

# Toni morrison's contribution to american literature

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



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Paradoxically, immortality is not achieved through the defeat of biological death, but rather through the indomitability of the spirit, which leaves behind the fruits of wisdom and humanity, putting forevermore things in a different perspective for generations to come. This, however, is not a smooth and linear process and nor does it leave one untransformed. Referring to the motto above, Toni Morrison's lifelong work has been an accurate reflection of her and her race's upheaval.

Albeit she fictionalizes her novels to a great extent, her work does not fail to constitute a palindromic iteration of her thoughts, feelings, and experiences - felt both directly and vicariously. To be more precise, if we overlook the minute details of her novels, one cannot tell where her fiction ends and her life begins, or vice-versa: they read the same, regardless of whether we "read" them from fiction to reality or from reality to fiction. This mirror in which Toni Morrison sees herself - and whose projections "fall" on the surface of our own interpretations and are thusly decoded and re-encoded - is not hung there for the purpose of throwing vanity glances; instead she uses it to question the endlessness of possibilities and that of answers to such broad questions as those relating to racism in the U. S. or to an idealistic state of affairs.

My books are always questions for me. What if? How does it feel to...? Or what would it look like if you took racism out? Or what does it look like if you have the perfect town, everything you ever wanted? And so you ask a question, put it in a time when it would be theatrical to ask, and find the

people who can articulate it for you and try to make them interesting. The rest of it is all structure, how to put it together. (Rustin)

Timing is of immediate importance, as Toni Morrison herself points out, especially since her debut novel appeared on the cusp of the civil rights and feminist movement: a time of great transformations and unparalleled historical significance. She times the appearance of *The Bluest Eye* so well that its impact reverberates strongly into the present. This is no wonder since her writing is not intended to cater for the general masses, nor does it follow the narrow furrows and strictures of fiction writing which are usually implicitly understood. The importance of her work does not only extend along the dimension of aesthetic value: her work is not cathartic in the sense of presenting true beauty loftily idealized; instead she endows her fictional voices with daring, cunning, resolve, resilience; they are often the loud or muffled voices of the surprisingly articulate and heart-rending insane, the latter perversion of mind being perceived in relation with mind-numbing senseless conformity. One may never tell where artistry begins and ends and to what extent her literary offerings will shape future mentalities, but one thing is for sure: her unquenchable thirst for racial justice and her innovative techniques will never cease to challenge our take on things.

If only to weave a flimsy mesh of interpretation around Toni Morrison's undeniably invaluable contribution on American literature and beyond, a closer scrutiny of her work would be most auspicious, especially if we proceed along the lines of racial formation, the importance of family and

community, identity, conformity, independence, allegiance, displacement and all the binaries therefrom.

Racial formation never has never been and never will be (one could safely imagine) a smooth and linear phenomenon of innocuous application. Not only that, but never has there been a time in American history when race wasn't a troublesome matter, from the initial clash between the early settlers who achieved the "conquest of paradise" and the native population, through every aspect of affirmative action, to present frictions with and around immigrants and the border (i. e. with Mexico), all still wrapped in the warm blanket of the American covenant.

The exodus of people crossing the ocean has always been a defining feature of the rugged American fabric and trouble and tension an inherent aftermath, for as Thomas Sowell puts it:

The peopling of America is one of the great dramas in all human history. Over the years, the massive stream of humanity—45 million people—crossed every ocean and continent to reach the United States. They came speaking every language and representing every nationality, race, and religion. (qtd. in Girgus 64)

Even though noble rank has been outlawed by the very Constitution of the United States, this does not necessarily ensure the homogeneity of multiethnicity. The social tension described by American sociologist Thomas Sowell and quoted by Sam B. Girgus in "The New Ethnic Novel and the American Idea" is that caused by the conflicting values brought to the

American land, together with languages, customs, and, more importantly, creeds and moral values that this veritable Tower of Babel is still finding very difficult to take in and transform into a meld of acceptable conformity. A tendency existed and steeply evolved in the not very long course of American history to assert the superiority of the Aryan waspish faction of the American nation over all other non-Aryan groups. Since the budding nation's ideals have always been slightly adumbrated by the skulking presence of slavery, the African-American paradigm of socio-cultural and political struggle has been conferred upon special significance and attention.

As such, the status of African-Americans has undergone severe and painful shifts, from the moment they were brought to America as slaves, until at least quite recently.

These days, the life of African-Americans in the United States is undoubtedly improved, a fact which can easily be proven by the recent election of the first "black" president in the entire history of this country. Not only at the highest level, but in all walks of life evidence exists of inclusion in the earnest of members of society belonging to the African-American race.

