WRITING THE OTHER:
A STUDY OF RACE, GENDER AND MARGINALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S FICTION

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Chapter I

Introduction

Considering the fact that both writing and reading require "being alert and ready for unaccountable beauty... being mindful of the places where imagination sabotages itself, locks its own gates, pollutes its vision" (1993: xiii), Toni Morrison interrogates and documents white America's literary representation of 'race' and 'gender' in her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1993). It is indeed difficult for a writer like Morrison to transcend the boundaries of 'race' and 'gender', for she is the product of a community that has been historically and creatively subjected to racism and marginalization. As an African-American and a woman writer, Morrison's writerly position is constantly challenged. As she maintains, "My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. To think about (and wrestle with) the full implications of my situation leads me to consider what happens when other writers work in a highly and historically racialized society. For them, as for me, imagining is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is, for the purposes of the work, *becoming*" (1993:4). The process of *becoming* is directly related to the author's *situatedness*. The authorial location is self-reflexive to questions such as: Is a writer's imagination (belonging to a minority culture) neutral to 'race' and 'gender'? Is there any reading position that is free from biases of racism and gender? To Morrison, both the writerly and readerly positions in

American literature are not free from contestations as the American imagination implicitly or explicitly is not free from the problematic of 'race' and 'gender'. The present study has attempted to explore the problematic of 'race' and 'gender' in the context of the American literary culture with reference to the works of Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison, the first African-American writer to win Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford, the second of the four children, in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. Both her parents Ramah (Willis) and George Wofford came from southern families. After graduating from Howard University where she changed her name to Toni, she earned a master's degree from Cornell University in 1955, writing a thesis on Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The same year she started teaching at Texas Southern University. A year later she joined the Howard University faculty. In 1957, she married Harold Morrison, a Jamaican architect and the former Chloe Wofford now became Toni Morrison. The marriage was dissolved in 1965 and Morrison left teaching to join the Random House as an editor. In 1967 she became the senior Editor for Random House, and published the works of many African-American writers: Leon Forrest, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis, Muhammad Ali, Ivan Van Sertima, Andrew Young, Henry Dumas and John Mc Cluskey. She published her first novel *The Bluest Eye* in 1970. It was followed by *Sula* in 1973, *Song of Solomon* in 1977, *Tar Baby* in 1981, *Dreaming Emmett* a play in 1986, *Beloved* in 1987, *Jazz* in 1992 and *Paradise* in 1998. Besides the novels, she has also produced an important critical work, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* in 1992. Morrison has also edited an

anthology of essays on Clarence Thomas – Anita Hill controversy titled *Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas and the Constitution of Social Reality* (1992). As a teacher of American and English literature and a successful editor, Morrison has brought into her work the alertness of an academic and the finesse of a literary editor. Apart from winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, she won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize for her work *Beloved*, the 1978 National Critics Circle Award for fiction and the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award for *Song of Solomon*. She was the first African-American woman to appear on the cover of *Newsweek*. She has achieved professorial status with Schweitzer Chair at the State University of New York, Albany, and later on the Robert F. Goheen Chair, Council of Humanities, Princeton University.

Racial and cultural marginalization has been to a large extent the story of human history. Under different mechanisms of control and suppression it has taken different forms. For example, class marginalization have taken religious, economic and socio-political forms in the USA as well as in other multicultural countries like India (where caste is also a category of differentiation) evolving into norms and practices. In the process the marginalized never gets out of the discursive discourse as a subject and s/he gets ensnared in what Adorno calls as a practice of hegemonic control. In the process the marginalized loses identity, in a history that is already always appropriated by the dominant group. Thus the discourse of the marginalized performs under a dialectical mode in which loss of history and self-possession result in loss of cultural and other identities. Contesting some of the prevailing

