeople as Baby Suggs-Holy, because she is a kind of a religious figure for the black community advising them to love themselves. Having arrived in Cincinnati around 1850, she spends her years of freedom, which is earned by his son, Halle, through working in the fields on Sundays for Mr. Garner. She works for the abolition of slavery, preaches in a place called the Clearing and helps the runaway slaves. The Clearing is a space far away from the political and cultural domain of the white people who perpetually disturb the black community of Cincinnati. The Clearing, then, is exclusively African-American with the authentic black woman leader Baby Suggs. Her powerful words which she employs in her preachings go far, beyond the Christian religious practices, ignoring all the restricting doctrines. In the middle of the Clearing she invites the children to laugh, the men to dance, the women to cry

“for the living and the dead.” (*Beloved*, 88) At the heart of her gospel lies “love” which will save the oppressed souls of the black people. According to Thomas R. Edwards, Baby Suggs is “the matriarch, she is the goddess of home.” (Plasa, 2000: 23) Nevertheless, this coinage “matriarch” should not be confused with the white man’s controlling image “black matriarch”. She is not an emasculating matriarch turning men into helpless beings, not a negative figure dominating the house. She does not make any discrimination between men and women when she calls them to be aware of their capabilities, to be self-confident by loving and trusting themselves. Hence, it may be deduced that she is a feminist character but not from the perspective of white feminism, which considers men as the opponent, as the enemy. Baby Suggs works for the survival of the black community, on her way she is not supported by a male comrade, she is alone, the head of 124 and her society. However, she is cognizant of the fact that the concept of survival is only possible through the unification of the community, men and women. She is a powerful leader who nourishes the psyches of her black sisters and brothers by eloquently celebrating the flesh, which is denied and maimed by the white race as follows:

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...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!*...No they don’t love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance...And all your inside parts that they’d just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark dark liver-love it, love it, and the beat and the beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (*Beloved*, 88)

Baby Suggs instructs the blacks to love their bodies, to love their mouths in order to defy the speechlessness imposed on them under slavery and to love their hearts in order to protect their human feelings. However, Baby Suggs, a vigorous female character fighting for the betterment of the black community, retreats to her bed after the catastrophic event called “the Misery.” After the arrival of the four horsemen,

Schoolteacher, one of his nephews, the slave catcher, and the sheriff, who are, likened to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the Bible (Famine, War, Pestilence, Death), Sethe murders her baby. Thus, twenty-eight days of freedom and happiness end as a result of this event.

Morrison's portrayal of Baby Suggs delineates the fact that she attaches importance to the strengths of her women characters. Like her daughter-in-law Sethe, Baby Suggs is also an effective figure and she has come face to face with the burdens of slavery. Instead of sitting and enjoying the days of freedom by herself, she prefers to rise and act by struggling to teach the black community the evils of the white race and she endeavors to eradicate the stain created by the white. After the horrible murder, she admonishes the whites for their oppressive and tormenting deeds. She says: "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed", then adds, "and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but white folks" (*Beloved*, 89)

Sethe and Baby Suggs, epitomes of efficient female figures, embodiments of fortitude, lonely black women have succeeded, without the help of men, in finding a way that leads to the survival of their souls, although the past which constantly intrudes into the present deeply disturbs their consciousness. Morrison's black male figures, on the other hand, are not as successful as the female characters, generally portrayed as deprived of strength. For instance, Halle, Baby Suggs' devoted son who has worked for his mother's freedom is not able to escape from Sweet Home together with Sethe and after eighteen years Sethe still despises him for having left her alone, she says to Paul D, "feel how it feels to be a colored woman roaming the road without anything God made liable to jump on you" (*Beloved*, 68). Nevertheless, the truth is reflected by Paul D who has witnessed the incidents, the cause of Halle's failure in not accompanying Sethe. Paul D reveals that he did see Halle, and indicates that Halle had gone mad. According to Paul D, he was sitting next to a butter churn, butter all over his face. Paul D believes that Halle witnessed Sethe's brutalization at the hands of schoolteacher and his nephews. Paul D tells Sethe that he wanted to say something to him, but he was not able to because at that time he had an iron bit in his mouth.

Sethe is infuriated by the acquisition of knowledge that her husband watched her while she was being tortured. Paul D tries to pacify her by uttering the following statements:

Hey! Hey! Listen up. Let me tell you something. A man ain't a goddamn ax. Chopping, hacking, busting every goddamn minute of the day. Things get to him. Things he can't chop down because they are inside. (*Beloved*, 69)

It is evident that Morrison makes an effort to sympathize with the ordeal of black men as well. Yet, it is obvious that women characters are more powerful than the male characters. Halle witnesses the brutal incident and goes mad, he does not or not able to help his wife, he just sits there watching. It may be put forward that Halle and any other black males like him are emasculated by the system. They are not belittled by their women, as Toni Cade Bambara aptly claims (see p. 24). It is the systematic and cruel oppression of the system that is regulated by the whites, which turns black men into desperate pawns.

Sethe strives to keep her sanity under the threat of the debilitating and demoralizing effects of the events that she experienced in the past and still experiences in the present. As she reflects, her mind is loaded with the past images, unable to ruminate over the future. She questions in her agony:

Other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle. And how sweet that would have been: the two of them back by the milk shed, squatting by the churn, smashing cold, lumpy butter into their faces with not a care in the world. Feeling it slippery, sticky-rubbing it in their hair, watching it squeeze through their fingers. What a relief to stop it right there. Close. Shut. Squeeze the butter. But her three children were chewing sugar teat under a blanket on their way to Ohio and no butter play would change that. (*Beloved*, 71)

Thus she gives the answer, she has got no time for madness, she must preserve her sanity for the sake of her children's survival, but Halle is not the type of person who is able to thrive on under such maddening circumstances. In *Beloved*, Halle is not the

only black male character who is emasculated and victimized by the whites. There are other black males like Paul D and Stamp Paid who are subjected to the humiliating treatments of their white masters and henceforth they lose their self-confidence, they are unsure of the source of their manhood. Throughout the novel, Paul D remembers the painful memories, the iron bit in his mouth, the enforced sodomy, the collar, and the lynchings... The cruel treatments have caused the breaking of his spirit and have hardened his heart into what he calls "a tobacco tin". As Halle watches his wife powerless without doing anything, Paul D also with a bit in his mouth resembling a horse watches a lame rooster, deeply feeling that his masculinity is inferior to Mister-the bird's name. The most striking scene is that of the rooster which is the property of the white master, strutting around the yard freely. The black man's manhood is denied by the dominant culture, again not by the black women. He is tormented deeply and shares his sorrowful memories with Sethe:

Mister, he looked so...free. Better than me. Stronger, tougher...he was the king and I was... Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay I was. Even if you cooked him you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.
(*Beloved*, 72)

The moving scene lays bare the huge gap between Paul D and the mere rooster. It is maintained by Morrison that what victimizes the black male figures is the Schoolteacher who should be regarded as the embodiment of the white control, white brutality. Stamp Paid is another black male character in the novel, who has encountered the evil of the white and has suffered after the rape of his wife by the son of the white master. He is an ex-slave whose wife Vashti has sexually been exploited and like other enslaved men he could do nothing to protect his wife, he could not attack the white master like Halle. As a result of this incident, he changes his name from Joshua to Stamp Paid and indicates, "whatever his obligations were, that act paid them off." (*Beloved*, 185) The name is deliberately chosen by him as a way of saying that he has paid all his dues.

Rape is a brutal fact that is part of the life of every black woman in the Plantation South as in the examples of Sethe and Stamp Paid's wife. It is an instrument in the hands of the white owners to exploit the black women and to remind them of their lowest status, it is a way of manipulating black men by showing that they are spineless creatures who are not able to defend their women. With regard to black feminist theorist Angela Davis's analysis, rape is employed as a weapon of terror. Her words upon the rape of black women clarify the white men's strategy:

It would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men's sexual urges... Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women's will to resist, and in the process, to demoralize their men. (quoted in Collins, 2000: 147)

It may be understood then the sexual oppression of black women is also an instrument that is employed in the oppression of the entire race. Black men are symbolically castrated and black women are used as the tools in the degradation of their men. As it is indicated in the early pages of this thesis, the rape of the black women by the white master is justified by indicating that black women are immoral beings. They are treated as irresistible sexual objects, portrayed as sexualized animals, as promiscuous "jezebels" having animal-like sexual urges. The black feminist Hazel Carby also supports the same argument when she lays bare the vulnerability of the black women and the justification of the white male considering the rape of the black female body. She declares:

The institutionalized rape of black women has never been as powerful a symbol of black oppression as the spectacle of lynching. Rape has always involved patriarchal notions of women being, at best, not entirely unwilling accomplices, if not outwardly inviting sexual attack. The links between black women and illicit sexuality consolidated during the antebellum years had powerful ideological consequences for the next hundred and fifty years. (Quoted in Hine, 1994: 37)

Black women's will to resist cannot be extinguished in Morrison's novel. Although they have to persevere and face up to innumerable setbacks, under no circumstances do they abide by the laws of the white. They object to being relegated to the lowest

status by being constantly sexually exploited, they reject in their words their white offspring that will undeniably perpetuate the degradation of the black race. Ella, who is a powerful element of the 'Underground Railroad' like Stamp Paid, is subjected to rape by a white man and his son. For more than a year, she is kept locked in a room and abused by the two men. Ella says to Sethe: "You couldn't think up, what them two done to me." (*Beloved*, 119) This tormenting memory does strengthen her and she becomes a significant agent in helping the runaway slaves. She calls these father and son as "the lowest yet" (*Beloved*, 256) and she remembers her wasted days of puberty which are spent in that nightmarish house.

Baby Suggs is obliged to have sex with a straw boss who makes a promise not to sell her child but later he breaks his coercive promise. He trades his third child, a boy, for lumber in the spring. Then she is compelled to be taken up by an overseer. Morrison maintains that Baby Suggs' eight children had six fathers. She is only able to see Halle near her for twenty years. Her two girls have been sold away to distant places and she was not able to utter words of farewell to them. When compared to Baby Suggs, Sethe is luckier due to her marriage to Halle for six years, and every one of her children have got only one father. Sethe's mother has also been "taken up by the crew" during the Middle Passage. Sethe recalls what she has learned from Nan, the one-armed woman who nursed children while their mothers were working in the field, after she has tried to identify her mother's dead body among the murdered and maimed bodies on the plantation. Nan tells Sethe about her heroic mother:

Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man. She put her arms around him. The others she did not put her arms around. Never. Never. Telling you. I am telling you, small girl Sethe. (*Beloved*, 62)

Sethe always remembers her mother who has got a constant smile on her face because of the bit she was made to wear on her mouth. She states that her mother has never fixed her hair; she could not see her enough to satisfy her needs. Most nights, Sethe's mother did not even sleep in the same cabin with Sethe. She worked from

before dawn until late at night in the rice paddies, and on Sundays “she slept like a stick.” (*Beloved*, 60-61) Sethe only clearly remembers her mother’s mark, right on her rib, which is a circle. It is discernible that Sethe is the only child that Ma’am has accepted as hers. Sethe’s unusual determination may have stemmed from this crucial fact; among the others she is the chosen one.

Throughout Morrison’s *Beloved*, there are multifarious allusions to the issue of rape. When the ghost of the dead crawling-already baby appears out of nowhere, Sethe endorses the idea that Beloved must have been locked by a white man for his own purposes. Moreover, she makes the assumption that she must have escaped to a bridge and eradicated the rest out of her mind. (*Beloved*, 119) Beloved questions Sethe and Sethe desperately endeavors to explain why she has murdered her. Sethe tries to tell the infuriated Beloved that in murdering her, she aimed to protect her from the despondency that caused the death of Baby Suggs, from “what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble.” (*Beloved*, 251) These are all atrocious remembrances of the past and Ella’s, Stamp’s and Paul D’s are directly connected with rape. Sethe goes further to tell Beloved about the evils of the whites. She says:

Anybody white...Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you...Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. (*Beloved*, 251)

Sethe is convinced that to be forced to work, to be maimed are never the equivalents to being dirtied by the whites. Sethe’s daughter, Denver, is one of the luckiest individuals, the reason of which may be explained on the grounds that she has never experienced rape, she has never witnessed any scene like that. She is the only child staying with Sethe, except for Beloved who is a ghost and a supernatural element in the novel. Denver is another assertive female character in the novel who has not undergone the horrific treatments of slavery, like rape, hard toil, assaults of various kinds, lynchings, brutal handling of the overseer or the white master, etc. However, until the end of the novel, Morrison does not depict Denver as a fully developed character, not an entirely powerful one. At the beginning of the novel, although she is

eighteen years old, Denver does not leave the yard of 124 on Bluestone Road without being accompanied by an adult. After Howard and Buglar escape for fear that their mother will kill them as well and Baby Suggs dies as a result of the disappointment that she faces when her community betrays her, Denver becomes a lonely, desperate figure. She shuts her ears voluntarily when she learns that her sister died at the hands of her own mother.

Only when Beloved arrives at 124 in human form does Denver metaphorically come to life. She regards Beloved as a savior. Although Denver is considered as being "circumscribed by the past" by Missy Dehn Kubitschek (Kubitschek, 1998: 129), she should be, with regard to Susan Bowers' opinion, seen as a representative of the future generations. (Bowers, 2000: 221) She is the one who is able to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world and find help, when "neither Sethe nor Beloved seemed to care what the next day might bring." (*Beloved*, 243) In rendering her birth, Morrison does draw the reader's attention to the possibility of cooperation with the whites on the way that leads to the recovery of the black community. It is suggested by Melissa Walker that "she is literally born on the road to freedom." (Walker, 1991: 41) When Sethe escapes from slavery, she is no longer able to walk "on the bloody side of the Ohio River." (*Beloved*, 31) At this point, Amy Denver appears suddenly and helps Sethe in delivering her baby. She responds to Sethe's agony and begins to care for her. Amy delivers the baby in the bottom of a boat in Ohio River cooperating with Sethe, and the newly born baby is named after her surname: "Denver."

Morrison exposes the fact that whites have caused serious troubles for the black community. Nevertheless, she portrays Amy Denver, a white indentured servant, and Sethe's cooperation as a form of female solidarity, companionship. They together are the emblems of women's strength and show to what extent it is significant to unite without regard to race. Morrison eloquently depicts the two women's work:

On a river bank in the cool of a summer evening two women struggled under a shower of silvery blue. They never expected to see each other again in this world and at the moment couldn't care less. But there on a summer night surrounded by bluefern they did something together

appropriately and well. A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws-a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair-wrapping a ten-minute-old baby in the rags they wore. But no pateroller came and no preacher. The water sucked and swallowed itself beneath them. There was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well. (*Beloved*, 85)

As it is maintained before, Morrison is aware of the discrepancy between the lives of white women and black women. However, her white character, Amy Denver, is a woman from the working class. Possibly, Morrison tries to suggest that bourgeois white women may not understand and therefore cannot share the predicaments of black women. A white indentured servant who may have encountered similar humiliating attitudes can apprehend the real nature of suffering.