Albeit banned on some level - for instance Executive Order 8802 issued by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt banned outright discrimination in the case of jobs related to the federal government and defence contractors - open discrimination continued throughout the decades, the segregation and gerrymandering trailing for many decades. Several boiling pressures, however, undermined these discriminatory tactics, such as the Brown vs. Board of Education of 1954 or the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955. These

and other actions precipitated the adoption of affirmative action, a bomb which exploded in the face of Presidents Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who had to make efforts to redress these social injustices through – as some like to call it – “ positive” or “ reverse” discrimination, in spite of Martin Luther King Jr.’s dream, a veritable gem of rhetoric. His world-famous 1963 I Have a Dream speech is a watershed moment not only for the Civil Rights Movement – a cause that is brilliantly, persuasively and most important, peacefully championed – but for every group that during the course of (American) history had been discriminated against. In it he advocates equality and fraternity, the vital prerequisites of coexistence in a sphere so decidedly multiethnic that, as Herman Melville phrases it, “ You can not spill a drop of American blood without spilling the blood of the whole world.” (qtd. in Girgus 65).

The attitude taken by American people concerning the preference for or against affirmative action is linked to what everyone was educated to believe. The factor that leaves the greatest imprint on our mind is education and the vehicles for achieving this, such as literature, films, and other media, to say nothing of standardized school curricula and society at large. It is the first of these vehicles that will be investigated in what follows, tracing Toni Morrison’s efforts as an epitomic endeavour, in order to isolate its influence on our belief system, values and life choices. Significantly, an original national literature was the first mark of America’s declaration of independence from Europe’s influence and the African-American one the declaration of independence from “ white” hegemony.

Benjamin Franklin believed that “ A good example is the best sermon” (qtd. in Marcovitz 55), while Emerson, the father of transcendentalism urged the American people to be self-reliant above all. Though a maverick at heart throughout his entire glorious existence – which, while dappled with tragedy, his work has been no less prolific in spite of all his hardships and his originality, humour and unmatched industriousness – Mark Twain, The Father of American Literature, has been a most controversial and compliant figure (only in the sense of providing such an inspiring string of examples in the sense of self-reliance) in his time and continues to be so even today. If at first his masterpiece – The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn – was criticized for the language and subject matter by both his contemporaries and later admirers (Ernest Hemingway would provide a notable example) for being trite and vulgar and even excoriated by public libraries such as the Concord Public Library in Massachusetts or New York’s Brooklyn Public Library, recent controversy has been focused around racial matters. Critics are split between those regarding the portrayal of Jim as disparaging and as a consequence offensive and those who find Jim’s superstitious behaviour to be an indication of an alternative perception of our bond with nature, or a more powerful connection with our spiritual side, to say nothing of the steep dissonance between the Waspish past and the politically correct present.

In Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* is analysed from the perspective of the importance of the Africanist presence, a presence much silenced and only timidly analyzed for decades. Discussed in terms of socio-historic development, the distinction between “ black” and “ white” themed by Twain’s novel reaches a peak in

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the mid-nineteenth century, as evidenced in Toni Morrison's interpretation. This can be verified by the juxtaposition between Jim's utter love for his masters and the "baroque" (Morrison 57) torture Huck and Tom subject him to. The "white" line of argumentation is brilliantly outlined in Mark Twain's masterpiece and shrewdly detected by Morrison, who finds Jim "unassertive, loving, irrational, passionate, dependent, inarticulate", which is exactly how the "others" are perceived. The religious, scientific, political, cultural and societal practices were so fashioned around the time when Mark Twain lived as to legitimate slavery and abuse. Starting from the assertion that white people around Jim seek forgiveness and supplication - veritable keystone concepts in Christian religions which, however, did not extend to everyone, considering the hovering doubt about the existence of the soul of the "others", they (i. e. religions through their cloistered leaders) instead providing convenient ways for turning a blind eye on slavery and even extermination - on condition that he accept his inferiority. Thus, she argues, only a representative of the African-American race could have been painfully humiliated by children after being presented as a father and an adult, while no one, not even a white convict, could have been submitted to this kind of treatment.

Toni Morrison's discourse is by no means vituperative: she does not intend any reversed oppression through her writing, either in *Playing in the Dark* or in any of her works of fiction. However, her writing is so compelling that when *Beloved* does not win her the National Book Award, as many as forty-eight African-American authors and critics write to the *New York Times* claiming her literary prowess, which afterwards earns her the laurels of the



Pulitzer Prize, and rightly so. Her lack of bias is evident when she praises the former President Bill Clinton calling him the “‘first black President’, since he displayed ‘ almost every trope of blackness: single-parent household, born poor, working-class, saxophone-playing, McDonald’s-and-junk-food-loving boy from Arkansas’” (Cooke), while her discursive equanimity can be traced from the way she analyses the Africanist presence in literature and the way it is regarded from the perspective of its relationship to mainstream literature and criticism:

Like thousands of avid but nonacademic readers, some powerful literary critics in the United States have never read, and are proud to say so, any African-American text. It seems to have done them no harm, presented them with no discernible limitations in the scope of their work or influence. I suspect, with much evidence to support the suspicion, that they will continue to flourish without any knowledge whatsoever of African-American literature. (Playing in the Dark 13)