assumptions regarding the Afro-American's identity in the melting pot of America, Michael Eric Dyson hopes: "to disrupt traditional notions of race and to interrogate how race, class and gender get constructed in ways that reinforce structures of domination" (Olson and Worsham 1999:xiii). The discourse of marginality needs to be translated into a discourse of disruption and resistance. It is in this sense narratives offer the space to articulate resistance. Thus 'race' and 'gender' relations need not be debated only as political and social issues, but also as narrative representations. This precisely is the concern of Morrison in her fictional works in that she has never idealized blackness nor has she demonized whiteness, but as she maintains: "I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive "othering" of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work" (1993: xii-xiii). The discourse of marginality is aligned to the concepts of race and gender in their constructions and deconstructions, which constitute the core of the thesis.

'Race' as a concept and construct has been central to the Euro-centric discourse of "otherness". Constituted in the Hegelian binary thesis of *self*/Other, over the centuries, it has taken different forms in different cultural and national discourses. Although the concept of 'race' is as old as human civilization, racism has been a product of European colonial expansion. Either privileged or subordinated race as a category of classification of *difference* is subsumed in the affirmation of popular, scientific and political assumptions. Naomi Zack says, "modern concepts of race derive from eighteenth- and nineteenth-

century pseudoscience that rationalized European colonialism and chattel slavery." (1996: x). Europeans invented the idea of biological race after they enslaved Africans as a part of their strategy to rationalize a crime that was already under way. David Brion Davis also says, "responsible scientists have long discredited any biological or genetic definition of racial groups" (1997: 7). According to him, the groups that we call races are "social constructions"' that exist only because of our ideas, beliefs, and practices. As a consequence, the history and the views of the oppressed are erased/appropriated attributing to them inferior and indeed animal like status. To be born as a black, a Negro or an African is to represent according to this discourse, all the negative attributes of the human species. The relation between "racial character" and certain types of characteristics was inscribed through tropes of race, "lending the sanction of God, biology, or the natural order to even presumably unbiased descriptions of cultural tendencies and differences" (Gates, Jr., 1986: 5).

The history of slavery in the Americas has taken different forms but what is significant for us is its textualization. What is of particular importance is that in the United States racism has become an instrument of reinforcing the white American sense of superiority, while suppressing and brutalizing a race of people deprived of history and identity. Thus the Negro in the white American imagination emerged as a stereotype that was culturally institutionalized. While interrogating the representation of the Negro in white literary works, Toni Morrison attempts to place him in a wider canvas not erasing his history, but pleading for an alternative approach in locating his voice and identity. Although creative literature is considered to be emancipatory, often the so-called

humane and emancipatory aspirations of literature get trapped in the author's biases and prejudices. How does literature behave in its encounter with 'racism', then, becomes a relevant question? Morrison is concerned with the textualization of 'race' in order to explore how literature implicates and imbricates race and literalizes racism.

Silence and evasion have been the twin strategies adopted by scholars in matters of literary discourse on 'race'. The question of race is either ignored on the ground that colonial literature responds to universal human condition or its inevitability is ensured through silence allowing the dominated, subject race to participate in the white cultural discourse. Although a non-white presence was created in the narrative discourses of American mainstream literature it was mostly self-serving. In the context of America, the Africanist presence offered both romanticisation and a redress to a deep sense of insecurity. However, during the early decades of the last century, the Afro-American creative writing challenged the assumption that African species of men could not create formal literature and master the "arts and sciences".