To reiterate Denver's stepping off the yard is crucial because after she leaves the yard and goes to seek for help, the community, which falls apart when the first traumatic event happens, gathers to help Sethe. Then, Denver, triggering the emotions of the black community, turns out to be a redemptive figure. The community does not warn Sethe and her family when they perceive that something bad will happen having seen the four horsemen arriving into the town. The community of the former slaves does not appreciate the feast, which is given at 124 by Baby Suggs and Sethe. They are jealous of Baby Suggs and her abundant service of food; they are envious observing their happiness. They think it is "too much" for an ex-slave who has been bought out of slavery by a doting son. (*Beloved*, 137) They despise "the reckless generosity on display at 124." Baby Suggs grasps the reason of the jealousy and understands that the source of the scent of disapproval is not the whitefolks. She thinks:

It wasn't whitefolks-that much she could tell-so it must be colored ones. And then she knew. Her friends and neighbours were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess. (*Beloved*, 138)

Hence, the community does not support Sethe, they do not gather around Sethe when she climbs into the cart for the ride to jail because they think that she seems to be too proud and she does not need them. They do not like Sethe, proud, powerful in front

of the cart and they criticize her for her demeanor. The scene displaying Sethe's pride and strength is striking:

She climbed into the cart, her profile knife-clean against a cherry blue sky. A profile that shocked them with its clarity. Was her head a bit too high? Her back a little too straight? Probably. Otherwise the singing would have begun at once, the moment she appeared in the doorway of the house on Bluestone Road. Some cape of sound would have quickly been wrapped around her, like arms to hold and steady her on the way. As it was, they waited till the cart turned about, headed west to town. And then no words. Humming. No words at all. (*Beloved*, 152)

The community is able to defend Sethe and before the tragic murder occurs they were able to send "a fleet-footed son" as soon as the riders began to ask questions. Nevertheless, they "do not" and Morrison seems to indicate that one of the reasons why Sethe committed the act of infanticide is the betrayal of the black community. It is the same community which, under the guidance of Denver, learns about Sethe's predicament that she is tormented at the hands of the embodiment of the past-her dead daughter who came to life, *Beloved*. The community, which crumbled in the past, now resuscitates itself being alerted by Denver. As Susan Bowers maintains, "her efforts (Denver's) lead to everyone's salvation: the reunion of the community." (Bowers, 2000: 222)

Led by Ella, the important component of the Underground Railroad, thirty women gather outside 124 to pray in order to exorcise *Beloved*. Morrison here epitomizes her use of orality in depicting the character, Ella who "hollers" and the others following her join the hollering. The thirty women in front of the house that is haunted by the irrepressible terrible past memories are the representatives of a spiritual power. When they arrive at 124, they remember the day of the feast and they visualize themselves laughing, eating in the yard. It is time for the revival of the female solidarity, the lack of which disturbs Morrison deeply and makes her utter the following words at Barnard College in May 1979:

I want not to ask you but tell you not to participate in the oppression of your sisters. Mothers who abuse their children are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to be willing to stay their hands. Mothers who

set fire to school buses are women, and another woman, not an agency, has to tell them to stay their hands. Women who stop the promotion of other women in careers are women, and another woman must come to the victim's aid. Social and welfare workers who humiliate their clients may be women, and other women colleagues have to deflect their anger.

I am alarmed by the violence that women do to each other: professional violence, competitive violence, emotional violence. I am alarmed by the willingness of women to enslave other women. (Cited in hooks, 2000: 49-50)

Morrison's words are an echo from the 1980s, but the statements she emphasizes, upon the dearth of a female solidarity are applicable to every era in the history of feminism. Thus, the thirty women, hand in hand in front of 124, represent the ideal in the mind of Toni Morrison. By making use of the strength of oral language, they take a step back to the beginning when "there were no words" but "the sound" and "they all knew what that sound sounded like." (*Beloved*, 259) At that moment, Edward Bodwin, the abolitionist at whose house Denver finds a work to earn a living for her mother, approaches 124 in order to take Denver to work. Sethe loses control, convinced that Schoolteacher has come to take Beloved and she runs hurriedly towards Mr. Bodwin who comes up the road. Sethe hears wings and "the ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand." She attempts to attack the oppressor not her child now. In a sense, Sethe reexperiences the original trauma and this reenactment of trauma allows Sethe to escape from the horrors of the past and to reclaim her life from Beloved. Then Beloved vanishes... This time the community of black women and Denver do not leave Sethe alone, "they make a hill, a hill of black people" and they do prevent Sethe from committing a murder once more. (*Beloved*, 262) In preventing Sethe, it is as if the community wishes to atone for its deadly mistake in the past. Morrison, again, stresses the solidarity between the black women and the black community.

Morrison seems to imply that the remedy which will save the black community and which will elevate the black women of the United States is inherent in the community itself. As Baby Suggs delineates as a part of her "unchurched preaching" in the middle of the Clearing: "the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it." (*Beloved*, 88)

The community must find the grace within itself. The black individuals in the community must learn how to survive through loving themselves and through understanding their capacities. The role of Paul D is also important because he helps Sethe to integrate into the community and shows her that she is not only a mother, that she is worthy like an individual "You your best thing, Sethe. You are". We can see at the end of the novel when she tells him "Me? Me?" (*Beloved*, 273) that she is also a human being not just a mother, and maybe opens the door for some hope for the future.

At the end of the novel there is hope for the future generations, Sethe, an ex-slave, at last under the influence of Paul D and the community which helps her this time realizes that she has got an identity of her own, she is strong because she is a black female. She has survived under the threatening circumstances, and now there is a possibility, which is optimistic and positive. She has succeeded in beating back the past, Beloved who is the embodiment of past memories, agonies goes away.

3. THE FEMININE VOICE IN MORRISON'S SULA:

Sula is Morrison's second novel, which is written in 1973 coming after her novel *The Bluest Eye* written in 1970. In *Sula*, as it is apparent in *Beloved* as well, Toni Morrison depicts realistic black women characters that are vigorous in their attempts to survive in a color-coded white, patriarchal, antagonistic society. In her second novel, Morrison exposes her bravery in writing a woman-centered novel which celebrates the unconventional female characters, female camaraderie and criticizes the restricting community affected by the racist attitude of the inimical whites.

Missy Dehn Kubitschek in her analysis of Morrison's novels regards *Sula* as an African American female *bildungsroman*, a novel that situates the female self at its center and delineates the development of a character into adulthood. She indicates that until the publication of *Sula*, white male characters permeated the air of the novels that were written compatible with the stylistic techniques of the *bildungsroman*. The ones that portray the female characters, as Kubitschek suggests, end with the central woman character's marriage. In the nineteenth century, there is a tendency of the white female heroine to marry as a result of her growth into adulthood. (Kubitschek, 1998: 54) However, in *Sula*, Morrison's heroine "Sula" does not fulfil her self-development by getting married because she, as a rebellious woman, does not value marriage as a satisfying and nurturing institution.

Sula consists of two parts, Part One and Part Two, each including specific dates to announce the chapters. In the first part, there are consecutive years starting from 1919 to 1923, then there is a final jump to 1927; the second part contains the years 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941, and then there is another final jump to 1965. The novel's structure, nevertheless, does not involve the system of the chronological order. Like Morrison's other novels, like *Beloved*, *Sula* does not obey the conventional norms of narration. The chapters are designed in a sequential order but the reader does not grasp the development of the characters by following the sequence. At the end of

each chapter, each year, Morrison skips to another issue, another shocking event which baffles the readers and holds their attention awake. Gurleen Grewal, aware of the artistic craft of Toni Morrison, defines *Sula* as:

An episodic narrative marked by skips and jumps in time from 1919 to 1965, the novel proceeds with flashbacks and tantalizing gaps, privileging a circular, mnemonic time. (Grewal, 1998: 44)

It is Morrison's readers' gift to read between the lines and to try to deal with these tantalizing gaps, the non-linear structure. Morrison indicates that her language is to be quiet and she attaches importance to "participatory reading", she explains Claudia Tate in an interview what she means by participatory reading:

I think it is what literature is supposed to do. It is not just about telling the story; it is about involving the reader. The reader supplies the emotions. The reader supplies even some of the color, some of the sound. My language has to have holes and spaces so the reader can come into it. He or she can feel something visceral, see something striking. (Tate, 1983: 125)

On the most visceral level, Morrison does not impose on her readers moral judgements because she does not believe in the model icons that will work for the survival of the community, on the other hand she expects her readers to create their own judgements, with this purpose in her mind she maintains that she never describes her characters very much. As it is mentioned before, she does defy the norms of the African American literature of those who do their best to reflect positive pictures of the black community. She does not restrict herself in any way to comply with these expectations and her female characters generally do not want to adhere to the regulations of a society which objects to strong and independent females.

In *Sula*, Morrison is again occupied with several important issues. She mentions the feminist energies of her female characters, the relationships between the black males and the black females, the racist attitude of the whites toward the blacks, the classist

obsessions of some of the characters and the effect of World War I upon the black male figures.

The first chapter opens with the portrayal of the town in which the black community lives. The town is called the Bottom and Morrison's omniscient narrator describes where the unusual name of the town comes from. It is "a nigger joke", tells the narrator. (*Sula*, 4) Although the land named as Bottom is high up in the hills, it is the Bottomland. A white man promises his slave that he will give him a fertile piece of land, "a piece of bottom land" and his freedom on the condition that he performs some hard tasks for his master. The slave accepts the proposal and does what his master wants but in the end, it turns out that the white master has tricked him. He does not want to give up his land although he sees freedom for his slave as relatively affordable. Hence, the farmer gives his slave a piece of land up in the hills. The surprised slave questions his white master; he asks him why he is not awarded by the rich bottomland of the valley. At this point, the tricky white admits that the land is in the hills and he justifies his action by stating: "but when God looks down, it is the bottom. That's why we call it so. It is the bottom of heaven-best land there is." (*Sula*, 5)

The joke is an example of the white exploitation of the black community. The slave, by accepting the land "where planting was backbreaking, where the soil slid down and washed away the seeds, and where the wind lingered all through the winter," (*Sula*, 5) admits his degraded status and the event epitomizes the huge gap between the white and the black; the white people deserve the rich valley floor and the black people populate the infertile, ruthless hills.

In that town live the two different "matrilineal genealogies of class and color." (Grewal, 1998: 47) The Peace household, on the one hand, representing the working-class history of black women, Eva Peace, Hannah Peace and Sula Peace; the Wright family, on the other hand, the bourgeois women including the fair skinned, Creole Rochelle, Helene Wright and Nel Wright Greene, constitute the backbone of the novel. It is typical in Morrison's novels, these triadic relationships, and households

including three women from different generations. In *Beloved*, also, there is the example of this relationship between Baby Suggs, Sethe and Denver. It demonstrates the fact that Morrison is interested in reflecting the experiences and lives particularly of black women. Morrison expresses that she, as well, lived in the same room with her mother, her grandmother and her great-grandmother, four generations of women together in the same house. She is impressed by her great-grandmother who has got a powerful personality and hence she puts forward that these memories may be associated with the central themes in her novels: the relationships between three generations of women in a household and the depiction of strong women in particular. (Kubitschek, 1998: 4)

Morrison especially focuses upon the camaraderie between Sula Peace and Nel Wright in *Sula*. Their relationship constitutes the novel's primary concern and displays Morrison's interest in rendering female companionship. Sula and Nel, at the beginning of the novel, appear as two young girls, enjoying their friendship. Their friendship is the source of power that nurtures their psyches, the power they need to fight against the tormenting awareness of their loneliness as women in the society. Morrison's narrator mentions their intimacy and the sheer fact of their loneliness:

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. Their meeting was fortunate, for it let them use each other to grow on. Daughters of distant mothers and incomprehensible fathers (Sula's because he was dead; Nel's because he wasn't), they found in each other's eyes the intimacy they were looking for. (*Sula*, 52, italics added)

Morrison stresses the issue of being neither white nor male, so to say, the privileges, although restricted for black men, are applicable to men in general. Sula and Nel are black women, deprived of privileges that will open the doors for freedom and independence. Thus, they create their own sphere to protect themselves from the confines of the white and male world.

Although Sula and Nel are close friends, there are a number of differences between them taking their different familial backgrounds into consideration. Sula lives in a house governed by her grandmother Eva Peace, a black woman of extraordinary strength. She is an unconventional woman who is able to survive under the threat of poverty, left alone by her husband BoyBoy. BoyBoy is not a positive black male character that "did whatever he could that he liked and he liked womanizing best, drinking second, and abusing Eva third." (*Sula*, 32) When he leaves Eva, she becomes a desperate woman without any money, three children left to her responsibility in the middle of winter. She thinks the situation through and having left all of her children to a neighbor, leaves the town to find a solution. After eighteen months she comes back, her purse full of money, and reclaims her children, Hannah, Pearl and Plum, and builds her own house in the town. As Gloria Wade-Gayles in her work "The Truths of Our Mother's Lives: Mother-Daughter Relationships in Black Women's Fiction" puts forward, "mothers in Black women's fiction are strong and devoted...they are rarely affectionate." (Cited in Collins, 2000: 187) Eva is a devoted mother but she cannot behave in a way that shows her love for her children. The reason is laid bare by Eva when she and her daughter have a conversation considering the issue of love. Hannah asks her mother: "Mamma, did you ever love us?" (*Sula*, 67) Eva is infuriated when she hears this question and a bitter conversation takes place between them:

You settin' here with your healthy-ass self and ax me did I love you? Them big old eyes in your head would a been two holes full of maggots if I hadn't.

I didn't mean that Mamma. I know you fed us and all. I was talkin' 'bout something else. Like... Playin' with us. Did you ever, you know, play with us?

Play? Wasn't nobody playin' in 1895. Just cause you got it good now you think it was always good? 1895 was a killer, girl. Things was bad. Niggers was dying like flies. Stepping tall, ain't you?...

Mamma, what you talkin' 'bout?

I am talkin' about 18 and 95 when I set in that house five days with you and Pearl and Plum and three beets, you snake-eyed ungrateful hussy. What would I look like leapin' 'round that little old room playin' with youngins with three beets to my name?...

But Mamma, they had to be some time when you wasn't thinkin' 'bout...