While she does not wish to challenge or criticise anyone for their views and choices, Toni Morrison cannot bear to look the other way when the literary Jim Crow era is still so fiercely enforced. That it might be convenient for anyone to ignore any slice of reality or exclude any of the fibres in the fabric of a nation is quite obvious, and while this approach does not impair our intellect, it does however limit our understanding. This selective interpretation of things which leaves Africanist representation in a cone of darkness is especially significant, since it underpins racism and it bolsters its moral justification, especially along the lines of racial formation: a deeply-

seated phenomenon which pervades every aspect of life in America and a very hurtful process for those slighted by it. The relevance of racial formation is underscored throughout Toni Morrison's work and, in their extensive study entitled *Racial Formation in the United States: from the 1960s to the 1990s*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant, the two American sociologists who developed racial formation theory, argue that race is an artificial concept, because the bases according to which any particular individual can be labelled as "white", "black", and so on, may start from certain biological traits, but race transcends these. To illustrate the point, a person of "mixed blood" is considered from the point of view of North American and then Latin American racial identification whereby the same categorization would have the same individual first "black" and then unable to "pass" as "black". At the other extreme, Brazilian legislation is willing to accept the assignation of several racial categories to various members of the same family.

In addition to being intricate and far-reaching, these considerations help provide grounding for our study of Toni Morrison's work and its impact on American literature and even life in America and also help account for the perception of other races by the early settlers, whose religious and even scientific tenets had to be broached to accommodate these "new" categories, such as the "noble savage," and dispute the very existence of their soul. This blatant dismissal of a person's soul based solely on the abstract and arbitrary consideration of race is an outrage that Toni Morrison starkly exposes in *Beloved*, about which Susanna Rustin comments the following in "The Guardian":

It is a novel of unspeakable horrors. But even more than the physical brutality, Morrison confronts us with the irreparable harm done by what Margaret Atwood described in a review as "one of the most viciously antifamily institutions human beings have ever devised", a system that sought to deprive human beings of what it is that makes them human.

(Rustin)

Sethe, her heroine, learns the truth and is shocked to realise that her masters, whom she is so devoted to, are taught to distinguish between her human and animal characteristics, which means, in other words, that she is but a soulless beast of burden.

That's when I stopped because I heard my name, and then I took a few steps to where I could see what they was doing. Schoolteacher was standing over one of them with one hand behind his back. He licked a forefinger a couple of times and turned a few pages. Slow.

I was about to turn around and keep on my way to where the muslin was, when I heard him say, "No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up." I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed.

I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly. [...] Flies settled all over your face, rubbing their hands.

My head itched like the devil. Like somebody was sticking fine needles in my scalp. I never told Halle or nobody. (Beloved 224)

This episode in Sethe's existence can never be erased nor her pain alleviated. The suffering she is caused is absolute and boundless. Her feelings of outrage surge like torrents in her brain and she feels utterly discombobulated. This memory will forever haunt her; it will shape her future and her attitude towards life, her behaviour towards her children, and it will serve as a constantly open wound. What's even more tragic is that this mind-boggling injustice spared no one: men, women, or children.

Remembering his own price, down to the cent, that schoolteacher was able to get for him, he wondered what Sethe's would have been.

What had Baby Suggs' been? How much did Halle owe, still, besides his labor? What did Mrs. Garner get for Paul F? More than nine hundred dollars? How much more? Ten dollars? Twenty? Schoolteacher would know. He knew the worth of everything. It accounted for the real sorrow in his voice when he pronounced Sixo unsuitable. (266)

Proceeding along these lines of dehumanization, monetary worth is assigned to each individual and that is the extent of one's value when assessed by the slave owner. Reality is raw, harsh, and beyond shocking, but sugar-coating it would not help if we are to learn the truth about racism and racial formation. The accuracy of Toni Morrison's writing - in spite of the degree of fictionalization - is the keystone of her discourse. It is her head-on confrontation of the underlying reality that lends Toni Morrison her

uniqueness and that has earned her - in equal measure - respect and criticism.

Despite the narrative voices that assert their own individuality in Toni Morrison's works, Sam B. Girgus comments on present-day African-American literary discourse, finding it too elaborate, and somewhat digressive to the detriment of thematic concerns such as the daily life, values, sorrows, tragedies, successes, woes, accomplishments, and so forth. He argues his point by referring to African-American writers Toni Morrison and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.:

...both Morrison and Gates typify qualities of ethnicity that are common to many of the writers in the literary and cultural renaissance under discussion. They all write in English even when extolling a particular vernacular speech, dialect, or region. They are all extremely sophisticated artists who use the most complex modern and postmodern techniques to convey their highly individualized visions of experience. Although rooted in ethnic communities and concrete historic situations, their works as cultural artifacts and products are nevertheless aspects of complicated technological and bureaucratic systems of cultural and social production that often differ from the language, values, and daily life of the cultures for which they speak. (Girgus 61)

This may be so if we for instance pick up Toni Morrison's Pulitzer-awarded novel *Beloved* where we find passages of stream of consciousness, dialectal dialogue, flashbacks from the past and the conflation of past and present resulting in a destabilized horizon of racial and individual formation. Toni Morrison's formal education may have driven a wedge between herself and

the culture she was born into and which she proudly represents, but she still manages to put together an incredible manifesto that reaches deeper truths and meanings with absolute valences. In her novel the three heroines - mother and two daughters - have overlapping individualities and they represent good and evil in equal measure. Their existences are nonlinear and they run both ways along the temporal axis. This is especially true of Sethe, the mother, whose past still haunts her and impacts greatly her present and future; an impact which extends to her family as well.