Writing, among other things, is taken as the visible sign of reason. Enlightenment as the culmination of the march of reason delimits and circumscribes the humanity of culture and people of colour while preaching universalism. In the literary texts produced by the whites the blacks were relegated to the lowest place in the 'great chain of being'. "Writing," says Henry Louis Gates Jr., "for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity" (1986: 9). The ideological environment in which Black writing emerged is one in which other

race specific texts of the period were marked by a single priority—the social and political empowerment of Black Americans. Charles Hamilton along with Carmichael in *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* asked to read the violent eruptions in the Ghettos as narratives of political desire. Social change was represented as appropriation and modification of African modes of dress and signs of national identity. There was linguistic resistance to cultural domination marked by displacement of 'standard English' viewed as the language of the dominant. Christian liturgy was rewritten and reinvented in which traditional religious symbolism was replaced by radical signs of Black culture. In spite of the vehement attempt at creating an alternative discourse, Black writing in America remains a hybrid cultural experience. It is neither completely African nor completely European, both traditions contributed to the birth of a complex genre called Black writing. Toni Morrison has inherited this heritage and in her unique way has contributed immensely to this tradition. Besides race she has been concerned with gender. The second chapter of the present study therefore deals with "narrating gender".

Elaine Showalter believes that a feminist theory based "on a model of women's culture... can provide a more complete and satisfying way to talk about the specificity and difference of women's writing" (1982:72). While accepting that a "cultural theory acknowledges that there are important differences between women as writers" and that these differences include class, race, nationality, and history as "literary determinants as significant as gender" (1982: 27), Showalter, along with other white feminist critics, fails to take this proposition to its logical conclusion—that feminist criticism can be

further defined through these cultural differences. Such a definition is implicit in the literary explications of Toni Morrison. Because of the evolving and increasing complexity of Morrison's works the discussions if any on her works need to encompass possibilities other than literary considerations. Although a sensitivity to the issues of women's reality initially unifies Morrison's works, the schism of individual racial and cultural perspectives eventually distinguish them.

Criticism and theory on feminist discourse underline *difference* and welcomes alterity. Although the concept of Black Feminism is problematic nevertheless it is a discourse that is constructed on *difference* within a *difference*. Alice Walker, a prominent Afro-American woman writer rejects the term *feminist* and replaces it with *womanist*, asserting that one is 'womanist' when one is "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (1983: pxi). In her work, *In Search of Our Mother's Garden: Womanist Prose* (1983), she identifies black female creativity in the earlier generations, through folk art, including quilting, music and gardening. Black writers such as Walker looks at figures like Zora Neale Hurston (1906), the writers of Harlem Renaissance and folklorists who insisted on the connection between folktales and other artistic pursuits of black women that led to the creation of black womanist literature. Although approaches to other black women feminists are quite varied, Toni Morrison is part of a nascent group of black women writers, who are concerned with the conditions of black women. Morrison along with Alice Walker, Paule Marshall, Audre Lorde, Toni Cade Bambara, Maya Angelou, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni and Gayl Jones

directs her gaze on subject matters previously marginalized in literature i.e., black women and their worlds.

In an interview with Claudia Tate (1983), Morrison underlines differences in writing strategies that characterize the works of black women:

> Aggression is not as new to black women as it is to white women. Black women seem able to combine the nest and the adventure. They don't see conflicts in certain areas as do white women. They are both safe harbor and ship; they are both inn and trail. We black women do both. We do not find these places, these roles, mutually exclusive...
>
> There's male/female thing that's also different in the works of black and white women writers, and this difference is good. There's a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in the writings of black women not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless. Love, in the Western notion, is full of possession, distortion, and corruption. It is a slaughter without the blood (Bill Moyers, pbs video 1992:161 –162).

For Morrison, the development of black fiction becomes important as an articulation of resistance as well as reconstruction. For the African-American writer, fiction has been the most dominant form of articulating 'race'. Contextualizing 'race' in the form of fictional narratives, white American writers have considered racism as a narrative recipe for domination of the Other through rhetorical devices. These devices ensure division at the level of phoneme, sentence and story. The fear of merging or loss of identity through synergistic union with the Other uses the idea of racial purification as a strategy against difference. It is evident that the literature of the United States, like its history, represents commentary on the transformations of biological, ideological, and metaphysical concepts of racial difference.