No time. They wasn't no time. Not none. Soon as I got one day done here come a night. With you all coughin' and me watchin' so TB

wouldn't take you off...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? (*Sula*, 68-69, italics added)

Eva stays alive for her children and it is rumored in the town that she allowed a train to amputate her leg to collect the insurance money to feed her starving children. It is true that she has got one leg and the opposite of the rumor is not reflected throughout the novel clearly. She accomplishes to survive, to stay alive and look after her children like Sethe in *Beloved*. She sacrifices herself for her children and in her way she is not supported by a male figure. She is a representative of the black women who bear the brunt of the world and she has got the "power thrust on her by bitter circumstance" (Grewal, 1998: 49) Under the severe circumstances that threaten her children's life, she takes drastic action in leaving the town. Sula, her granddaughter, on the other hand, is powerful because she prefers to be. In other words, she is not powerful as a result of the bitter events that necessitate drastic actions. She has got the choice in her hands to be rebellious compatible with her outlawed feminist desires. Nevertheless, this choice, to take hold of one's life at will, is a privilege that the old generation of women including Sethe in *Beloved* and Eva, do not have. Although Eva leads an independent life, of necessity, she does not want Sula to live as she has lived. She wants her to marry and the issue of choice is the focal point of their argument:

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. (*Sula*, 92)

Eva stands for the traditional role against Sula's independence indicating that a lonely woman cannot live comfortably in the society without a man, without a family. However, Sula has got many role models like Eva, and her own mother Hannah who has witnessed her husband Rekus's early death. Like her mother

Hannah, Sula eschews a definite commitment to a man. It is mentioned in the novel that Hannah “ended up a daylight lover” and chose not to sleep with men because “sleeping with someone implied for her a measure of trust and a definite commitment.” (*Sula*, 44) It is suggested that she makes a man to feel complete as a wonderful being and thus she compliments the women of the town by not belittling their men. Nevertheless, Sula is her mother’s opposite; she just establishes relationships with men and then as it is emphasized in the novel, throws them away. The wives are angry with Sula because:

Sula was trying them out and discarding them without any excuse the men could swallow. So the women, to justify their own judgement, cherished their men more, soothed the pride and vanity Sula had bruised. (*Sula*, 115)

Sula’s hedonistic life without any borders and limits is criticized by the townspeople. She is deemed to detract from the dignity of the community. The roles that the community imposes in the name of black solidarity and survival are subverted by Sula. Her efforts to go beyond the limits by asserting her independence is not appreciated by the members of the community who are beleaguered by the economic restlessness due to the rejection of the black work force by the whites. As it is contended by Gurleen Grewal, “anger at the economic structure that keeps them down is vented on an enemy within, who appears to threaten a precariously functioning world.” (Grewal, 1998: 45) Grewal goes further to employ Madhu Dubey’s deduction, which associates the critical-confining approach of the community with the Black Nationalist movement and the rebellious Sula with the feminist movement, to reinforce her argument that labels *Sula* as a feminist novel. As it is stated before, in the theoretical section, the black nationalist movement expects feminism to remain several steps behind, adopting the black race’s cause as its primary concern and not being a traitor to the race by defending only the women’s cause.

As Madhu Dubey asserts, “*Sula* plays nationalism and feminism against each other” and this is a “dynamic contradiction”; the conflict between the tormented community

and defiant Sula is indicative of "the counterpressure exerted by black nationalist ideology on a feminist articulation of black femininity." (*Ibid*, 45)

It is apparent that Sula has inherited the rebellious qualities, the indifference to social convention from her mother and grandmother. Standing in stark contrast to Sula, Nel inherits conventional values from her family. Nel's mother, Helene Sabat Wright, daughter of a Creole whore called Rochelle, is a pale yellow woman who has adopted middle-class values under the influence of her grandmother, Cecile. Cecile brings up Helene in an effort to avoid her mother's "wild blood", as a result Helene turns out to be a woman obsessed with middle-class respectability. Helene's attempts to reject blackness is compatible with her bourgeois aspirations like the other light-skinned characters in Morrison's novels, like Dr. Foster and his daughter Ruth Dead in *Song of Solomon* and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye*. Nel is brought up in Helene's "incredibly orderly" house, compelled to wear a clothespin, which is an instrument to turn her broad, African nose into a less broad nose. Helene's husband, Wiley Wright is a seaman, and he does not stay at home for a long time, makes short visits because of his occupation. Therefore, Helene, mostly a lonely woman, endeavors to mold Nel's character according to the dictates that she bears in her mind. She does not want Nel to befriend Sula, condemning her mother as "sooty", she does not regard Sula as a suitable friend to her daughter but she cannot prevent them from being close friends. Thus, only when Nel plays with Sula in the Peace household does she feel at ease, enjoying the freedom together with "the throbbing disorder." As can be understood, Nel is not comfortable with her mother's treatments; she does not like her mother's attitude towards blackness. Helene Wright loses respect in the eye of Nel on a train trip to South for Helene's grandmother Cecile's funeral. The white conductor insults them when they are trying to find their way passing through the whites-only part of the train. When they are able to reach the colored-only part, they are relieved but the conductor reminds them of their mistake asking Helene, "What you think you doin', gal?...What was you doin' back in there? What was you doin' in that coach yonder?"(*Sula*, 20-21) At this point, in order to pacify the white conductor Helene smiles, a smile, which Nel cannot stand. She accepts abuse and the fellow black passengers in the coach scorn her because of her foolish, sheepish smile. Thus

no one helps Helene in putting her suitcases in the overhead rack and Nel despises her mother's dazzling smile.

In the following pages of the book, Morrison draws the reader's attention to the self-realization process, which Nel tries to fulfil in order to strip her psyche away from the confining attitudes of her mother. She whispers to herself at night: "I am me... I am not their daughter. I am not Nel. I am me. Me." (*Sula*, 28) She has got a gathering in her like power and her goal is to leave Medallion, but she meets Sula in whose house there are no directions or instructions and after she meets her, she gives up the clothespin and puts it under the blanket as soon as she gets into the bed. She is not interested in smooth hair any more; instead she wanders with her original Afro-style hair.

It is evident that Sula affects Nel; with Sula she becomes an independent figure. It is emphasized by Morrison's omniscient narrator that "Nel seemed stronger and more consistent than Sula, who could hardly be counted on to sustain any emotion for more than three minutes." (*Sula*, 53) Nevertheless, it is Sula who saves Nel and herself when a gang of Irish boys attempted to harass them on their way to home. Sula pulls out Eva's paring knife and she cuts her forefinger, she says: "If I can do it to myself, what you suppose I'll do to you?" (*Sula*, 55) Then the white boys escape leaving the brave Sula and shocked Nel behind.

Sula and Nel are closely connected to each other, they grow up together, they discover men together and they share, as close friends do, secrets, which cannot be disclosed to any other person in the world. However, their secrets are a little bit different, an example of them is the shocking incident, which stays between them as a hidden fact of life. When Sula plays and teases with a [little] boy called Chicken Little, she loses control, she picks him up and swings him outward and around, as a result of this joyful play for the child, Sula drops him into the river. While the water swallows Chicken Little, the two girls stare at the water. The only person who sees the event other than Nel is Shadrack, the World War I veteran and he eases Sula's guilty conscience by implying that he will keep this secret "always." (*Sula*, 63)

The integrity between Sula and Nel is interpreted in many ways and Barbara Smith in her essay "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" evaluates their relationship from her own feminist perspective. According to Smith, Toni Morrison's *Sula* may be termed as "a lesbian novel." Smith states that *Sula* works as a lesbian novel,

.... not only because of the passionate friendship between Sula and Nel, but because of Morrison's consistently critical stance toward the heterosexual institutions of male/female relationships, marriage, and the family. Consciously or not, Morrison's work poses both lesbian and feminist questions about Black women's autonomy and their impact upon each other's lives. (Smith, 1982: 165)

Barbara Smith, before indicating that *Sula* is a lesbian novel, expresses that she takes her cue from a discussion named "Lesbians and Literature" at the 1976 Modern Language Association convention. She is impressed by Bertha Harris's following suggestions on lesbian literature:

If in a woman writer's work a sentence refuses to do what it is supposed to do, if there are strong images of women and there is a refusal to be linear, the result is innately lesbian literature. (*Ibid*, 164)

Hence, Barbara Smith applies this suggestion to Morrison's *Sula* revealing that *Sula* may be considered as a component of lesbian literature "not because women are 'lovers', but because they are the central figures, are positively portrayed and have pivotal relationships with one another." Moreover, the structure, the language and the form of these products do not resemble the products of the white patriarchal culture and they do not appeal to their expectations, which is what a feminist product of art insistently requires.

Although Smith mentions "the erotic romanticism" in *Sula* and Nel's relationship, she nevertheless acknowledges that Morrison "obviously did not intend the reader to perceive Sula and Nel's relationship as inherently lesbian." (*Ibid*, 170) She is right, Morrison in the interview with Claudia Tate talks about the main concerns of *Sula*

and she negates the idea that there is homosexuality in *Sula*. Her ideas upon *Sula* are reflected in Tate's work titled *Black Women Writers at Work* as follows:

When I wrote *Sula*, I knew I was going to write a book about good and evil and about friendship. I had to figure out what kind of people would manifest this theme...Nel would be one kind of person; Sula would be different. Friendship between women is special, different, and has never been depicted as the major focus of a novel before *Sula*. Nobody ever talked about friendship between women unless it was homosexual, and there is no homosexuality in *Sula*...Relationships between women were always written as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing...It seemed to me that black women have friends in the old-fashioned sense of the word; perhaps this isn't true just for black people, but it seemed to me...in *Sula*, it was inevitable I would focus on black women, not out of ignorance of any other kind of people, but because they are of compelling interest to me. (Tate, 1983: 119)

It is accurate that Sula and Nel are friends in the old-fashioned sense of the world; it is as if their world is the same without the interference of anyone. They are the central figures in the novel and they affect each other's development throughout the novel and they are strong characters, even though Nel appears to be conventional when compared to Sula, conventionality is not a measure considering the power of the individual who survives in a state of loneliness. Nel also goes on to live and she is able to look after her children after her husband Jude leaves her, first by taking to cleaning and then working as a chambermaid which she terms as a better job. (*Sula*, 139)

As Morrison aptly remarks they are not lovers in the sexual sense, but they have got a deep relationship. Bertha Harris's descriptions of lesbian novel which are mentioned above are congruent with *Sula*, because in *Sula* the reader sees strong depictions of black women and the narrative structure of the book does not respond to the expectations of an ordinary reader. Then, Sula and Nel are not lovers but "with regard to Harris's framework of lesbian literature," the work may be thought as a lesbian novel.

The relationship between Sula and Nel is damaged in the novel when Nel decides to get married to Jude Greene. After their wedding ceremony, Sula leaves Medallion

and does not come back for ten years. Jude Greene is one of the boys in Medallion who is not welcomed to the road work – an emblem of masculine power. The whites do not want Negroes to work; instead “thin-armed white boys from the Virginia hills and the bull-necked Greeks and Italians” (*Sula*, 82) are picked out by the white gang boss. The roadwork is equal to taking on a man’s role for the black boys in the town but they are not able to achieve it. In a metaphorical sense, their masculinity is denied by the dominant white population. Therefore, Jude Greene, his aspirations truncated due to the racist treatments, needs someone to “care about his hurt.” He thinks it through and chooses Nel as his future wife. His dreams about marriage are reflected by the narrator as follows:

Whatever his fortune, whatever the cut of his garment, there would always be the hem-the tuck and fold that hid his raveling edges; a someone sweet, industrious and loyal to shore him up. And in return he would shelter her, love her, grow old with her. Without that someone he was a waiter hanging around a kitchen like a woman. With her he was head of a household pinned to an unsatisfactory job out of necessity. The two of them together would make one Jude. (*Sula*, 83)

Thus, in the eyes of Jude, Nel is a nurturer of his emotions showing no signs of aggression when she is not accompanied by Sula. Nel’s identity merges with Jude’s, she assimilates herself into Jude’s self and in Gurleen Grewal’s words she abandons “the creative project of her own self-making for his struggle with subordination within the dominant social order.” (Grewal, 1998: 47) Hence, there are no assertions like “I am me” on the part of Nel. Grewal demonstrates that this kind of subservience is an epitome of the Black Nationalist erasure of the feminist claims.

Nel’s easy acquiescence in Jude’s exploitative treatment may be associated with her upbringing at the hands of Helene Wright. She is unable to assert herself and defers to the secondary role as a wife who tries to mitigate the results of deprivation. Jude tells Nel and Sula about how he is insulted by a customer and his boss, and he ends his story “with the observation that a Negro man had a row to hoe in this world.” He expects a “milkwarm commiseration” (*Sula*, 103) and his pride to be restored. Nel is ready to coddle Jude while Sula responds to his tale with a humorous rejoinder.

As regards Kubitschek's interpretation, Nel's consoling attitude towards Jude is "the conventional black woman's response to white victimization of black men." (Kubitschek, 1998: 61) Nevertheless, her husband Jude does not appreciate Nel's love and protective disposition. He flies away, as black men generally do, after having a sexual relationship with Sula - although he has thought before that Sula is a funny woman who "stirred a man's mind, but not his body." (*Sula*, 104) He does nothing to compensate for his unfaithful action and leaves the town. As a consequence, Nel is deprived of both her husband and her best friend Sula. Morrison, as it is indicated before, does not endeavor to impose moral judgements and she does not judge Sula, even reflects Sula's innocent claims from Sula's own point of view when she thinks about Nel. Sula thinks that "she had no thought at all of causing Nel pain when she bedded down with Jude." (*Sula*, 119) Having no intimate knowledge of marriage, she cannot understand why Nel responds to her action in a conventional way, considering that "Nel wanted everything." Moreover, she regards Nel as having the same qualities with other ordinary women in the town whose beautiful bronze had been dusted with ash, whose eyes "that had once opened wide to the moon bent into grimy sickles of concern." (*Sula*, 121) She ruminates over the lives of Bottom women who are tormented by the confining duties of marriage and motherhood. Her negative thoughts about women in the town are reflected below:

Those with husbands had folded themselves into starched coffins...
Those without men were like sour-tipped needles featuring one constant empty eye. Those with men had had the sweetness sucked from their breath by ovens and steam kettles. (*Sula*, 122)

In the midst of those women who have adopted the traditional values and are therefore subjected to the debilitating effects of marriage, Sula stands as a pariah, a strong and different character. She is able to attempt to take a risk towards free fall but Nel, in contrast, is not able to go beyond the limits. Sula thinks that Nel belongs to the town and behaves as the others, she regrets that Nel is not able to strip herself of the structural constraints. Her regret breeds the following critical opinions about Nel:

Nel was the first person who had been real to her, whose name she knew, who had seen as she had the slant of life that made it possible to stretch to its limits. Now Nel was one of *them*. One of the spiders whose only thought was the next rung of the web, who dangled in dark dry places suspended by their own spittle, more terrified of the free fall than the snake's breath below. If they were touched by the snake's breath, however fatal, they were merely victims and knew how to behave in that role (just as Nel knew how to behave as the wronged wife). But the free fall, oh no, that required-demanded-invention: a thing to do with the wings, a way of holding the legs and most of all a full surrender to the downward flight if they wished to taste their tongues or stay alive. But alive was what they, and now Nel, did not want to be. Too dangerous. (*Sula*, 119-120)

Nel is not able to spread her wings and lead her life as a free woman and she is not able to behave as Sula expects her to when she faces the disloyalty of her husband and her close friend. Yet, she succeeds in staying alive and at the end of the novel, she realizes at last what Sula has discovered before that "a lover was not a comrade and could never be-for a woman." (*Sula*, 121) It may be pointed out that Sula's attitude towards marriage and her ideas about her "old acquaintances", the married women, reflect Morrison's own point of view, her opinions about marriage. Morrison's black women characters, as it may be recognized, are all forsaken women who have got temporary relationships with men, who have experienced transient happiness through their marriages. Eva, Nel, Helene Wright, Sula, Hannah are all solitary women who are not gratified by their relationship with men.