The state of nonlinearity, conflation, and duality is also found in other novels, such as *The Bluest Eye* or *Sula*, in which the heroines manage to become displaced from their status, they are isolated from their respective families and friends, and are forced into pursuing painful valences of individuality. From this point of view, Toni Morrison herself manages to overreach her scope by challenging the perceptions, values, mores, and principles we are ingrained with by society and education. Agnes Suranyi, a contributor to “*The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*”, edited by Justine Tally, expresses just such a view: “The borderline between decent women and man-eating prostitutes is erased; only the latter are capable of giving love to Pecola, whose quest for it elsewhere is futile.” (16-17). This view is of great significance because it epitomizes Toni Morrison’s take on life: nothing in her work is “fed” to us already masticated; it is quite the contrary that occurs: we have to interpret the facts stated, the innuendoes, the streams of consciousness, the multifaceted and split personalities, their actions and inactions all by ourselves, through our own filters and open up to a more thorough interpretation that must override dated tenets.

Applying the above stated, upon perusing Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, one cannot miss the connection between melding and overlapping identities and the life of people struggling with racial formation and being forced into conformity and assimilation. This assertion is further reinforced by the fact that Sethe lived in the time of the Underground Railroad, a time which saw a sharp increase in the severity of punishments for escaping bondage. The tenseness of life on the black / white divide is passed on to later generations who carry on with their incessant frictions all the way to Martin Luther King Jr. and beyond.

In a 2004 interview with Rachel Cooke for "The Observer" Toni Morrison successfully proves why the battle with racism is not yet over, in spite of all the things that have changed since the beginning of affirmative action.

' I don't pass without insults. Let me give you an example. I walk into the Waldorf Astoria in New York to check in. We're going to have a drink, and then my friend is going to go home. She stands behind me, as I check in. Finally, the guy says, " Oh, are you registering too?" He thought I was the maid. My friend was trembling with anger. It was so personal. But the irony of it was that I was on the cover of a magazine that month, and there were these posters with my face on them all over New York.' (qtd. in " The Observer")

*The Bluest Eye* - her debut novel - for instance, has had its popularity delayed many a year precisely because of the stark way in which Toni Morrison approached taboo subjects and because she strived to prove that " black" did not equal " ugly". Growing up is difficult and the girls in the novel

find their race assignation - which is no fault of theirs - a difficult burden to carry around. They do not have the easier lives of the lighter-skinned people in their community and their perceived ugliness is a feature which gradually seeps into their consciousness to such a degree that it becomes overbearing. The validity of this externally-imposed ugliness is reinforced not only by the white members of society, but by the very families themselves. In Pecola's case, her own mother finds her daughter repulsive and troublesome, choosing to love a white child more than her own - an unforgivable and heinous deed. But then the destabilization of identity is a practice quite common for Toni Morrison, and rightly so, because although identity is formed at an early stage in our existence, the vector of external factors leave multiple indelible marks upon the essence of our character. For Toni Morrison's characters the insurmountable obstacles they have to overcome take too great a toll on their resilience, which ultimately becomes defeated. This reciprocal allegoric relationship between private and collective (in this case racial) identity is a true-to-life representation of many generations of oppressed African-Americans and their struggles to survive in a disparaging mainstream society.

In *Sula*, the African-American writer uses the Bottom as a twofold metaphor: on the one hand the location of this neighbourhood is on top of a hill which, as the slave owner explains to the slave, is the bottom of the world from where God is watching and from which "the blacks" took "small consolation in the fact that every day they could literally look down on the white folks" (11), while on the other we see little black girls being picked on by the most



recent immigrants who themselves would endure abuse, thus continuing this loop which is closed by the proximity to God that the hills afford them.

The ramifications do not stop here: it seems that in any place in the novel, any novel of Toni Morrison's, there is a starting point for a new insight, for a new interpretation, for a kernel of postmodernist truth about life and literature, for novel literary technique and what it entails for both the novel itself as a genre, as well as for the reader and his/her perception of things that's constantly being challenged, just like the reader's matrix of social tenets and belief system.

Possibly the best example of this is served by the story which inspired Toni Morrison to write *Beloved*, the story of the African-American woman who would rather kill her own daughter than suffer to have her returned to bondage. As Nellie Y. McKay, the co-editor alongside William L. Andrews of "*Toni Morrison's Beloved - A Casebook*" states another critic's point of view (i. e. Karla F. C. Holloway, writer of "*Beloved: A Spiritual*"), Toni Morrison really manages to come up with a fresh and reinvigorating approach

For example, with myth as a dominant feature of *Beloved*, Morrison not only reclaims the Garner story from those who interviewed her after her child's death and expressed enormous surprise at her calm but also, as mythmaker, achieves a complete revision of the episode. [...] The oral and written history that Morrison revises, consciously and unconsciously felt, considers many aspects of each life and reflects an alternative perspective on reality. [...] In addition, Morrison, like many other African and African-American writers, often defies the boundaries separating past, present, and future time. This

allows her to free *Beloved* from the dominance of a history that would deny the merits of slave stories. As Morrison's creation, *Beloved* is not only Sethe's dead child but the faces of all those lost in slavery, carrying in her the history of the "sixty million and more." Holloway sees *Beloved* as a novel of inner vision: the reclamation of black spiritual histories. (15)