This socio-cultural frame of reference has ensured that literature redistributes and mutates in figurative language the social conventions of

Africanism. It is in this sense 'race' is a text. Its intertext unfolds into a tense interface between categories such as domination/marginalization, appropriation/resistance, history/historylessness. The textuality of 'race' is further conflated in the linguistic response to Africanism. A writer's response to American-Africanism often provides a subtext that either sabotages the surface text's expressed intentions or escapes them through a language that mystifies what it cannot bring to articulation. Morrison feels that the linguistic responses to Africanism serve the text by further problematizing its matter through resonance, where language becomes allegorical. As a black author Morrison's writerly position is not to simplify the narrative, but to comprehend the limits of narrative art in order to deal with a complex and problematic category like 'race', particularly, in the American context. In other words, her strategy has been to give her texts a deeper, richer, more complex life than the sanitized one commonly presented to the reader. Morrison's abiding concern has been not to present a particular writer's attitude to 'race', but to explore and examine the larger question of a non-white Africanist presence and the construction of its personae.

It is in this context that 'gender' cannot be considered as an isolated category from 'race'. Like racism, gendered spaces also victimize and marginalize. As an African-American and a woman writer, Morrison's authorial position is very challenging. As an author, she is alert to the validity and vulnerability of her assumptions about 'race' and 'gender'. As with 'race', 'gender' differences are socially constructed. Sex is a term that can be used to indicate the biological differences between men and women, but 'gender'

signifies the socially constructed differences that operate in most societies, which lead to forms of inequality, oppression and exploitation between the sexes.

Approaches to 'race' and 'gender' by other black feminists are quite varied. The autobiographies of black women, especially in slave narratives, have been important to many. Audre Lorde asks us to seek "the Black mother in each of us"; that is, to relay on "intuitive" language rather than analysis and see African culture's emphasis upon the mother-bond as an alternative to white patriarchal culture's way of *thinking* (1984:13). In *Inspiring Influences: Tradition, Revision, and Afro-American Women's Novels* (1989), Michael Awkward makes an important distinction between the ways black female writers influence each other and the way male writers do. Awkward points out that black female writers carry out their relationships as mothers, daughters, sisters and aunts rather than sons vying with fathers. From *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970) to *The Heart of a Woman* (1981), Angelou emphasizes African-American women's condition; their violation and betrayal by men, guilt at their own perceived betrayals of their race, the life of the single mother, their sense of displacement, their experimenting with cultural identities, and the continuing process of self-discovery.

A considerable body of criticism produced by both male and female black scholars revolved around questions of representing blackness or, more broadly, the black experience. Those who follow an anti-essentialist position attempt to retrieve the black voice distancing it from 'race'. Whether essentialised or not, race is important for recording black experience and

unearthing authentic black voice of slavery and the historical consequence of racism through institutionalisation of it. Morrison is alert to the problematic of race. Unlike Angelou, Morrison puts very little of her own life into her own writing. But she connects her texts to earlier stories and incidents. In that, she creates a special narrative through intertextuality and attempts to move beyond the stereotype.

Some African-American critics try to underline that Morrison's novels invert familiar myths and stereotypes of black women. For example, de Weever (1991) argues that Morrison evokes a range of mythical mother figures, such as that of the nurturing mother who devours her children as a reaction to the stereotype of the black mother (134). The black Mammy is the legendary figure of sentimental novels and popular films, obedient, obliging, cheerful, resilient and resourceful. It is a stereotype created by white writing. As such the black mother provides a powerful example how inherited Euro-American language organizes and shapes our perceptions of black people. It is understood that any black writer must subvert this stereotype. The Euro-American stereotype forced black women to function chiefly as mothers ignoring many other dimensions and strengths of them. These qualities rather than simply a desire to subvert stereotypes drive Morrison's characterizations of black women.