Toni Morrison, as it is evident in her novel *Beloved* as well, portrays black male characters who are psychologically hurt and dejected owing to the subjugation they experience throughout their lives. As a result, these black men are not able to establish healthy relationships with black women and when they do, like Jude, they are not able to display consistent attitudes. Halle, Howard, Burglar, Paul D in *Beloved* and Shadrack, Jude, Plum in *Sula* are not the representatives of powerful black individuals unlike their mothers, lovers or friends.

Shadrack is described in the opening of the novel as a World War I veteran who has suffered from shell shock and stays at a hospital for a period of time. He is not able

to recover from the shell shock and returns home as a disabled veteran. In order to control his fear and despair, to confront and dismiss the possibility of suicide, he creates a day called National Suicide Day. His peculiar annual ritual is viewed by the community with disdain. They deride his celebration, his wandering in the streets with a cowbell and a hangman's rope inviting people to take the chance and kill themselves if they want to on that particular day. Shadrack is an outcast like Sula, he does oppose the norms of the town. A dissenter in the town, he does not communicate with people, he just communicates with Sula when he pacifies her with his word "always" and at the end of the novel, after Sula's death, he celebrates his last National Suicide Day, which will cause a disaster.

Plum is another tormented black male character in the novel, who returns home from war and withdraws into the oblivion as a heroin-addict. Unable to witness her son's defeat, Eva kills Plum by setting his room to fire. As Grewal stresses, she pronounces him unfit to live and she takes his life with her own hands. (Grewal, 1998: 51) Eva is a survivor, a strong woman and thus she cannot bear the vulnerability of her son, she wanted her son to rise and act as she did in the past but it is impossible for Plum, a weak, depressed figure. She tells her daughter Hannah that Plum wants to get back into her womb as follows:

There wasn't space for him in my womb. And he was crawling back. Being helpless and thinking baby thoughts and dreaming baby dreams and messing up his pants again and smiling all the time. I had room enough in my heart, but not in my womb, not no more. I birthed him once. I couldn't do it again...when I closed my eyes I'd see him...six feet tall smilin' and crawlin' up the stairs quietlike so I wouldn't hear. (*Sula*, 71)

She is unable to accept his regressive state and as she maintains she has done everything she could to make him leave her and go on to live and "be a man." However, she is not successful in her efforts to turn Plum into a healthy individual again. As a consequence, she confesses to Hannah: "I had to keep him out so I just thought of a way he could die like a man not all scrunched up inside my womb, but like a man." (*Sula*, 72)

Eva's decision to kill her son reminds the reader of Sethe's decision to kill her children. These women are determined and powerful figures, Sethe is able to escape from slavery on her own and Eva is able to stay alive for her children after her husband leaves her alone in the world. Sethe kills Beloved in order to avoid her child's suffering at the hands of the white masters and Eva kills Plum, an oppressed figure who fought for the United States which denied his racial identity and thus existence. Sethe endeavours to avert the future-oppression whereas Eva strives to eradicate the consequence of the oppression. They do not want to witness their children's victimization.

There are other male characters in the novel such as Tar Baby, the Deweys and Ajax. Morrison presents them as eccentric individuals who are, like other black male figures in the novel, not as assertive as the black female characters. Tar Baby is Eva's tenant, who is "a beautiful, slight, quiet man." (*Sula*, 39) As regards the townspeople's observation, he is half white but Eva regards him as "all white." Furthermore, because of his milky skin and cornsilk hair, Eva starts to call him as Tar Baby. He is a drunkard who seldom works but does not disturb anyone in the town. He only drinks himself to death and ironically goes to Wednesday-night prayer meetings in order to sing "In the Sweet By-and-By." (*Sula*, 40) Tar Baby is a lonely man apart from his performance at the prayer meetings. He is a figure who is depicted by Morrison to add color to her work because, as it may be examined Morrison does not portray flat, uninteresting characters. She presents the character as a colorful one, as an interesting character about whom she says little and expects the reader to comment. Thus, Tar Baby is a light-skinned outcast in the novel, another fair-skinned character who is not able to communicate with other individuals but chooses to drink himself to death.

The Deweys are three black boys, who are adopted and named by Eva without regard to their separate identities. The first one is described as a deeply black boy, the other one is light-skinned, and the third one is half Mexican with chocolate skin. For Eva, although their differences are evident, they are "all deweys." Hence, they remain

infantile and they never become self-confident adults. The obliteration of individuality here may be likened to the black male slaves' absence of identity at Sweet Home in *Beloved*. At Sweet Home, the black males are named as Pauls, Paul A, Paul D, Paul F, their distinct traits are not taken into consideration by the white master. Gurleen Grewal associates Eva's treatment of the three waifs with "her need to control the threat of chaos." (Grewal, 1998: 51) The Deweys become physically indistinguishable and their growing stops at 48 inches, they are the epitomes of black male characters whose identities are suppressed.

Ajax is one of the members of the last generation, trapped by society's restrictions. He is a black male living in the Bottom and like Eva's husband BoyBoy, and like Nel's husband Jude, he leaves Medallion. His attitude resembles that of the other black males in the town, he leaves his woman, Sula. Ajax is fascinated by airplanes and flying, connected with his admiration for freedom, but he cannot fulfill his desire to fly airplanes, he is a black man disfranchised like the other ones in Morrison's novels, a victim of the dominant white economy. He is impressed by the unconventional women like his own mother who "is an evil conjure woman" who knows about the weather, the living and the dead, the omens. She is a skilled woman who allows his sons to be free. Sula's "elusiveness and indifference to established habits of behaviour" (*Sula*, 127) reminds Ajax of his mother. Thus, he admires Sula's unconventionality, her free spirit. The relationship between Sula and Ajax shows that women should always be strong and they should, in Sula's words, hold their heads stiff lest they may lose their heads like the dolls. (*Sula*, 136) Until Sula meets Ajax, she does not give any value to males, she has got short-lived relationships with his male lovers.

Only once in the novel Sula begins to act as a stereotypical non-feministic conforming woman. Sula begins to behave differently in her relationship with Ajax. Ajax pursues Sula because like his own mother she is "the only other woman he knew whose life was her own, who could deal with life efficiently, and who was not interested in nailing him" (*Sula*, 127). In the beginning their relationship is one of equal freedom: both remain separate and strong, and they like each other because of

the atmosphere of mutual respect and distance. Sula begins "to discover what possession (is)" and turns out to be a different woman. She ties ribbons in her hair and cleans her house (*Sula*, 130). It is only after Sula changes that Ajax leaves her, for she has become to him like all other women, weak and clinging. When her strength evaporates to mindless womanly tasks of straightening and primping, so does his interest evaporate. Thus Sula understands her tragic flaw, on her death bed, she does not think about Ajax but her comrade Nel, she thinks that she should tell Nel about dying, that it does not hurt. She says: "Well, I'll be damned...it didn't even hurt. Wait'll I tell Nel." (*Sula*, 149) Morrison seems to imply that whether the female is conventional or unconventional, it does not matter; the relationships between black men and black women are crippled. As a result, female camaraderie is crucial for black women and it is always better for them to hold their heads stiff and be powerful both in their relationships with men and the community.

Sula's elusiveness, her sexual adventures, her independence, and her free actions are not appreciated by the black community in Bottom. In that small community, black people are aware of each other's actions, they know exactly what each member does in a particular place. They know about Ajax and Sula, Sula and Jude, and all the relationships Sula establishes. For the community, Sula is the embodiment of a threatening evil and in the name of fighting against the evil-natured Sula, the black community unites. They are not able to come to terms with Sula's eccentric ways; she is a college-graduate and a dangerous artist who has no art form. When she comes back to town after ten years following her departure immediately after Nel's wedding ceremony, she is accompanied by a plague of robins and the townspeople are alarmed by the impending evil, the imminence of bad events. The community recalls that Sula has watched, without intervening, her mother Hannah burn. They interpret the meaning of the birthmark over Sula's eye as the mark of her mother's ashes. Moreover, she is despised by the community because she slept with white men. There is nothing lower she can do, there is nothing filthier than sleeping with a white man. The community insists on the idea that "all unions between white men and black women be rape; for a black woman to be willing was literally unthinkable." (*Sula*, 113) On the other hand, she is criticized by the community for

having put Eva in Sunnydale, a nursing home, an action by no means acceptable for the black community.

Thus, Sula is regarded as a witch owing to her deviation from generally accepted standards of behaviour. Morrison's omniscient narrator emphasizes the townspeople's remarks about Sula: "she was free of any normal signs of vulnerability." (*Sula*, 115) Some of the men in the town draw the others' attention to the fact that "neither gnats nor mosquitoes would settle on her." (*Sula*, 115) Therefore, she is claimed to be a witch, a supernatural evil creature against whom the community must fight as a unified force. The community's reaction to Sula's independence is a centuries-old reaction to women who are unconventional and their persistent remark that she is a "witch" is a reminiscent of the attitude of many confining communities towards the majority of women who are rebellious.

The community's conviction of Sula's evil changes them, as the narrator indicates:

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. In their world, aberrations were as much a part of nature as grace. (*Sula*, 117-118)

The portrayal of evil and good is one of the most crucial issues that Morrison attaches importance to. In *Sula*, the incarnation of evil is the unusual character of Sula who is the pariah in the community and the black community perturbed by Sula's rebellious presence see themselves as good people. Morrison maintains that she takes particular delight in reflecting the pariah figure in her writing. In her opinion, the black community is a pariah community. Furthermore, the black people are pariahs. She says: "a community contains pariahs within it that are very useful for the conscience of that community." (Tate, 1983: 129)

In *Sula*, Morrison endeavors to bring forth black people's response to evil, their traditional means of coping with evil. The black people think that evil has a natural place in the universe. They do not wish to eradicate it; they want to protect

themselves from it, even to manipulate it. According to Morrison and the community, “evil is not an alien force; it is just a different force” and that is the evil Morrison describes in *Sula*. (Tate, 1983: 129) Morrison tries to show that their African cosmology is different than Western cosmology and their concept of evil is different than the other peoples’. The community in *Sula*, in Morrison’s opinion, is very nurturing for Sula. Her ideas about the community and Sula may be examined in the following lines:

There was no other place in the world she could have lived without being harmed. Whatever they think about Sula, however she is strange to them, however different, they won’t harm her. Medallion is a sustaining environment even for a woman who is very different. nobody is going to lynch her or call the police. They call her bad names and try to protect themselves from her evil; that’s all. But they put her to very good use, which is a way of manipulating her. (Tate, 1983: 130)

It may be pointed out that they manipulate Sula in order to prove that they are good people. Nevertheless, Morrison does not say a final word, does not affect her readers considering the evaluation of good and bad. Sula’s watching her mother Hannah burn is out of curiosity, as it is underlined in the book from Sula’s own point of view, she stood there watching her burn and she was thrilled. She wanted her to keep on jerking like that, to keep on dancing. (*Sula*, 147) It is not highlighted whether Sula has got devilish thoughts in her head or not. She is depicted as an artist, dangerous because “she has no art form.” (*Sula*, 121) During a conversation between Sula and Nel, the reader encounters a dilemma, the focal point of which is the concepts of good and bad. Nel decides to pay a visit to her old friend’s house when she hears that she is sick. Sula appears as a powerful and tenacious figure even if she is on her deathbed. There occurs Sula and Nel’s confrontation, which recapitulates Sula’s argument with Eva over conventional roles of women. Nel again demonstrates the fact that she belongs to the town, she has adopted the taken for granted beliefs of the town. For Nel, Sula’s actions are unacceptable and impossible, she angrily states:

You *can’t* do it all. 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. (*Sula*, 142)

Moreover, Nel reveals that Sula is lonely but Sula defiantly announces: "my lonely is *mine*... Your lonely is somebody else's...A second hand lonely." (*Sula*, 143) Sula stresses that men are not worth more than her and implies that nothing is more important than her. Sula challenges Nel with her final remark, asking Nel: "How you know?... About who was good. How you know it was you?...I mean maybe it wasn't you. Maybe it was me." (*Sula*, 146)

It may be contended that by putting forward Sula's statement which questions the good and the bad, Morrison once more points out that she does not impose final judgments and that there are shallow boundaries between the good and bad. Nel joins with the community to view Sula as a pariah but Nel and the community are also a part of a race that is regarded as pariah, there are many kinds of dilemmas in Morrison's works forcing the reader to stop and ponder upon the disturbing issues.

As Diane Gillespie and Missy Dehn Kubitschek in their essay "Who Cares? Women-Centered Psychology in *Sula*" suggest,

Nel's rejection of Sula is a microcosm of the community's rejection, for the Bottom's judgment of a woman living an experimental life is severe. Sula functions as Scapegoat (Royster). (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 2000: 85)

Sula is a scapegoat and the members of the community measure themselves against this malignant enemy. When Sula dies and the enemy withdraws to the other world, the community returns to its old way of life. Sula was bad, they were good but now there is no one to measure themselves against. Therefore, the women in the town change again, they are not good and affectionate mothers anymore. The "mothers who had defended their children from Sula's malevolence (or who had defended their positions as mothers from Sula's scorn for the role)" (*Sula*, 153), now have no "other" to confront.

In rejecting its own member, in a sense the community rejects itself. The only person who mourns after Sula's death is Shadrack whose only visitor is Sula. Sula went to Shadrack's place to hear the reassuring word "always" and she has hitherto been his only friend, his social life, his company, his guest. (*Sula*, 157) Shadrack does not want to celebrate the National Suicide Day anymore, after Sula's death everything turns out to be meaningless to him. Nevertheless, his rope improperly tied, his bell having "a tiny unimpassioned sound", not caring for the other people in the town, not caring "whether he helped or not" (*Sula*, 158), Shadrack sets off early in the morning in order to invite people to end their lives for the last time.