As Morrison herself points out in the novel, the press has no interest in presenting the truth detachedly. It also does not concern itself with such "trite" topics as the abominable abuses of slavery and it does not give praise where praise is due. Instead, it engages in shameless hectoring of a mother who kills her own daughter. If taken out of context, we would expect it to do no less and, but for Toni Morrison's reframing and revamping of the story, we probably wouldn't have given the story a second thought. But we cannot be left to stand idle before such brazen hypocrisy as regarding Sethe more animal than human, and then a murderess guilty of a heinously premeditated act done whilst in full possession of her faculties. Furthermore, her case is stripped of context, just as the plethora of various other deeds similarly perpetrated as a result of extraordinary duress. This time around Morrison gives ample space to her heroine to justify her actions, while not allowing her, however, to be absolved of the guilt she must bear until the end, hence the muddled border between temporal references, actions, characters, and individualities, which again escape their expected linearity and contiguity.

Perception is a fickle thing, especially when something is stretched, filtered, re-filtered, decoded and re-encoded, challenged and stereotyped and

warped in every way imaginable. We cannot assert our identity as long as we are unable to find the appropriate compromise between the adoption and rejection of every aspect that is debatable and that can be transacted over this social Carrefour of exchanges.

But, more importantly, we can no longer acquiesce in this moral comfort zone set out by society, which overshadows whole groups based on artificial considerations, especially when the relativism of the preceding adjective becomes too overbearing and too painful to stand. The point being made here is that while maybe artificial in essence, the segregation inflicted on these groups – and others, as well (while Toni Morrison is clearly concerned with the African-American case, it cannot fail to be propitious to generalise an assertion that we should internalise already – if we haven't done so – and apply to any case in which double standards might occur) is absorbed by those whose mental health is abused incessantly and whose resilience truly worn out and even suppressed. What Toni Morrison attempts is to sow the seeds of individual and discernible thought willing and capable enough to probe things deeper than the shallowness of their outward appearance. Toni Morrison's works are soul-wrenching panegyrics dedicated to the memory of the former slaves and her contemporaries who were still enslaved through omission and discrimination, as well as a testimony of the noblest and most dedicated application of one's moral ideals.

Chapter Two: The Importance of Family and Community in *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Sula*

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company.

(nobelprize. org)

It is no secret or surprise that, first family and then family and community, have the greatest impact on our personality, shaping and reshaping our existence, validating and supporting our preferences and choices or going to great lengths to lay stumbling blocks in our path towards achieving these. Furthermore, the conceptions and principles professed within familial confines are based on the patterned behaviour of one's surrounding environment. This, in turn is founded on what is deemed just and acceptable behaviour leading to harmony and cooperation and is related to civic duty.

According to Freud's structural model of the psyche, the development of the human psyche is a three-stage process which corresponds to the three most important stages in our existence. In the first stage, the id, our psyche is so shaped as to want nothing but to fulfil its own needs and wishes, regardless of those of everyone else. Then, as we start learning to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour - that we are exposed to within the bosom of our family (if only still for the sake of tending to our own needs) - we begin to observe the need to conform and become acquainted with the boundaries of our environment. It is only in this last stage that right and wrong - as we are wont to perceive it within said familial context for the greater good of society - truly become sedimented. If we think about this

model of the psyche we realize the significance of family to our personal development and the reciprocating relationship between family and society. The latter has been at length debated and is still a bone of contention even today. Aristotle is the thinker who first addressed the issue of ethics developing the term to mean the well-being of society as a whole; as a political entity. He goes so far as to claim that “ human beings are naturally political animals” and that “ the good of the multitude is greater and more godlike than the good of the individual”.

He finds the origin of this greater societal good to stem from personal virtue of character. The dichotomy between morality and ethical behaviour is paramount and deserves our careful scrutiny if we wish to understand Toni Morrison’s ideas beyond the mere surface of things. The very motto of this chapter is no mere accident. The choice is not marked by haphazard or even serendipity: it reflects the consequence of unethical behaviour on the part of the (moral) individual. Of course, one may assume that this extrapolation is taken out of context, or that the interpretation chosen is refashioned for the purpose at hand, but I would like to contend that it is not. For too long humankind has tended to put things in balance in order to reach a verdict of good or bad; acceptable or unacceptable; moral or immoral; ethical or unethical. In Toni Morrison’s Nobel lecture she recounts the story of the old blind woman who is challenged by young people for the purpose of exposing her, and takes the allegory along the path of language. Since she regards language as a (living) organism – signified by the bird in the hands of one of the young people, why couldn’t we reshape the allegory to mean our individuality held in the grasp of our hands but challenged and at times