Each of Morrison's novels embodies diverse and broad social background and becomes increasingly open in form. Epiphany, both embraced and turned from, becomes more of a necessity than a possibility in each novel. *The Bluest Eye* presents the world from a child's point of view. It is the story of three black schoolgirls, the sisters Claudia and Frieda and their friend Pecola,

growing up in Ohio. Claudia, who tells much of the story, is a strong willed eight years old. Pecola, her eleven years old friend, thinks that her life would be perfect if only she could have blue eyes. *Sula* presents black girlhood and adulthood. The relationship between Nel Wright and Sula Peace is unique. Even as little girls, they are bound together by a terrible secret. Sula leaves town and returns several years later, and betrays Nel, putting their friendship to test. *Song of Solomon* is a sweeping epic, much larger than the story of the Milkman's quest for his family heritage. Milkman leaves his house in Michigan and travels to the South in search of the fabled family fortune, a hidden treasure of gold. Although he never finds the gold, Milkman finds something more important to his life—his legacy. This novel attempts to define the consciousness of Black male and the mid-western black culture. *Tar Baby* widens Morrison's geographical sphere presenting the American characters against another culture's racial hierarchies. The work leans heavily on the black folklore and records the conflicts between white and black cultures. Morrison's next work *Beloved* has its origin in a violent historical incident—the story of the woman she had read about while doing research for *The Black Book*. Sethe in *Beloved* struggles to create a new life for herself while her house is haunted by the ghost of the baby she killed some eighteen years earlier to save her from slavery. Paul D, a former slave tries to cast out the baby's spirit and seems to have succeeded until one day a beautiful twenty-year-old stranger with a scar on her throat arrives at Sethe's house. In *Jazz*, Joe Trace, a middle-aged salesman falls crazily in love with Dorcas, an

eighteen year old girl "with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that...he shot her just to keep the feeling going" (*Jazz*, p.3). Joe's wife crashes at the funeral and tries to cut the dead girl's face with a butcher knife. In *Paradise*, the isolated, past-obsessed citizens of the all-black town of Ruby project their faults and blame their problems on the women who live in the Convent, a mansion in the outskirts of the town. "They shoot the white girl first (*Paradise*, p.3) and kill the rest subsequently. Although the outlines of the novels given here indicate the diversity of themes they are interlinked to an understanding of the complexity of racism and gender. The symbolic and the real merge into a narrative pattern in which Morrison attempts a multilayered structure for each of her works. Morrison comes out strongly in defence of her writerly position in asking: "How does literary utterance arrange itself when it tries to imagine an Africanist other? What are the signs, the codes, the literary strategies designed to accommodate this encounter?" (1993:16). She structures her novels in an attempt to answer these questions. Hence she has to be self-reflexive to her own subject position in exploring the fears and desires that reside in her consciousness as a black woman writer. The oral culture, its narratives and the myths of the blacks are invoked in order to distinguish her work from others and connect them to the broader context of 'race' and 'gender'.

Morrison's novel tends to be 'dialogic' where there is a constant interaction between meanings with each having the potential for conditioning others. Her fictions in fact are multilayered and competing discourses that bear upon concepts such as community, authority, individuality, and moral responsibility. She inverts the western philosophical tradition and its modes of

ordering and classification. Generally speaking no one character gives us the whole truth in her fiction. The oppositional narrative modes of realism and fantasy in a continuous struggle to become the language of truth are like the voices in a dialogical novel. There are strong elements of fantasy, recurring non-realistic structures in Morrison's novels. For example, Pecola's obsession with blue eyes, Sula watching her mother burn to death, Pilate's absence of a navel, Ruth's obsessive breast feeding of her son and necrophiliac love for her father; the myth of Solomon's leap, the appearance and dismemberment of Beloved. Parts of the events are presented not as flash back but as 'rememory' in which the past interrupts the narrative and reminds the characters of their struggle. The openness of the narratives has allowed Morrison to use fantasy. In fact Bakhtin's identification of the inconclusiveness of the novel as a genre that is always in the process of development, can help us to understand how it has proved to be such a popular vehicle for non-European subjects and worldviews, in that, it also accommodates the openness of traditional black culture.