With regard to Kubitschek's view, which she puts forward in her critical companion to Toni Morrison's novels, "not male rejection of women's independence, but women's rejection of their independent female selves...triggers the death of the Bottom." (Kubitschek, 1998: 64) Dessie and Ivy, two black women in the Bottom, are the first to join the last parade that is organized by Shadrack. They start to walk together with Shadrack, laughing and mocking his parade. Then others join Shadrack, the deweys, Tar Baby, most of the people in the town, laughing, dancing, calling to one another. They form a pile behind Shadrack and follow him up to the tunnel where the roadwork that is managed by the whites takes place. At the gate of the tunnel, the people turn out to be infuriated figures and in a spontaneous act of rebellion, they start to demolish "the tunnel they were forbidden to build." (*Sula*, 161) Most of them die there when the earth caves in. Tar Baby, the deweys, Dessie and Ivy, all die there. Shadrack does not die; he just witnesses the disaster, ringing his bell.

The tunnel is the embodiment of the black people's aspirations, their denied wishes, their predicament, their ordeal. Thus, immediately after Sula dies, they lose the target towards which they direct their anger, their rage. The tunnel as the incarnation of the white men's power causes the death of the majority of people that belong to the black community in the Bottom. It is ironical that the tunnel disaster occurs in 1941 after Sula dies in 1940, an ironical fatal incident which ascertains that the community cannot live without the emblem of female independence, Sula. Hence, Morrison's

Sula, clarifies the point which appears to be complicated, by drawing the reader's attention to the fact that if the community rejects the free spirits, the independent female self, it destroys itself. The Bottom, a pariah as well as the character Sula, should not have rejected the non-conformist figures inherent in itself. Kubitschek, as well, supporting the same points articulates her ideas on Sula and the community:

When individuals and communities fail to take responsibility for discovering, examining, and acting on their own natures, they inevitably become unbearable burdens for individual women and for the archetypal female life force. (Kubitschek, 1998: 65)

In the novel's final chapter the reader observes Nel in 1965, she is the only figure in the novel that, after Sula's death, is able to attain moral maturity in taking responsibility for discovering her own nature. In the last chapter titled 1965, Morrison does not mention the Civil Rights Movement but it is obvious in the novel that the movement has broken the community's unity, if there was one. There is a great change and change is what Nel fears because as she stresses "hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change." (*Sula*, 108)

As the omniscient narrator points out the Bottom has collapsed because the black people are interested in the valley which is inhabited by the whites and on the contrary, white people are building towers for television stations up in the Bottom. Therefore, hill land, once deemed as useless, is valuable for the white people. They have changed their minds and as the narrator tells, "instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now they wanted a hilltop house with a river view." (*Sula*, 166) The black people, always jealous of white people seem to follow the white men's track, as the narrator suggests:

The black people, for all their new look, seemed awfully anxious to get to the valley, or leave town, and abandon the hills to whoever was interested. It was sad, because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn-and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by. (*Sula*, 166)

Amidst a mood of growing restlessness, amidst this hubhub Nel wanders in the streets of the Bottom and then she visits Eva in the home for the aged, in Sunnydale. They do not have a peaceful conversation and throughout this conversation Nel feels the spite of Eva, the same spite that permeates the air of the Bottom, which is not softened by the death of Sula. After leaving her, Nel visits Sula's grave in the colored part of the cemetery and as she walks along the road from Sula's grave, suddenly she stops and there she remembers Sula and understands that she has missed Sula, has longed for Sula, her best friend, for all the years that have passed by. Morrison depicts the last scene eloquently, reflecting Nel's pain and longing:

"Sula?" she whispered, gazing at the tops of trees. "Sula?" Leaves stirred; mud shifted; there was the smell of overripe green things. A soft ball of fur broke and scattered like dandelion spores in the breeze. "All that time, all that time, I thought I was missing Jude." And the loss pressed down on her chest and came up into her throat. "We was girls together," she said as though explaining something. "O Lord, Sula", she cried, "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl." (*Sula*, 174)

The agony is defined as "a fine cry", having no bottom and no top, "just circles and circles of sorrow." The soft ball of fur is the gray ball of fur that is, according to Gillespie and Kubitschek, the embodiment of Nel's "submerged needs" that are floating outside of her field of vision. (Gillespie and Kubitschek, 2000: 74) The ball of fur is broken at the end of the novel and Nel is able to overcome, at last, the confining measures. She is able to attain moral maturity in realizing that what she seeks and needs is Sula's friendship and the female solidarity between them.

Thus, in the last scene of the novel, Nel abandons the conventional feminine voice and her supreme attachment to her husband. Nel's last words in the novel may be associated with Sula's last words which are uttered, as the narrator suggests, after her death, "Wait'll I tell Nel." (*Sula*, 149) Their attachment to each other may well be understood by taking their words into consideration. The last words uttered by Sula and Nel represent the significance of female companionship. It may be contended that Morrison endeavors to express what black women mean to each other. With

regard to Barbara Smith's view, "the final passage verifies the depth of Sula and Nel's relationship and its centrality to an accurate interpretation of the work." (Smith, 1982: 170)

In the Bottom, then, the female selves who are able to fulfil their self-realization processes, who assert themselves as self-reliant, are the ones who survive in the community. *Sula*, as a women-centered novel, celebrates the powerful black female characters who lead their lives without the help of men. The community, on the other hand, as Morrison implies, should not disown its strong, independent female members because by casting them off, the community makes a fatal mistake. The powerful black women figures and their feminist energies are necessary for the survival of the black race, the black community.

4. THE ARCHETYPAL HEROINE IN SONG OF SOLOMON

Toni Morrison's third novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977) is among the complex studies of the writer, a novel which encompasses innumerable allusions to crucial issues such as racism, class, and gender differences.

Although, in this novel, the central storyline seems to be a black male's quest for identity, Toni Morrison's black feminist standpoint enables the readers to examine the novel from the perspective of feminism. As a matter of fact, in *Song of Solomon*, like in *Beloved* and *Sula*, Toni Morrison centers on black female characters who are different, outrageous, and able to survive, again in a dominant white culture.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison is able to, in Timothy B. Powell's words, "de-centre the white *logos*". She is able to create a fictional world, which defies the dictates of the dominant culture by focusing primarily on oral texts like "spirituals, blues, and folktales." (Powell, 2000: 47) She is a black woman writer who is able "to lift the black self out of the hole, to bring the meanings out of the semantic shadows of the Master's language" (*Ibid*). The powerful African American woman Pilate, a representative of the strong women of Africa who are able to survive under harsh circumstances, fulfils the task in *Song of Solomon*.

Toni Morrison, in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" expresses her wish, her yearning for a closer identification of the black writer with her community, she states:

There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community. (Wilentz, 2000: 109)

Morrison asserts herself as a genuine representative of the tribe by depicting her female characters as authentic African figures, by adopting the traditional African modes of storytelling, oral tradition, and myths. According to Gay Wilentz, Toni Morrison endeavours “to transform Eurocentric cultural discourse through the acceptance of African heritage, told by generations of women storytellers.” (Wilentz, 2000: 110)

The African heritage is kept alive by the women storytellers like Aunt Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd in *Song of Solomon*. Milkman Dead, the male protagonist, under the tutelage of his aunt Pilate, discovers his African past, the crucial vernacular tradition of songs, blues and spirituals and he realizes the power of the African self. Toni Morrison describes *Song of Solomon* as “a journey from stupidity to epiphany, of a man, a complete man.” (Grewal, 1998: 62) It is made evident in the novel by Morrison that the male character’s initiation into maturity is only possible under the guidance of black women figures like Pilate. It is crucial for the black male protagonist to learn to attach importance to black women and his culture. Thus, he undergoes a process of self-realization guided by the women around him.

As it is noted by Gay Wilentz, some male critics, for instance, Mel Watkins of the New York Times, have empathised with *Song of Solomon* rather than *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* since *Song of Solomon* is about black men, not about “the insulated, parochial world of black women.” Nevertheless, as regards Wilentz’s remark, “the work is equally concerned with the world of black women that is disparaged by Watkins, and the focal character of the novel is Milkman’s aunt, Pilate.” (Wilentz, 2000: 111)

In the first part of the novel, Milkman is delineated as a black male figure enjoying the middle-class comforts provided by his father Macon Dead. He feels alienated and not at ease in his family and in the community. He is dissatisfied with his life style, his possessions, and his father’s job. As a result, in the second part of the novel, he undertakes a journey to the South, which may be called as a spiritual journey through which he explores the southern settings significant for his family’s history. He goes

to Danville, Pennsylvania, and Shalimar, Virginia and he discovers his roots in these places, his African heritage.

Milkman's father Macon Dead and his mother Ruth Foster Dead are isolated figures and their isolation is an evidence which justifies Milkman's alienation. Macon Dead is an ambitious black man who is despised by the black community. He is a representative of the emergent middle-class blacks in America, standing in stark contrast to Pilate Dead who is an embodiment of the African values, the African past. According to Gurleen Grewal, "Toni Morrison's novels tend to bridge the gap between emergent middle-class black America and its subaltern origins," (Grewal, 1998: 4) and Morrison displays her work as "peasant literature for her people." Toni Morrison's peasant literature is, therefore, an art form, not pertaining to the interests of the middle-class. As a result, her depiction of the bourgeois black characters are not positive as in the example of middle-class Helene Wright in *Sula* and Macon Dead in *Song of Solomon*. Morrison reflects Eva, Hannah, Sula in her novel *Sula* as more sympathetic characters than Helene; and in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate is represented as a peasant woman, whose "formidable strength arises from her nonbourgeois identity." (Grewal, 1998: 5)

Macon Dead hankers after money and power that are under the control of the white people. He wants to have what the white people possess; he is fascinated by their power. As a consequence, he fulfils his wish by gaining properties, living on rent monies from the black community, being one of the richest black men in the town. He becomes a cruel man who, for the sake of piling up his income, does not take pity on the poor condition of the black people. For example, he ruthlessly attempts to evict Mrs. Bains who is the mother of Guitar, Milkman's comrade, without regard to their poor condition. He just attaches importance to money, which he considers as the most important thing in the world, which will make him as powerful as, as wealthy as the white people in Michigan.

Ruth Foster Dead, the daughter of the richest Negro doctor in town, is Milkman's mother. She is a woman who is hungry for love and affection, she cannot satisfy her

hunger in her marriage with Macon Dead. Her father is described by the omniscient narrator as “a high-yellow nigger who loved ether and hated black skin.” (*Song of Solomon*: 87) As it is stated by Macon Dead who feels belittled in front of Ruth’s father, “Dr. Foster didn’t give a damn about Negroes even though the Negroes worshipped him. He called Negroes as cannibals.” (*Song of Solomon*: 80) Ruth is not a strong black woman, most probably because of her lemony light-skin, like other light skinned characters in Morrison’s novels. However, she is not negatively portrayed like Helene Wright in *Sula*. The reader is able to take pity on her loneliness, her desperate craving for love. Nevertheless, she is not able to confront her husband, she cannot defend herself against him. She is a frail woman, who, with the help of Macon Dead’s sister Pilate, succeeds being a survivor. David Cowart stresses that “Morrison deplores the Dead family’s failure to cohere and its petit-bourgeois attempts to distance itself from a larger idea of ethnic community.” (Cowart, 2000: 102)

Pilate Dead defies all the norms of the middle-class blacks. She is a different black woman without a navel. Her namesake is the Roman Pontius Pilate who presided over the trial of Jesus Christ before Crucifixion. However, throughout the novel, she is not a killer but a life-saver, a nurturer. She saves Macon Dead III’s – Milkman’s life by preventing his father from beating Ruth Dead when she is pregnant. Morrison, through the characterization of Pilate, emphasizes the significance of African values and African culture. As Macon Dead tells his son Milkman, “If you ever have a doubt we from Africa, look at Pilate,” Pilate is a custodian of her African culture. According to Gay Wilentz, “Pilate has all the qualities Morrison associates with an ideal African woman: She has stature, strength, presence.” (Wilentz, 2000: 116)

There is a rift between Macon Dead and Pilate throughout the novel, which stems from a misunderstanding on the part of Macon. Their father, Macon whose real name is Jake but recorded as Macon (the name of his place of birth) by a drunken Yankee as a result of a literal slip of the pen, is murdered by the white people. Jake does not take the white men’s intimidation into consideration and he does not leave his land when they order him to. Then, Pilate and Macon, having witnessed their father’s

murder, hide in the murderer white family's house with the help of their black maid Circe and then in a cave where Macon kills a white man whom he considers a threat. Macon assumes that Pilate has stolen the white man's gold that they have discovered in the cave. However, he is mistaken, Pilate is the one who does not attach importance to material wealth. Hence, Macon hates and criticizes Pilate; he does not want Milkman to see his aunt.

Pilate has got manly qualities, owns a wine-house, she is a bootlegger who, by taking advantage of the Prohibition and the Depression, the crash of 1929, produces cheap home brew for the buyers and she makes a huge amount of money but as she indicates she has no interest in accumulating wealth. Wearing unlaced man's shoes, she behaves like a man, she wanders around independent like a man. She has got the courage to set out for a journey on her own at the age of twelve after her father is murdered. Whereas her brother goes to the North, she heads for Virginia where she thinks "her people" live. On her journey towards her roots, she is constantly discarded by the other people due to the absence of a navel, which they regard as unnatural, and they do not want to be "in the company of something God never made." (*Song of Solomon*, 159) As Morrison's narrator suggest:

It was the absence of a navel that convinced people that she had not come into this world through normal channels; had never lain, floated, or grown in some warm and liquid place connected by a tissue-thin tube to a reliable source of human nourishment. (*Song of Solomon*, 35)

In its absence, the navel marks Pilate as a different character and she becomes one of the most striking black women characters of Toni Morrison, standing among Sethe in *Beloved* who is marked by a chokecherry tree on her back and Sula in *Sula* who has got a birth mark over her eye that is interpreted in several ways. Pilate undertakes several jobs in each town that she stays in and when the other people recognize her peculiarity, she is again a wanderer on the roads with her geography book. She works as a washerwoman, works side by side with the root workers. Able to hide her unusual quality, she establishes relationships with the other black workers who understand that she does not like any sorts of restrictions. Pilate, cognizant of the fact

that the sight of her belly without a navel invokes outrage, covers it and thus she is accepted to be a member of the community. Her last station is an island off the coast of Virginia which is a suitable place for a woman like Pilate who does not like "the mainland and the confinement of town." (*Song of Solomon*, 162) Having managed to keep direct light from ever hitting her stomach, she has got a lover from one of the island families and there she gets pregnant. She refuses to marry the man, the father of her baby girl Rebecca whose name she chooses from the Bible, following the tradition of choosing names from the Bible randomly as his father did.