scoffed or ignored by family and community? We entreat those around us to not patronise us and accept our choices and beliefs: “ Don’t tell us what to believe, what to fear. Show us belief’s wide skirt and the stitch that unravels fear’s caul.” (Morrison Nobel lecture). While Toni Morrison clearly addresses writers, readers, policy makers, orators, as well as other categories or groups of people who utilize, make or destroy language, our extrapolation is no less potent, because a dead or disused language implies a dead culture and dead culture lack of intelligent life that usually takes place within the sphere of community, with family at the core of this cluster of interrelations. Toni Morrison holds that: “ Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created.” (Nobel lecture) This viewpoint is a crucial bolster for this argument: we are made and broken by narratives and narratives make the cement that holds together the community. As we are about to see, Morrison’s novels focus on this aspect a great deal, especially since her heroes and heroines do not suffer – for the greatest part – through objective shortcomings of their own, but rather their spirits are blighted by the reprobating vociferation and standings of the community that are again framed through the perspective of the reciprocating dealings of family and community. In “ The Republic: Book V” Plato theorises that the influence of family on its offspring is such that would eventually lead us to abolish the idea of family altogether.

The Aristotelian “ common good” is another influence on the private individual. This concept challenges us to ask on what considerations may the community and what agency authorizes it to hold ideals that subsume private choice and individual needs, creeds, moral values, faith, and so on.

And, more importantly, how do we know if and to what extent the greater collective good may prevail to the detriment of the individual good? In the course of time, various thinkers have come up with various responses to this question.

Henry David Thoreau (July 12, 1817 - May 6, 1862) - American transcendentalist writer, poet, historian, and philosopher - writes about our duty as upright citizens to resist any form of unlawful government in his renowned essay called "Civil Disobedience" in which he argues in favour of just rebellion. Ralph Waldo Emerson (May 25, 1803 - April 27, 1882) - another American transcendentalist philosopher, essayist and poet - argues that our lives must be dedicated to the aim of finding our originality and letting nothing stand in the way of our asserting our self reliance. The way of achieving self-reliance is through following our ingrained virtues that have sprouted from the divine, which he refers to as the Over-soul. Thomas Aquinas (1225 - 1274) - Italian Dominican priest of the Catholic Church, influential philosopher and theologian - develops his philosophical argumentation around the divine rule. According to his reasoning, there are four types of law: eternal, natural, human, and divine. The first - eternal law - is God's ruling, which governs the entire universe and everything in it. Natural law is based on "the first precept of the law, that good is to be done and promoted, and evil is to be avoided. All other precepts of the natural law are based on this" (qtd. in Stern 145), while human law is that which stems from the government and which regulates the dealings and goings-on within society. Finally, divine law is the summation of the teachings of the Scripture.

The most obvious observation to be made is that all these great thinkers' argumentations only take into account the ideal case in which the individual is a fully compliant (in spite of the assertion of one's independent thought and action) and "well-greased" "cog" in this "machine" called society. The next salient remark to be made is that all these rights and duties deriving from following the rules of society only apply to privileged groups. If we go back to racial formation, religion has for a long time been a promoter of the subjugation of "lesser" groups of individuals. Not only has it turned a blind eye to racial abuses, but it has even provided solid grounding for blatant discrimination, treating other races as inferior, subpar, savage, etc.

If we think about Thoreau's advice to fight unlawful governing, how could the silenced voices of "wagonload of slaves" who "sang so softly their breath was indistinguishable from the falling snow" (Nobel lecture) revolt against a system that disavowed their humanity in exchange for a fixed monetary value? How could those who had to withstand harsher and harsher regulated abuses even dream of going down this path when just the thought of reaching a haven of freedom would be a castle in the air most of the times? They could have sought protection from the Over-soul, but His representatives on earth would provide quite the contrary. Not only did they not receive the succour usually associated with religious faith, but they would have to fend off persecutions incessantly. And even those could have been easier endured had family ties been allowed to become a bit stronger.

Lastly, one could hardly envisage a way to conciliate divine and human, societal, political, and religious law. If we were to abide eternal laws then



there would be no room left for the arbitrariness of human laws. Whether instituted by the state or the church, these laws can hardly be considered just from all points of view. First of all, historically and anthropologically speaking - with few isolated exceptions - all societal organisations have been patriarchal. Even today women have predefined gender roles to be filled, usually centring on household activities and child rearing. According to feminist interpretations of family, marriage is a social institution which enables, nay compels the state to interfere in the life of the individual. The state must also ensure the welfare of its future generations, which means the physical and mental development of children must take precedence over other things. This of course means added constraints to the development of a woman's career and accomplishments, since the division of labour will mean added responsibilities. However, Toni Morrison shows that in spite of these added responsibilities, she can still pursue her career:

Well, I really do only two things. It only looks like many things. All of my work has to do with books. I teach books, write books, edit books or talk about books. And the other thing that I do is to raise my children which, as you know, I can do only one minute at a time. (qtd. in McKay 140)

and her results so far have truly complimented her achievements.

Still, the 19th amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which was only enacted in 1919 proves that we still live in a patriarchal society that teaches young boys that the mere truth of their gender validates their demand for preferential treatment.

Going back to parenthood, the divine law of the Scripture, and its commandments, of which one runs: “ Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (New Jerusalem Bible, Exodus 20. 12), Toni Morrison’s novels constantly challenge the legitimacy of its rule.