Instead of firm closures, Morrison's novels end with moments of insight. At the end of *Sula* (1973), as de Weever says, Nel realises that she has been lonely for Sula and not for Jude; at the end of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Claudia realizes that the town's people have made Pecola their scapegoat. *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Tar Baby* (1981) are inconclusive and leave many questions unanswered. Thus Morrison's works extend the dimensions of the narrative in that novel as an art form is probably characterized by incompleteness, disruption, confusion, contradiction, internal inconsistencies

and unfulfilled expectations. Concepts such as linearity, progress, and chronology are not applicable to the works of many African-American writers, especially Toni Morrison. Her novels are evolutionary, circular, repetitive, contradictory, and often ambiguous, with the histories of the characters revealed in fragments from a variety of sources. de Weever (1991) argues that until the social movements of the 1960s, our definitions of American literature were determined by Attic-Hebraic-Christian traditions that make up European culture (1991: 21). Morrison herself has complained to Claudia Tate (1983) that the works of African-Americans have been approached from a sociological perspective rather than being considered as texts:

> Critics generally don't associate black people with ideas. They see marginal people; they just see another story about black folks. They regard the whole thing as sociologically interesting perhaps but very parochial. There's notion out in the land that there are human beings one writes about, and then there are black people or Indians or some other marginal group (Bill Moyers, pbs video 1992: 160).

Henry Louis Gates Jr. also endorses the view of Morrison:

> If Euro-Americans have used the creative writing of Afro-Americans primarily as evidence of the blacks' mental or social 'perfectibility' or as a measure of the blacks 'racial' psychology or sociology, then they have used African literature as evidence of African 'anthropology', of traditional and modern African customs and beliefs (1984: 5).

He goes on to say that because of the valorization of the social and polemical functions of black literature, the structure of black text has been repressed and treated as if it were transparent.

Toni Morrison's works go beyond inverting the stereotype. She gives expression to desires, needs and aspirations that are articulated through

cultural myths. Throughout Morrison's works, there is a recurring concern with black, female-headed households where survival is dependent upon 'self-inventing'. Morrison feels that emancipation of black people can only be realized in the context of their culture.

In view of the above discussion, it is proposed that a study of Morrison's works may be critically aligned to our understanding of 'race' and 'gender'. The study through the thematic of 'race' and 'gender' is expected, to throw up insights that may help in understanding Morrison's works better and exploring the complexities of her perceptions. It is evident that 'race' is not simply a category of differentiation; it is many things, is in fact, a very complex construct. The textuality of 'race' covering the spectrum of outside/inside, self/Other alterity needs to be deconstructed in the context of theory as well as fictional narrative. Similarly, the dynamics of 'gender' calls for a different kind of reading. Because Morrison is a theoretically informed writer, she mediates various visible/invisible aspects of 'race' and 'gender' as they are conceptually formed, reformed and deformed. Her narratives welcome strong feminine bonding and deconstruct *difference* in its diversity and complexity. Otherisation is one way of articulating marginality, but writing the Other is altogether a different task. In order to bring authenticity and sincerity to her fictional voice, Morrison uses various narrative devices. She subverts the linearity of traditional narrative and escapes its closures making her narratives magical. The present study will also examine Morrison's use of language and the methods of unlocking their multiple meanings. Morrison employs a number of perspectives on language, meaning,

narrative and history with an understanding that language does not merely reflect 'reality', but constructs it.