Restlessness seizes Pilate's psyche and it is underlined by the omniscient narrator that "it was as if her geography book had marked her roam the country." (*Song of Solomon*, 163) Hence, she leaves the island and she does not worry about the navel any more. The lack of a navel isolates her as the narrator underscores:

Already without the family, she was further isolated from her people, for, except the relative bliss on the island, every other resource was denied her: partnership in marriage, confessional friendship, and communal religion. (*Song of Solomon*, 164)

Finally, she begins to take offence and she decides "to begin at zero," cutting her hair, wearing outrageous dresses, staring at other people, which is an act considered as the height of rudeness among the blacks, giving up all interest in table manners or hygiene. Only after Reba becomes a grown-up and gives birth to a child named Hagar does Pilate make a decision to have a settled life. Furthermore, she finds Macon, her brother who has got a conventional life, which Pilate deems as suitable for a neat girl like Hagar. She arrives at the town where Macon and his family live "with suitcases, a green sack, a full-grown daughter, and a granddaughter," to find her brother "truculent, inhospitable, embarrassed, and unforgiving." (*Song of Solomon*, 167)

Macon as a middle-class patriarch reflects the conventional attitude of men towards unconventional women. Contemptuous of Pilate's feminist response to traditional norms, he berates her saying:

Why can't you dress like a woman? What's that sailor's cap doing on your head? Don't you have stockings? What are you trying to make me look like in this town?" (*Song of Solomon*, 27)

He is worried about what the white men in the bank who help him in buying and mortgaging houses may think when they discover the "raggedy bootlegger was his sister." He condemns the two women, Pilate and Reba owing to the fact that they do not have husbands and he likens them to "common street women" because they sell wine and sing in the streets. Robert James Butler points out that Pilate is "one of the very few women in American literature capable of leading the picaresque life, which is given so easily to the male protagonists." (quoted in Grewal, 1998: 74) Nevertheless, Pilate's own brother and the community do not approve of that kind of picaresque life. As a consequence, Pilate and her daughter Reba, and Reba's daughter Hagar create their own community at Pilate's house, estranged from the society due to their unaccustomed lives. Pilate's house bears a striking resemblance to Eva's household in *Sula*, they have got the same qualities as regards the disorder and a dearth of a male figure. Three generations of women living in a single household where "no meal is ever planned, balanced or served." The freedom of the black women living at Pilate's house is further exposed by the omniscient narrator:

Nor was there any gathering at the table. Pilate might bake hot bread and each one of them would eat it with butter whenever she felt like it. Or there might be grapes, left over from the winemaking, or peaches for days on end. If one of them bought a gallon of milk they drank it until it was gone. If another got a half bushel of tomatoes or a dozen ears of corn, they ate them until they were gone too. They ate what they had or came across or had a craving for. (*Song of Solomon*, 37)

Pilate, Reba and Hagar do not have to obey the dictates of a patriarchal figure because they do not have one to rule over them. The lack of a patriarch enables them to be free and behave as they like, do whatever they want, be responsible for no domestic duties. Gay Wilentz in his essay on *Song of Solomon* highlights the resemblance of Pilate's house to a typical African house because she foregoes gas and electricity by using candles and kerosene, and she cooks over a three-stone fireplace which is, as Wilentz suggests, a direct carryover from the Bakongo peoples

in central Africa. (Wilentz, 2000: 116-130) The facts reflected by Morrison's narrator indicate that Pilate is an archetypal African heroine embracing the culture and values of Africa while rejecting the dictates of the dominant white culture.

Pilate becomes an emotional support for Milkman, who, as a boy, meets his aunt and finds comfort in the disorderly house of her. He escapes from the sterility of the Dead household and he perceives what is not seen by the other people in the town, enjoying emotional connection, music and harmony. In one scene of the novel, Milkman's father Macon Dead stands in the shadows, hidden outside his sister Pilate's home. He watches and listens to three women sing, Pilate's powerful contralto and Reba's piercing soprano accompanied by the soft voice of Hagar affect Macon so deeply that he thinks of fields, wild turkey and calico, remembrances of his days in the South. Macon feels "the irritability of the day drain from him" and feels himself "softening under the weight of memory and music." (*Song of Solomon*, 38-39)

There is a sharp discrepancy between the male-headed household of Macon and the female-headed household of Pilate. At Pilate's house, the blues tradition is kept alive, the language of resistance for the black people at the time of slavery. Through singing and giving voice to the blues tone, which enlivens their psyches, as it is known, the black people have found the courage to defy the oppression of the white people. With regard to the black feminist critic Angela Davis's analysis, "art is special because of its ability to influence feelings as well as knowledge." Moreover, she states that the dominant group has been unable to understand the social function of music and to what extent it takes part in all aspects of life in West African society. As Davis suggests,

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. (quoted in Collins, 2000: 105)

Spirituals and the blues tradition are a part of a "continuum of struggle which is at once aesthetic and political." The blues is a coded language for the black people,

which is a means of maintaining the collective black consciousness. In the dark, standing outside Pilate's house, Macon Dead may be considered as alienated from the spiritual communion. Cut off from his African roots, he is driven to amass properties instead of preserving the old values and traditions, his house and his family are metaphorically "dead" without music, without love.

It is the blues song sung by Pilate, which is the key to Milkman's quest. Milkman, by listening to the song and seeking for its meaning, is able to attain self-conscious manhood, and he is able to make sense of the African heritage crucial for his development. In the first part of the novel, in his thirties, Milkman is a black man who is tormented by the impact of the double-consciousness. As it is known "double-consciousness" is a term put forward by W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes the term as follows:

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife-this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face. (quoted in Bell, 1987: 3)

Only after Milkman meets Pilate is he able to tear the American self, which torments his psyche. Pilate is the one who teaches the double conscious Negro that he is descended from the Flying Africans, who did not accept the humiliation of slavery. Pilate is Morrison's African storyteller who transmits the valuable knowledge of the African ancestors to the new generation. The myth about the Flying Africans, hidden in the lines of Pilate's blues song illustrate the fact that Toni Morrison, as a black woman writer committed to the survival of the black race, attaches great importance to the oral traditions of the black community. The importance of black women as the educators of the black children is reflected by Morrison in her characterization of

Pilate. Pilate sings the blues song before the birth of Milkman in the opening pages of the book; the poignant lines are uttered by Pilate as follows:

*O Sugarman done fly away
Sugarman done gone
Sugarman cut across the sky
Sugarman gone home (Song of Solomon, 11-12)*

The song is sung by Pilate, Reba and Hagar in another part of the book and Milkman is fascinated again by the powerful words of the song, about to faint “from the weight of what he was feeling.” (*Song of Solomon*, 58) New lines are added to the song in this scene and the reader is able to grasp Hagar’s predicament, her hunger for love, her need for a father figure when she tells her mother and grandmother that some of her days were hungry ones. Pilate realizes that Hagar does not mean food but something else, and then Pilate and Hagar give voice to the other lines of the blues song:

*O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Sugarman don’t leave me here
Buckra’s arms to yoke me...(Song of Solomon, 58)*

It is underlined by Gurleen Grewal that germane to Pilate’s blues song is a story about the ancestral flight which belongs to the oral tradition. The story is specific to Gullah slaves of coastal Georgia and South Carolina, who “were not broken into slavery, refused to labor, choosing to sit under a tree rather than hoe.” The slave driver that is responsible for these slaves comes along and the flying myth is passed on to the new generations as follows:

The dribuh say ‘Wut dis? And dey say, Kum buba yali kum buba tambe, Kum yunka yali kum kunka tambe,’ quickly like. Den dey rise off duh groun an fly away. Nobody ebuh see um no mo. Some say dey fly back tuh Africa. Muh gran see dat wid he own eye. (Grewal, 1998: 65)

The tale of the Flying Africans who flew back to Africa to escape from slavery affects Milkman because he discovers that his own great-grandfather has also flown

away, leaving his family behind. Milkman decides to head for the South in search of gold under the influence of his father Macon Dead who thinks that the gold must still be in the cave in which, Pilate and he, stayed in order to hide themselves from the white people. Nevertheless, Milkman cannot find the gold in the cave, he finds Circe, there in the South, and learns the names of his grandparents from her. Milkman learns that his grandmother's name was Sing and she was an Indian. Moreover, he is able to learn his grandfather's name, Jake, whose name is misunderstood and changed by a white clerk. Circe is a black woman storyteller like Pilate, and Milkman is guided by her on his voyage towards the roots. Circe is a conjurer figure who has got supernatural powers because the people who mention Circe's name and tell Milkman where she lives state that she must have been older than a hundred years old when she died. Nevertheless, Milkman sees Circe; he talks to that woman living in the Butlers' house under whose dominance she worked as a maid. The house is full of dogs and there is no one in the house except for Circe. She, like Pilate, is a black woman who is able to survive. When Milkman asks her why she still stays there after everyone has died, she answers firmly indicating that she wants to see the house of the white people decay. She hates the white people, their house and she is proud that she is the only person left in the house. She is delighted with the view she observes, the disintegration of the house. The fall of the house of Butlers pleases her and she describes her happiness to Milkman as follows:

They loved this place. Brought pink veined marble from across the sea for it and hired men in Italy to do the chandelier that I had to climb a ladder and clean it with white muslin once every two months...But I am the one left. Me and the dogs. And I will never clean it again...Not a speck of dust, not a grain of dirt, will I move. Everything in this world they lived for will crumble and rot. The chandelier already fell down...Ha! And I want to see it all go, make sure it does go, and that nobody fixes it up. (*Song of Solomon*, 269)

It is evident that Circe is taking revenge for all she has suffered from. She is the epitome of the black maids who have been tormented under the hegemony of slavery; she is a mammy figure who has looked after the children of the whites. However, Circe points out that she has never loved any of the children and she hates the last white lady whose death she has witnessed. The white lady could not live

without servants and money, as Circe tells Milkman she killed herself instead of living like her black maid. Circe angrily announces:

She killed herself rather than do the work I'd been doing all my life...Do you hear me? She saw the work I did all her days and *died*, you hear me, *died* rather than live like me. (*Song of Solomon*, 268)

Through Circe's angry statements about the white people and especially the white lady, Morrison depicts the discrepancy between the lives of black people and white people. In her portrayal of this demarcation, she again uses a black woman character that has been subjected to the oppression of the whites. She endeavors to reflect her ideas about the white ladies who consider themselves as elegant and superior than the black women and she exposes the cruelty of white people, their ruthless attitude towards the blacks. Considering Milkman's journey, Circe is a significant figure who informs him about the place where his grandparents and the other relatives have lived, she says: "Both of them lived in Virginia, her people and his. Down around Culpeper somewhere. Charlemagne or something like that." (*Song of Solomon*, 265) After a while, Milkman understands and corrects the name of the town on his way with the help of other black people; it turns out that the name of the town, where he will face his roots, is Shalimar.

As it is underscored before, the black women characters are crucial in the novel; they are necessary for the development of Milkman's character. He is depicted as an immature character in the first part of the novel and in the last chapter of the first part, before Milkman sets out for a journey to the South, a conversation takes place between him and his sister Magdalena called Lena, a dialogue which makes Milkman realize the burden of black women. As Gurleen Grewal underlines, Lena is an important black woman in the life of Milkman because "he is spurred on to his journey toward maturity by his sister Lena's ultimatum." (Grewal, 1998: 62) Magdalena and First Corinthians are Milkman's elder sisters, who are Macon Dead's beautiful dolls. They are brought up in the Dead household as dolls, as ideal partners for middle-class black men. In their childhood, they are exhibited in Macon Dead's big Packard, which is a status symbol and called by the black community in

Michigan as "Macon's hearse", as beautiful and elegant black girls. They are assumed to marry rich black men and continue their lives as bourgeois black women. Nevertheless, they are not able to impress black men, Lena and Corinthians, two black women having refined tastes, and one of them, Corinthians, is a college-graduate. In her depiction of college-graduate Corinthians, Morrison stresses the attitude of the patriarchal community towards the intelligent women. Morrison's omniscient narrator comments on the opinions of the black men suitors about Lena and especially Corinthians:

These men wanted wives who could manage, who were not so well accustomed to middle-class life that they had no ambition, no hunger, no hustle in them...They wanted wives who would sacrifice themselves and appreciate the hard work and sacrifice of their husbands. Corinthians was a little too elegant...if the man was a teacher, he steered clear of a woman who had a better education than he did. (*Song of Solomon*, 206)

A graduate of Byrn Mawr, Corinthians can only find work as a domestic servant, this is a successful act performed by her because she is able to escape from the tedious work of making velvet roses in the Dead household, accompanied by her mother and Lena. Corinthians may be regarded as a more developed character because of her determined manner to get out of the Dead household than Lena but Lena's role in teaching Milkman the burden of black women must not be ignored. Corinthians becomes acquainted with a working-class man, Porter who is one of the members of the Seven Days, the militant group killing the white people to keep the ratio same, and she defies the rules of his father, Macon Dead, by meeting him secretly. Corinthians is an intelligent black woman who never lets her mistress know she has been to college and Europe and she hides the fact that she can recognize the French words that her mistress uses. The disparity between the white lady and the black woman, even if the black woman comes from a middle-class family, is laid bare by Toni Morrison once more. Although Corinthians is a college-graduate having teaching skills, she is only able to work as a servant and the poetess for whom she works is superior than her. The sharp discrepancy between the white lady and Corinthians resembles the disparity between Sethe and Mrs. Garner. The black

woman has, during slavery and after emancipation, always been subjected to humiliation and this fact is clearly delineated in the novels of Toni Morrison.

Immediately after Milkman sees Corinthians and Porter and tells his father about them does Lena give voice to her diatribe calling Milkman “sad, pitiful, stupid, selfish and hateful.” She reveals her criticism of Milkman and it may be put forward that Morrison expresses her opinion about the majority of black men, their patronizing demeanor. Lena is a representative of the black feminist consciousness and her diatribe exposes Morrison’s critical attitude towards patriarchal system. Lena criticizes Milkman as follows:

You’ve been laughing at us all your life. Corinthians. Mama. Me. Using us, ordering us, judging us...You don’t know a single thing about either one of us—we made roses; that’s all you knew...Our girlhood was spent like a found nickel on you. When you slept, we were quiet; when you were hungry, we cooked...You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You’ve never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?... I hope your little hog’s gut stands you in good stead, and that you take good care of it, because you don’t have anything else. But I want to give you notice. (*Song of Solomon*, 234-235-236)

Thus, Milkman takes heed of Lena’s notice and leaves Michigan in order to go to the South where he hopes he will find the gold that his father talks about. In the South, however, he attains the spiritual wealth instead of the material wealth that he yearns to have. Having been informed by Circe of Shalimar, he sets forth without hesitation and on his way he encounters black women whose hands are empty, carrying “no pocketbook, no change purse, no wallet, no keys...no comb.” (*Song of Solomon*, 281) He is impressed by the freedom of the black women in the South. He thinks: “Pilate must have looked as a girl, looked even now.” (*Song of Solomon*, 285) With regard to Gay Wilentz’s remark about the scene in which Milkman admires the black women in the South, Milkman notices the women’s walk and their carriage, the demeanor of the women reflecting “a personal strength” which the city women, up in the North have lost. (Wilentz, 2000: 125) The black women in the South are

descendants of the strong black women of Africa, like Pilate, they are not assimilated, like Pilate, they are proud and powerful. Milkman associates Pilate and the black women walking freely in the streets of the South because he knows that Pilate is as powerful and as free as any other women he comes across with.