Beloved is a novel built around the lives of three heroines: the mother Sethe and two daughters: Denver and Beloved. The direct aim of this novel is to retell the story of an oppressed and enslaved people whose tragic lives have never been commemorated:

There is no suitable memorial, or plaque, or wreath, or wall, or park, or skyscraper lobby. There’s no 300-foot tower, there’s no small bench by the road. There is not even a tree scored, an initial that I can visit or you can visit in Charleston or Savannah or New York or Providence or better still on the banks of the Mississippi. And because such a place doesn’t exist . . . the book had to. (Toni Morrison Society)

This valence of encomium Beloved is charged with is significantly stated at the very onset of the story when Toni Morrison quotes a passage from the Bible: Romans 9: 25, to be more precise, which may as well serve as an appropriate incipient inference of her choice of title: “ I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved.” (New Jerusalem Bible)

This theme of remembrance and commemoration is a recurrent one. While the plot of the novel takes place in a time when slavery had just been

abolished, the ghost of past events has not perished with it. A veritable pivotal influence on the story's shape and - more importantly - on the daughters' lives is Sethe's unbearable past, fragments of which are chanted throughout the story. Her past is marked by such heart-breaking events that there is no wonder her take on things is sometimes wild and exaggerated. Since the ghostly presence of the murdered daughter haunts her incessantly, Sethe is forced to relive her past and it is not until the end of the novel that she can release herself from this spectre when the community gathers to chase Beloved out of Sethe's and their own lives.

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative - looked at too long - shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do.

This is not a story to pass on. Down by the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar. (Beloved 319)

This act initiated by the brave Ella - who herself had been a victim of abuse - occurs at a very important moment in the life of Sethe. At this stage Sethe had all but morphed into her late mother-in-law Baby Suggs who isolated herself from the community and family she belonged to and plunged into deep oblivion, remembering only that her first born liked "the burned bottom of bread" (4). If at first she held a job at a restaurant and still

functioned in the midst of her community in Cincinnati, providing for her introverted daughter Denver, she gradually becomes a slave to Beloved's every whim. It is now when Sethe almost gives herself wholly to her reclusive animal nature, being completely dehumanized by the parasitic daughter and the painful remembrances stirred in the mind of the former that Ella decides enough is enough: "it infuriated her and gave her another opportunity to measure what could very well be the devil himself against 'the lowest yet'" (297) and triggers her sense of morality and ethos.

First, she is enraged by this manifestation of evil which challenges and disturbs the comfortable atmosphere of morality and communion in hallowed good the group aspires to during this time of the Reconstruction and blights the existence of one of its members who once was the nexus of it, then fell, was ousted and treated as a pariah, then gingerly and cautiously reaccepted into the midst of the community that Sethe finally retreated from.

Subsequent to this initial rage, an amalgamated reaction combining elements of community spirit and common good - to a certain extent, along the lines of Thomas Aquinas's philosophy - and the supplication of the divine brew into the synergetic common conscience the solidarity and impetus that prods them to act as one and dispel Sethe within whom Ella recognises the threat of evil.

This upsurge of rage branches out in a multifarious cloud of significances. The multidimensionality encountered at this point underscores the importance of remembering one's past (in this particular case, the tribulations of the "Sixty million and more" (3)), paying tribute, forgiving

transgressions and transgressors, and using it as a lesson for future endeavours after a closer and more in-depth scrutiny of the truth. Of course this last part cannot really be fathomed properly and analysed through the broad-ranging filter of the community. Truth is subservient to the common good and it is disseminated as the voice of community: " Newspapers are recycled as " material," they return to what they are, mere paper: Without primary material produced by slave labor, the history of the masters simply could not be, a fact Sethe stresses: " He liked the ink I made"." (Raynaud 48). This cogent observation adds a new dimension of its own: the interrelating of the two racial categories and the importance of slave labour not only for the economy, but for " white" history and culture, as well.

While the historical period of slavery hasn't usually been probed too deep - a fact Toni Morrison herself undertook to correct - as well as editorial " flashes" chronicling everyday (shocking) events, a lingering effect will always trail along in the minds and hearts of future generations, just as the problems of the past have sometimes foretold the future: " From a woman's point of view, in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, black women had to deal with ' post-modern' problems in the nineteenth century and earlier." (Raynaud 45).

The particularization Toni Morrison makes can be extended beyond the range of black African-American women to women in general even today (sic), but the compelling case of Sethe / Margaret Garner (the conflation is purposefully intended, in spite of the novel not being written along the lines of realism) reinforces Toni Morrison's words and provokes us to reread them,

just like the circular manner she employs in writing the novel urges us to reread it and reassess the heroines' act (both real and fictional). Going back to Sethe's previous assertion, we can also infer another sort of interrelation: that of the individual and the community: "...the inkI made" (45). In this instance Sethe restates her privileged status in the community that once she had been at the heart of, alongside her mother-in-law, for she feels superior - not necessarily to someone in particular, but to this despised caste she belonged to:

Sethe understood it then, but now with a paying job and an employer who was kind enough to hire an ex-convict, she despised herself for the pride that made pilfering better than standing in line at the window of the general store with all the other Negroes. She didn't want to jostle them or be jostled by them. Feel their judgment or their pity, especially now. (Beloved 223)

This is an important counterpoint when regarded alongside Ella's reaction and alacrity. However, the diffidence she shows is rooted into something real and extremely painful: on the one hand there is the recollection of her scientifically-studied inferiority which confers her a more animalistic side than would otherwise be the case for a white person - a view which is then reinforced in the press after her filicide - and, on the other the community's failure to alert her of schoolteacher's looming approach.