The study is divided into six chapters and organized in the following manner:

1. Introduction
2. The Discourse of the Marginal
3. Race as Text: Texualizing Race
4. Narrating Gender and Representing Women in Toni Morrison's Fiction
5. Writing the Other: Narrative Strategies in Toni Morrison's Fiction
6. Conclusion

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Chapter VI

Conclusion

Although "lives are lived and stories are told" (Carroll in Roberts (ed.), 2001: 251) the dichotomy between lives/stories are not exclusive of each other. This argument is true in the context of black narratives in which individual lives are lived under compelling historical conditions. The African-American literature is, therefore, not made up, but is made from the contingencies and experiences of life. Morrison reflects on this construct and says, "Winging one's way through the vise and expulsion of history becomes possible in creative encounters with that history. Nothing, in those encounters, is safe, or should be. Safety is the foetus of power as well as protection from it, as the uses to which masks and myths are put in Afro-American culture remind us " (Morrison in James and Sharpley-Whiting (ed.), 2000: 53). For an African-American writer like Morrison the creative engagement has been a backward look at the history and its reconstruction through masks and myths. However, it is not through the tropes of masks and myths but at the same time taking the actual situation and naming the things, people and events that are significant for a culture in search of itself. The reflexivity needs to centralize 'race' and 'gender' to be signifying. Therefore "124 was spiteful", is important for the house Sethe lives in with its number as opposed to the "Sweet Home" from where she fled as a slave. The readers of Morrison's work should be in search of an address to the 'Home' of black literature. This address is metaphorically a splendid presence in America

and is a personalized one: "personalized by its own activity, not the pasted on desire for personality" (*Ibid.*, 53).

The activity is, therefore, significant. However, no activity takes place without an objective. Morrison's activity as a novelist has been to understand the pain of African life and work towards its representation. Her novels are multi-voiced and distinctive in the sense that they are not self-anointing on the western model. In the game of valorizing a particular literature at the cost of another, Morrison feels her writerly mission is not to value the process but the product. For her,writing is also an exploration, and examination of Africanist presence in America that forms the very structure of work with the linguistic and cultural practices of the blacks. "A work does not get better because it is responsive to another culture; nor does it become automatically flawed because of that responsiveness" (*Ibid.*, 41-42).

Tradition becomes a loaded referent in Morrison's endeavour as a writer. As black tradition theorizes itself, it echoes and renames other theories as well. In this renaming the black writing aspires towards 'transparency'– writing which presents itself to the reader as unmediated and full in a transcription of reality without gaps. Morrison's effort has been to make the black tradition 'transparent'. As Gates Jr. maintains: "The black tradition is double-voiced. The trope of the Talking Book, of double voiced texts that talk to other texts, is the unifying metaphor within this book" (1988: xxv). Morrison's works are in this sense double-voiced; they talk to other texts,to other discourses, both western and non-western.Black tradition as a fractured text insists on a writer to go beyond the obvious and piece together the pieces from history to knit them

together to have a sense of fullness of experience. This very complex act puts Morrison constantly on guard that her writerly position remains free from the accusations of valorizing one literature over another or idealising one character over another. Morrison has dwelt on this problem deeply in her work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.*

An analysis of her works show that she is surprisingly successful in maintaining her authorial neutrality although it is impossible to maintain racial neutrality in the face of violence in the name of race, gender and language. 'Racism' in America has been a preoccupation with Morrison. Black-White racial problem and the attendant social consequences seem to be most severe, given the history of slavery, segregation and poverty. As 'racism' is not a neutral category, Morrison's works attempt to deconstruct this category in order to underline the fact that blacks are at the receiving end. All the male characters in her works like Cholly Breedlove, Milkman Dead, Paul D. and Joe Trace have been victims of racism in different ways. Their personality, conduct and actions have been conditioned/shaped by racism. The pain of slavery is difficult to forget and the black man returns to it using 'rememory'. There are two aspects to it: one is a historical return to account for the present and the other is a mythic return in that the heroic characters of the past come alive. Both ways the past reinforces the understanding of the present.