In several scenes of the novel Milkman witnesses Pilate's heroic actions when she asserts herself as a powerful figure in order to protect the people whom she loves. She is a black woman who is fiercely protective like Sethe in *Beloved* and Eva in *Sula*. In one scene of the novel, Reba is being beaten by her boyfriend. His boyfriend assumes that Reba has got a huge amount of money because he has received three presents from her without any reason. He does not know that this is a characteristic of Reba: to buy nice presents for her lovers, to give all she owns to men. Hagar tells Pilate about the incident, about the quarrel going on inside the house. Thus, Pilate removes a knife from a shelf, approaches the man from the back, whipping her right arm around his neck, positions her knife at the edge of his heart. She threatens to kill the man and Morrison's omniscient narrator comments on the crisis as follows:

He would have known not to fool with anything that belonged to Pilate, who never bothered anybody, was helpful to everybody, but who was also believed to have the power to step out of her skin, set a bush afire from fifty yards, and turn a man into a ripe rutabaga-all on account of the fact that she had no navel. (*Song of Solomon*, 105)

Pilate as a typical African woman is able to frighten the man who does not hesitate to beat a weak and helpless woman. She displays the strength of African woman and makes the men be aware of that power arising from her African roots. She gives a long speech to the ruthless man and describes the meaning of motherhood to him. She says:

Women are foolish...and mamas are the most foolish of all. And you know how mamas are, don't you? You got a mama, ain't you?...Mamas get hurt and nervous when somebody don't like they children...but we ain't got the strength you men got. That's why it makes us so sad if a grown man start beating up on one of us. (*Song of Solomon*, 105)

Pilate gives voice to the ordeal of women in the world, women who are constantly subjected to beating and oppression in every sense. She is Morrison's all-powerful black goddess who protects and stands for women, especially the black women who are the most suppressed group of women in the world. She emphasizes the overpowering feelings of the mothers and she aptly puts her feelings into words. She stresses the importance of motherhood, what it means, and by using the word "foolish" to describe the behavior of the mothers, she endeavors to underline the fact that mothers attempt to do everything for their children, and that their love may sometimes verge on madness. Pilate's, Sethe's and Eva's love for their children exemplify that kind of love, love which is on the verge of madness.

Morrison portrays Pilate as a different character. As she underscores in an interview with Claudia Tate:

I was trying to draw the character of a sister to a man, a sister who was different, and part of my visualization of her included that she had no navel...It couldn't be anything grotesque, but something to set her apart, to make her literally invent herself. (Tate, 1983: 128)

Pilate's character invents herself and the absence of a navel adds a supernatural quality to the character. As it is usual in Morrison's novels, black women have got some supernatural powers, the ghost of the murdered baby girl Beloved in *Beloved* is an example and Sula in *Sula*, although she has got no visible supernatural powers except from her birthmark, is regarded as a witch by the community. Pilate and Circe in *Song of Solomon* stand amidst those characters, Circe appears as an ageless witch-like woman and Pilate is able to transform herself into another shape when she wants. Moreover, Pilate prevents her brother Macon Dead from beating Ruth Dead in order to make her abort Milkman. By using her eccentric powers, Pilate puts a doll on Macon's chair in his office, a male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between his legs, accompanied by a round red circle painted on its belly. Hence, Macon cannot disturb Ruth any more, and she gives birth to Milkman. Thereupon Ruth recognizes Pilate, as "the only person she knew of strong enough to counter Macon." (*Song of Solomon*, 153) Pilate is able to communicate with the ghost of her

dead father receiving advice from him. Her father advises her that she should accept responsibility for having killed another human being and thus she goes back to the cave where Macon killed a man, and puts the bones of the man in a green sack to hang and display it in the middle of her room. Later, she learns from Milkman that the bones are her father's bones who has been killed by the white men.

According to Toni Morrison, "black people believe in magic" and it is part of their heritage. (Watkins, 1977: 50) For Morrison, what may be called superstition, supernatural and magical in the Western world is a natural part of the African cosmology. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation", Morrison explains the alternative epistemology of the African heritage and she comments on *Song of Solomon* as follows:

(With that novel), I could blend the acceptance of the supernatural and a profound rootedness in the real world at the same time with neither taking precedence over the other. It is indicative of the cosmology, the way in which Black people looked at the world. We are very practical people...but within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things...And some of those things were 'discredited knowledge' that Black people had; discredited only because Black people were discredited therefore what they knew was "discredited...." That knowledge has a very strong place in my work. (Wilentz, 2000: 121)

As regards Gay Wilentz's comment, Pilate has that kind of discredited knowledge. Through using her special knowledge, it may be contended that Pilate is able to defy the dominant white culture and the male hegemony. Before Milkman's eyes, she is able to transform herself into a withered black woman. She becomes a weak black woman in order to save Milkman and Guitar from the prison. Milkman is impressed by Pilate's performance, which he calls "Aunt Jemima" act. Pilate employs the negative stereotypical image "Aunt Jemima", who is the stupid, illiterate, meek and mild, obedient black woman, so as to deceive the white men. Therefore, she defies the rules of the white men, overturning the white logos.

It should be contended that the dominant white culture is able to annihilate Pilate only once throughout the novel. Pilate, the strong black woman who is equipped to deal with every kind of predicament, cannot succeed in saving her beloved granddaughter from the hands of the white culture. Hagar and Milkman become lovers but Hagar falls obsessively in love with Milkman. After Milkman decides to leave Hagar with "a thank-you note" for all they have shared, Hagar's love turns out to be a tremendous rage, an "anaconda love" that torments her. She attacks him several times but she is not able to kill him. "The calculated violence of a shark" (*Song of Solomon*, 141) grows in her, she desperately searches for Milkman. However, she proves to be the world's most inept killer. When Ruth learns that Hagar wants to kill her son, she goes to confront her and they have a conversation about Milkman. Pilate is infuriated by the dialogue between the two women. Hagar says: "He is my home in this world," and Ruth declares: "And I am his." (*Song of Solomon*, 152) Pilate cannot stand watching these two women competing with each other for "a man." In a sense, she cannot tolerate the frailty of Hagar and Ruth, fighting against each other for a man. Pilate, in exasperation, reproaches the two women as follows:

Can't say as I blame him neither. Two growed-up women talkin about a man like he was a house or needed one. He ain't a house, he's a man, and whatever he need, don't none of you got it. (*Song of Solomon*, 152)

Pilate cannot affect Hagar with her words and Hagar begins to sink into oblivion. One day Pilate gives Hagar a small plastic compact with gold trim, and when Hagar stares into the mirror, she sees an ugly black woman's face. She is deluded and thinks that Milkman does not like her because she lacks the blue eyes, the long straight hair that are the ideals of the dominant white culture, the constructed norms that classify women as ugly or beautiful. Thus, Hagar attempts to reject her African identity, her roots and she falls prey to an alien standard of beauty. In desperately trying to beautify herself, she starts to shop and buys the products of the consumer system that will transform her into the objectified self. She buys a "Playtex garter belt, I. Miller No Color hose, Fruit of the Loom panties...and nylon slips." (*Song of Solomon*, 335) She becomes a representative of women in the consumer society who

bear the burden of sexual and gender-focused exploitation. Moreover, she is a member of the subordinate groups who are defined and measured according to the dictates of the beauty myth that Naomi Wolf describes in her work *The Beauty Myth* (1991). Wolf indicates that the images of beauty are products of politics and they work in order to perpetuate the male dominance in force. Hence, Hagar looks forward to being worthy of male attention, yearning for the “the silky hair, the lemon-colored skin, gray blue eyes, and thin nose.” (*Song of Solomon*, 341)

It is demonstrated by Lucinda Joy Peach in her work *Women in Culture, A Women's Studies Anthology* that there are class and race dimensions to the beauty system as well. She comments on the binary oppositions constructed by the American culture:

Beauty standards set up hierarchies among women that privilege fair-skinned women over women of color and other non-Anglo-looking women. White women are given the message that they are special because of their looks. This privilege provides them with an incentive to maintain the beauty system, which excludes non-white women. (Peach, 1998: 172)

The controlling images of beauty derogate black women whose African features are deemed as inferior; dark skin, broad noses, full lips, and kinky hair cannot be accepted as beautiful according to the norms of the oppressive white culture. Morrison reflects some of her black woman characters grappling with the controlling images under the influence of the prevailing standards of beauty. She wants to expose the detrimental effects of the images on black women and she wants to reflect what happens to the African woman if she endeavors to achieve the taken for granted ideals. Helene Wright in *Sula* attempts to turn her daughter Nel Wright's broad African nose into a thin American nose and she wants Nel to smooth her kinky hair in order to eradicate the African self. In *The Bluest Eye*, the little black girl Pecola yearns for blue eyes and that kind of yearning causes the devastation of her psyche. Hagar's devouring wish consumes her energy; she loses herself and dies of a fever as a result of self-hatred and the disappointment of not being able to fulfil the magical transformation guaranteed by the beauty products she frantically consumed. As a result of the idealization of the Caucasian features, the African features are

denigrated by the American beauty standards. Patricia Hill Collins incorporates in her work a citation from Maya Angelou's autobiography in which Angelou records her realization that in order to become beautiful she should be white, her realization bears resemblance to Hagar's deluded realization. Angelou expresses the painful epiphany as follows:

Wouldn't they be surprised when one day I woke out of my black ugly dream, and my real hair, which was long and blond, would take the place of the kinky mass that Momma wouldn't let me straighten?...Then they would understand why I had never picked up a Southern accent, or spoke the common slang, and why I had to be forced to eat pigs' tails and snouts. Because I was really white and because a cruel fairy stepmother...had turned me into a too-big Negro girl, with nappy black hair. (Quoted in Collins, 2000: 90)

Black women experience rejection by whites because they are the Others having been assigned all of the negative characteristics inferior to those reserved for white women. They are expected to internalize the controlling images, and they are forced to adhere to being objectified as the Other. Only the defiant and strong black women are able to survive in America like Pilate in *Song of Solomon* and Sethe in *Beloved* who do not act in accordance with the rules of the white people, who do not internalize the controlling images. Weak women like Hagar are not able to endure hardships and they fall prey to the matrix of domination. It is pointed out by the omniscient narrator of Morrison that "neither Pilate nor Reba knew that Hagar was not like them. Not strong enough, like Pilate, nor simple enough, like Reba, to make up her life as they had." (*Song of Solomon*, 332)

With the help of the blues song that the children in Virginia sing, another version of Pilate's song, Milkman learns that his great-grandmother died of a broken heart when his great-grandfather flew to the South. It is evident that Hagar has been passed on the weakness of her great-grandmother Ryna, who could not stand the hardships having been left alone by her husband Solomon in the white-dominated world with twenty-one children. Milkman acquires the necessary knowledge, which leads him to completely understand the children's blues song from his distant cousin Susan Byrd. Susan Byrd acknowledges that Solomon is a flying African and he has flown back to

Africa leaving his baby boy Jake, Milkman's grandfather, and Ryna behind in the cotton field. Susan Byrd tells Milkman that he cannot hear about women like Ryna anymore. She describes Ryna as "the kind of woman who couldn't live without a particular man. And when the man left, they lost their minds, or died or something." (*Song of Solomon*, 348) Milkman has deciphered the song before he learns all of the details from Susan Byrd; he only needs her to complete the missing places of the puzzle. He recognizes that the sorrowful black lady in the song is his great-grandmother:

*Black lady fell down on the ground
Come booba yalle, come booba tambee
Threw her body all around
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee*

...
*O Solomon don't leave me here
Cotton balls to choke me
O Solomon don't leave me here
Buckra's arms to yoke me.*

*Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone
Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home. (Song of Solomon, 328)*

The white people are known as "Buckra" and Solomon, for the sake of his freedom, abandons the whole community of women and children to the oppressor. Ryna begs her husband not to leave his family behind, beleaguered by cotton balls in the land of the enemy. Nevertheless, Solomon flies away and it is the task of black women like Ryna to take care of the children that have been left behind. As David Cowart stresses "Solomon embodies a myth of masculine insouciance and irresponsibility." (Cowart, 2000: 105)

Milkman's quest, his voyage towards his roots in the South re-enacts his great-grandfather's flight and he realizes this harsh reality when he learns that Hagar has died: "While he dreamt of flying, Hagar was dying." (*Song of Solomon*, 357) Milkman has left Hagar behind and like Ryna, Hagar could not live without a particular man, she died of grief. As Gurleen Grewal suggests, "the stultifying reality

of black women's truncated lives" (Grewal, 1998: 73) is brought forth in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and inherent in the blues song is the ordeal of black women.

Gay Wilentz draws the readers' attention to the dedication of *Song of Solomon*: "The fathers may soar and the children may know their names." It is pointed out by Wilentz that when the fathers fly away, the children are taught their names by the mothers. He emphasizes the women's crucial function as the educators of the children in the African context and he comments on the significance of the women's role as storytellers. In his view:

It is evident that the tales of the Flying Africans and the stories of endurance and strength in the face of slavery and oppression, as well as the values of the African communities from whence they came, have been encapsulated in the orature of the women-left behind not only to sing the blues but to sing of home. (Wilentz, 2000: 114)

By listening to the stories told by Pilate, Circe and Susan Byrd, and by realizing the importance of Lena's diatribe, Milkman is able to fulfill his self-realization process. He becomes a separate individual, abandoning his assimilated self, he attains his African identity. At the end of the novel, he understands that black women are of vital importance to the community. When Guitar shoots Pilate accidentally, instead of Milkman, Milkman whispers to Pilate: "There must be another one like you, there has got to be at least one more woman like you." (*Song of Solomon*, 362) He sees two birds; one of them dives into Pilate's new grave and scoops a shiny thing in its beak before it flies away. Milkman is fascinated by Pilate's power, he thinks: "Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly." The shiny thing is Pilate's earring, the little brass box that contains the scrap of paper bearing her name written by her illiterate father, Jake. Thus, her name is taken to the air by a bird, which, according to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, is the spirit of Pilate's American Indian mother Singing Bird, who has returned to claim her child. Kubitschek makes use of a book juxtaposing African and African American culture called *Flash of the Spirit*. With regard to her analysis, the book reports that:

In West African societies, glints of light are thought both to attract ancestral spirits and to testify to their presence. For this reason, African Americans in the South still make "bottle trees" - bare branched trees with bottles of different colors over the end of the limbs - to bring the ancestors home. The glint of Pilate's earring draws an ancestral spirit to her grave, so that she is welcomed into the spirit world. (Kubitschek, 1998: 90)

Hence, that is another African myth employed by Morrison. Pilate can also fly like her great-grandfather Solomon, but she can fly without ever leaving the ground with the help of her mother. Morrison, in Milkman's words, reflects the importance of black women. Milkman considers that there should be women like Pilate in the world, who are independent and strong, who act as guides. Pilate, whose name is a pun on pilot, guides Milkman who appears to be the double-conscious black male at the beginning of the novel. Nevertheless, in the end, he is a real African male and fulfilling Pilate's death wish; he sings the blues song, the story of his ancestors. As Pilate's life bleeds away on Solomon's Leap, her only regret is this: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song of Solomon*, 361). Dying, she asks Milkman to sing for her. Like Ryna and Hagar before him, Milkman pleads in abandoned despair: "Sugargirl don't leave me here / Cotton balls to choke me / Sugargirl don't leave me here / Buckra's arms to yoke me" (*Song of Solomon*, 361).