The discourse of feminism reconstructs women's subjecthood. The forms of subjectivity of black women are different from the Eurocentric white feminism. 'Gender' becomes a crucial context for the development of black feminism. But within the black discourse 'gender' cannot be considered

independent of 'race'. In Morrison's works 'gender' is complimentary to 'race'. Black women as has been said are doubly marginalized. They are objects of both white and black sexism. However, black mother is a survivor as she is the key to the survival of the race. In the final pages of *Song of Solomon*, an aged, weary and dying Pilate gifts her nephew Milkman with a valuable gift – she gives him her voice and urges him to sing. His song "Oh Sugargirl don't leave me here" that he could not stop ... from coming" (p.336), connects him to his lineage. "Pilate, Circe, Mary Therése, Eva all these women are embodiments of women... who impart feminine spiritual wisdom (which) become the basis for survival of children and culture" (Holloway, 1987:152). Morrison's works also deal with the tragedies of the lives of women like Pecola, Sethe, Violet, Ruth and the women in the Convent. The tones of most of these novels are sombre and violence racial, sexual or domestic figure invariably in most of her works. In fact one controversial aspect of Morrison's novels has been her portrayal of the heterogeneous nature of African-American community and her exposure of the violence and sexual abuse suffered by black women and children at the hands of black men. But in Morrison's novels it is not an image conscious criticism with 'race' as the only determinant of identity subsuming sexual difference. She refuses to see the concepts of history and identity as fixed or essentialist, Tar Baby predicates the identity of the displaced person – Son, Jadine, Valerian, Margaret Sydney, Ondine. Son discovers that there is no easy retreat into ethnic absolutism or illusory notions of classless organic community. Throughout Morrison's work "identity is the product of psychic struggle. The self is perceived as perpetually in process" (Peach, 1995: 137).

As an empathetic writer she feels that the black women does not figure anywhere. As an individual engaged in creative writing she endeavours to create her with her story of humiliation, pain and desperation. She also inverts the representation of both black male and female characters. In doing so she interrogates not only the rationale of white racism but also deconstructs the black consciousness so as to make each character responsible for what they do beyond 'race' and 'gender'. This is certainly an unique achievement of Morrison as a creative writer.

Morrison's strength has been her narrative strategy. She employs different resources to complicate the narrative such as folklore, myths, religious texts, history and real experiences. Experience indeed becomes an important vector in the telling of the various characters' personal stories. This technique brings strong measure of authenticity to her narrative. Beyond this the narrative becomes fragmentary. This fragmentariness is contingent upon the black experience in that Morrison puts to contestation opposing categories like white/black, male/female, truth/falsehood, moral/immoral, history/ historylessness etc. These categories are woven together like 'quilting' to give the desired effect. In order to make her works both effective and affective she in some of her works uses the techniques of parody, pastiche and elipses making case for representing the unrepresentable. Language in this endeavour becomes a major tool. She uses both the vernacular narrative and standard English to give her novel the status of the talking book. Very often the narrative swings between the allegorical and the real, the fantastic and the bizarre. It seems that Toni Morrison is not preoccupied with the sense of an ending. The

linear time and the classical notion of a text with a beginning, middle and end have not been used by Morrison. Her works are open ended. The author liminality bears upon the works as they are perpetually placed in between places and inter-subjective zones. Time becomes circular for, the black people, as Morrison maintains are timeless – a belief expressed by Son in *Tar Baby*: "He thought he was rescuing her from Valerian, meaning them the aliens, the people who in a mere three hundred years has killed a world millions of years old" (p.271). The metaphoric allusion to the timelessness of black people is in a sense emancipatory as they need to move beyond the discursive struggles of race, gender and marginality. Morrison's works thus underline a perspective where marginality need not be a perpetually socio-economic dispossession rather than a method of altering the system. This altering needs to go beyond the western practice of exclusion and appropriation. Therefore, rediscovering oneself becomes a quest for re-discovering one's own culture, roots.

To Morrison, writing is a means of self-discovery. The quest of self-discovery is not driven by the endeavour of writing individual texts but engaging in the act of writing and rewriting the interminable text of the black people. Thus for her, the end is always, already the beginning.

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