Sugargirl leaves the material world but she succeeds in teaching her nephew the values of the ancestors, her last words highlight the humanistic side of the women characters in Morrison's novels. Depicting her female protagonists, for instance in her portrayal of Pilate, as individuals who attach importance to "personal relationships in the family and community" (Bell, 1987: 243), Morrison proves herself to be one of the significant black women novelists in the American grain. Her black women characters are endowed with heroic virtues and they are, as in the example of Pilate, archetypal heroines under whose guidance the future generations of the black race survive and stand against the dominant white culture.

CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison as a black woman writer has made meticulous observations of the agonies of the African race, and the ordeal of African-American women. In her critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison reveals her contempt for the canonical American literature on the grounds that the Africanist presence has been deliberately ignored. She claims that "the arbiters of critical power" relish their ignorance of African-American texts. (Morrison, 1992: 13) With regard to Morrison's vantage point, parallel to this profound disregard for the African voice is "the centuries-long, hysterical blindness to feminist discourse and the way in which women and women's issues were read (or unread)." (*Ibid*, 14) Morrison berates the blindness of the American critical canon toward blackness and disapproves of the general indifference to the issues of women.

In *Playing in the Dark*, she does not admit being a feminist, which is indicative of her unwillingness of being categorized and labeled. However, she emphasizes the general ignorance about feminism and feminist discourse. She reveals in her work that in her "genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world," she may not be as free as she demands. (*Ibid*, 4) Thus, in her eloquent novels, Morrison displays her magnificent talent of juxtaposing aesthetics and politics putting it to full use in portraying the predicament of the black race, particularly the black woman's ordeal. Critic Barbara Johnson outlines this aspect of the novelist in a few striking examples from her work:

[Morrison] makes the aesthetic inextricable from trauma, taboo, and violation...by choosing to aestheticize a mother's murder of her grown son and a daughter watching her mother burn to death in *Sula*, and the scars on a slave woman's back in *Beloved*. (Johnson, 1998: 86)

It should be noted that Toni Morrison, for all her disclaimers of being a feminist, is a black feminist writer. The protagonists that she portrays in her novels are generally assertive, powerful black women who are able to survive in "a wholly racialized and

genderized world.” Their perseverance is indicative of Morrison’s endeavor, her endeavor to depict black women heroines who are the emblems of fortitude.

The black female characters of Morrison in her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon* are analyzed in this thesis. Their personalities, their persistent efforts to overcome the debilitating effects of racism, classism and gender discrimination are the focal points of the fundamental argument. In America, besieged by diverse forms of race, class and gender oppression, Toni Morrison’s black female protagonists strive to dignify their existence through performing acts of resistance and empowerment. Defying the assumptions of the white patriarchal world, which validates black women’s inferiority to all branches of the caste system in the United States, Morrison’s black women characters struggle to be powerful. These black women choose to resist the eradication of their selves. They try to break the silence, the enforced speechlessness of the black race. Morrison’s black women characters seem to echo the eloquent words of the black feminist poet Audre Lorde that render the problematic situation of the black women in the United States during and after slavery:

And when we speak we are afraid
our words will not be heard
nor welcomed
but when we are silent
we are still afraid

So it is better to speak
remembering
we were never meant to survive.
Audre Lorde, “A Litany for Survival” (White, 1995: 542)

As regards Alexis De Veaux’s viewpoint, the black heroine is “a guerilla warrior”, fighting against “the central oppression of all people of color as well as the oppression of women by men.” The black heroine in Morrison’s novels is also a warrior encumbered with the weight of racism and sexism, and in Claudia Tate’s words “her battle cry gives pitch and timber to the countless unheard voices of armies of black women.” (Tate, 1983: xxiii)

Set in the second half of the nineteenth century, in 1873, *Beloved* deals with the life of an ex-slave whose name is Sethe. The novel enables the reader to explore the depths of a slave woman's traumatic experience. The fragmentary structure, the patchwork that is created by Morrison serves as a pictorial remembrance of the painful incidents. Sethe appears as a survivor figure, proud and confident, courageous and assertive. She is a black mother who has suffered from the agonizing effects of the slavery era and she withstands the oppressive forces of the white hegemony. She rebels against the impenetrable whiteness that torments her psyche through fighting against the matrix of domination that regards her as a breeder, an animal, and a chattel. She claims ownership of her children and she commits infanticide rather than witness her children's suffering at the hands of the slaveholders. Baby Suggs as a spiritual in the community, Ella as a powerful agent of help to the fugitives the 'Underground Railroad', Denver as the voice of the future generations are all Morrison's prominent black female characters who are able to oppose the notion that they are "the mules of the world."

Sula, written in 1973 and set in 1919, is another novel of Morrison's that reflects her black feminist standpoint. She shows the situation of the black community in the aftermath of World War I and she makes use of dates to introduce each chapter such as 1919, 1923, 1927, 1937, 1939, 1940, 1941, 1965. The reader is able to grasp that for the black woman the world has not changed much. The female protagonists Sula and Nel are cognizant of the fact that "they are neither white nor male." Nevertheless, they endeavor to assert themselves, to fulfil their self-realization process. Eva's personality as the matriarch of the Peace household bears resemblance to Sethe's and Baby Suggs' personalities. They are all black women, the survivor figures, without the help of black men. It is evident that Eva and Sethe have much in common. They both commit infanticide because they do not want to see their children suffer. Sethe tries to make sure that her baby-girl Beloved does not experience the agony, debasement and exploitation involved in slavery, and Eva tries to eradicate the consequence of the tormenting memories of World War I from the mind of her son Plum. The two strong black women cannot accept their children as

subordinated individuals and under no circumstances do they want to witness their children's victimization.

In *Song of Solomon*, written in 1977, Toni Morrison portrays a male protagonist Milkman who is an immature black male. He is able to understand the meaning of life, the importance of his African roots under the guidance of his aunt Pilate. He learns to appreciate black women after having listened to his sister Magdalena's diatribe. He is guided by the black women storytellers like Circe and Susan Byrd. He is a double-conscious Negro at the beginning of the novel. However, in the end, he realizes that he is an African. The black female characters in the novel play their crucial roles in precipitating this self-realization process.

Toni Morrison's delineation of the black women's experience, the importance she attaches to her black heroines in *Beloved*, *Sula* and *Song of Solomon* provide evidence for those researchers who claim that she is an ardent black feminist writer committed to the survival of black women and the black race. It should be noted that Morrison as a black feminist writer does not regard men as the enemy, which stands in stark contrast to the male-bashing tendency in some white feminist groups. She portrays black men as weak characters in her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, flawed characters who do not support their women. Halle in *Beloved*, Solomon who is the great-grandfather of Milkman Dead in *Song of Solomon*, Eva's husband BoyBoy and Nel's husband Jude are the epitomes of black males who leave their wives, helpless and desolate. The black female characters are more powerful, persistent and stable than the black males in the three novels that are examined in this thesis.

As a black feminist writer, Morrison does not appreciate the white feminist attitude towards black women. She demonstrates that there is a sharp discrepancy between the experiences of black women and white women. In her novels, middle-class white women are shown to be assuming superiority over black women and this attitude is criticized by Morrison. Sethe's mistress Mrs. Garner in *Beloved* who laughs at Sethe's wish to have a wedding ceremony, and First Corinthians' poetess-mistress in

Song of Solomon, from whom Corinthians — the college graduate servant — hides the fact she knows the French words her mistress employs, are the chief examples of white women figures that Morrison depicts. The much-quoted words of Nancy White, who is a black woman aware of the dichotomy between the lives of black women and white women, display the centuries-old superior versus inferior conviction as follows:

My mother used to say that the black woman is the white man's mule and the white woman is his dog. Now, she said that to say this: we do the heavy work and get beat whether we do it well or not. But the white woman is closer to the master and he pats them on the head and lets them sleep in the house, but he ain't gon' treat neither one like he was dealing with a person. (Collins, 2000: 114)

The quotation above exposes the white man's domination over women and it also lays bare the fact that the domination is handed over to white women who exert pressure on black women by dint of their closeness to the master. Thus, the black women are the inferiors or 'mules' who must obey the instructions of the master and its puppets.

Morrison's black women heroines defy the oppression of white men and white women, and the oppression of black men who let down their women. The new generation, the representatives of which are Denver in *Beloved*, and Sula in *Sula* are strong women. Sula's strength is by choice, in other words, she chooses to be rebellious, to be the persona non grata as a vigorous black woman. Eva and Sethe, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Pilate, members of the old generation, are vigorous owing to the power "thrust on them by bitter circumstance." Pilate, another outcast, another persona non grata, is a black woman survivor; a bootlegger who possesses manly qualities. Morrison maintains that when black women exert pressure and influence in the community this is generally out of necessity; and she rejects the view of those white feminists who see black women as super strong and not in need of an agenda to protect their rights. Morrison is against the sexism of black males as well, and she questions the flaws of the black males by displaying their irresponsibility and the

black women's loneliness. Critic Marcia Gillespie comments on the notorious irresponsibility and ingratitude of the black men in the following terms:

We were castrating bitches if we complained or questioned men's actions or decisions. We were "Good Sisters" if we dutifully followed orders, or mouthed the party line laid down by the brothers. We were "Strong Black Women" if we spoke out against racism but never about sexism, if we shouldered the burden for raising families on our own and placed all blame for the lack of male irresponsibility on racism. (Cited in Peach, 1998: 95)

Morrison does not ascribe male irresponsibility to the trauma provoked by racism when she gives instances of male negligence. Halle's defection may perhaps be explained as a case of male weakness. He loses his mind and runs away when the system subjects him to emasculation making him witness to his wife's abuse at the hands of the slaveholders. However, Jude's and BoyBoy's can be said to stem from their own insouciant nature. She does not portray her women as castrating characters but nurturers as in the examples of Pilate, Sethe, and Eva. Her black women are the matriarchs of their houses who raise their families on their own and the vast majority of them are not appreciated by the black males as in the epitome of Macon Dead who berates his sister Pilate because of her being a bootlegger and an independent black woman.

It is crucial to recognize that in her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*, Morrison celebrates the self-confident African persona, and this self-reliant character is generally a black female, who is strong and assertive. The black women characters like Sethe, Baby Suggs, Eva, and Pilate are representatives of the African race. They adopt the traditional values of the black race, and reveal that the power the black race seeks is inherent in the African roots. The oral tradition, spirituals and blues songs empower the black women characters and help them to survive. Thirty women gather in front of 124 to exorcise Beloved, and they utter a blues song to save Sethe from the hands of Beloved's ghost, Baby Suggs advises black people to love themselves giving voice to the sentiment of self-respect in her powerful speeches, and Pilate with her daughter Reba and Reba's daughter Hagar sings a blues song that affects

Macon Dead deeply and reminds him of his African roots. Morrison tries to demonstrate that the traditions of Africa are the keys that open the doors to survival.

Patricia Hill Collins mentions the educator Fannie Barrier Williams' views about the African- American woman, who sees the black woman "not as a defenseless victim but as a strong-willed resister." It is maintained by Collins that Williams regards the black woman as irrepressible. According to Williams, the colored woman is "always doing something of merit and credit that is not expected of her", and she continues to talk about the black woman as follows: "She is insulted, but she holds up her head; she is scorned, but she proudly demands respect... The most interesting girl of this country is the colored girl." (Quoted in Collins, 2000: 98) Sethe in *Beloved* is an epitome; she is Williams' "proud and irrepressible colored girl." She climbs the cart that will take her to the prison after she has murdered her baby girl, holding her head up as a proud woman. Pilate, as well, is the type of woman that Williams talks about. She begins at zero, cutting her hair, wearing unlaced man's shoes, working as a bootlegger after having been rejected by the community due to the absence of a navel. She is proud of her mysterious quality. Sula and Eva are also proud of themselves. Eva does not hesitate to exhibit her single leg after she has had the other one amputated to get the insurance money for the sustenance of her children. She is cheerful and not ashamed of her handicapped anatomy. There are many examples of the proud black woman in Morrison's novels, who act defiantly even though they are hindered in diverse ways.

The black women characters of Morrison rebel against the sexist, racist, patriarchal world. Indeed, as Barbara Johnson asserts: "one of the most revolutionary things Morrison does in *Sula* is to deconstruct the phallus as law, patriarchy, and cultural ground." (Johnson, 1998: 79) Under no circumstances does Morrison regard patriarchy as the law. In many of her novels, not just in *Sula*, Morrison stands against the patriarchal world. In *Beloved*, Sethe, her daughters and Baby Suggs; in *Sula*, Eva, Hannah and Sula; in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate, Reba and Hagar create their own communities, composed of black women defying the genderized world of male hegemony.

Toni Morrison, as a black feminist writer, makes her borderline clear in her novels *Beloved*, *Sula*, and *Song of Solomon*. Her black women characters are strong; they should be strong in order to survive. The black women have always endeavored to withstand the oppression perpetrated against them ever since their arrival in the United States, and Toni Morrison depicts their sheer ability to survive, their commendable fortitude in the three novels that are examined in this thesis. She demonstrates that the black community should stand by its independent, and defiant women because these women are necessary for the survival and the liberation of the black race.

Toni Morrison is regarded as a black feminist writer in this thesis, who does not expatiate on theories and dictums but believes that the feminist spirit is natural to black women. Throughout her novels, in her distinct literary world, Toni Morrison expostulates against the suppression policy of the United States, and she extols African customs and traditions as a better guide to her people. In her literary output, where she deploys a conjunction of aesthetics and politics, Morrison's black women characters play their significant roles as nurturers, educators, revolutionaries and rebels who with their inspiration and potentials offer sound guidance to the future generations of the black race.

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