She, however, is not alone in her aloofness. At heart everyone feels the need of belonging and validation. The former is repeated over and over through three episodes of uninterrupted trails of thought into which Sethe and her two daughters lapse, the binding element for the mother and Denver being

Beloved and for Beloved her mother. Along this backdrop of isolation and belonging Paul D also reminisces about his past camaraderie with fellow men literally bound to him in slave labour and about the time he spent in the company of other women he temporarily lived with. In spite of all these memories he fails to attach himself to anyone and even forsakes Sethe, whom he fails to connect with. A more forceful and weighty representation of solitude and belonging inherently conjoined is provided by Beloved's internal and quasi-subconscious soliloquy which is brilliantly rendered by Toni Morrison to allegorize the baptismal and purifying resurfacing and redemption of bound and intertwined communal destiny of a racial group forced into a symbolic sepulchral ritual in the midst of skinless people.

On a different and rather marginal note, Denver's stepping out into the world marks an important phase in her life. The mental and physical lassitude Sethe allows herself to revel in forces Denver to step out of her comfort zone and reach out to the community who reciprocates her gesture and welcomes her. At this point Denver becomes more mature and starts better showing her age than when she was engrossed in more childish and solitary pursuits. Even Paul D, who meets her in the street, can see the progress she has made and senses the fact that she has started assuming adult responsibilities, caring about her family's welfare enough to think about managing to find a second job. This gut-wrenching shift that propels her out into the world is also due to the stuffy atmosphere of the household that completely ousts her.

Revisiting the passage that lies at the end of *Beloved*, the community of Cincinnati is once more involved in the relationship between Sethe and her murdered daughter, helping the former let go of her past, atoning somewhat for their earlier involvement. Ella's individual feelings of rage are transposed onto the group and the energy she transmits is evenly multiplexed among the members of the posse who have come to chase *Beloved* and what she purports away, so they voice but one voice and will but one wish. In leaving her elegant dress behind, *Beloved* vacates her persona and is ultimately dismissed as a signifier for Sethe's past. *Beloved* is for the most part selectively erased and the memory of her constructed and wiped out upon the community's whim. The severed familial tie of Sethe and Denver is perhaps allowed to re-emerge, but the novel leaves it in the air.

The *Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison's literary debut, is a story that puts forth many themes and affords us many avenues of thought and study. One theme we may - with genuine post-modernist uncertainty - assign chief importance to is that of the role of family and community. This time, if we appeal to our innate moral virtue, we may as well embrace Plato's conclusion regarding the necessity of the dissolution of family. Alternatively, we may conjecture that this case study of familial interactions is the exception that reinforces the rule. While some critics have tended to append this to an agenda or another (e. g. the feminist movement), we are safe to assume that Toni Morrison's effort overachieves the somewhat unidirectional quality of a simple cautionary tale or fable in the classical sense. It seems that the more we read her novels, interviews and literary criticism, the more we discover that Toni Morrison is a prophet of what we are heading towards: a world so



full of uncertainty and so overworked with meaning, symbolism, struggles and shape-shifting values on the constant verge of redefining, that our only chance of surviving is a sharpening of our senses and of our intellect.

After slavery, when fresh-born blacks ceased to represent a supply of unpaid labor, agents of the law, the economy, the academy and the Government began to view the black family as problematic in every way. The education of black children, the employment of black adults, housing, medical care, food – whites suddenly began to regard these normal needs as insupportable burdens, and supposed solutions to " the problem" of the black family destroyed some families and disfigured others.

That blacks in America were able to maintain families at all and that these families endured after the Civil War is amazing. Perhaps because of this unexpected survival, historians usually treat the black family as a special phenomenon or trivialize it beyond recognition. (The Family Came First)

This interpretation of the African-American family and its meaning is what this critical endeavour hinges on and – more significantly – the theoretical grounding of the novel. Though not expressly stated as such, the atmosphere of the novel is that of inflicted stigma and perceived ugliness that pervades everyday life and besmirches the innocence of childhood. Ugliness is a constant presence and it never ceases to be juxtaposed by the blueness associated with perceived mainstream beauty.

If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different, and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they'd say, " Why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn't do bad things in front of those pretty eyes."

Pretty eyes. Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run, Jip, run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes. Jerry has blue eyes. Jerry runs. Alice runs. They run with their blue eyes. Four blue eyes. Four pretty blue eyes. Blue-sky eyes.

Blue - like Mrs. Forrest's blue blouse eyes. Morning-gloryblue-eyes. AliceandJerrybluestorybook-eyes. Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time. Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (The Bluest Eye 47)

But then we can argue that, after all, " beauty is in the eyes of the beholder". This perception of beauty, or rather the randomness of this association - blue equals beautiful and the superlative of beauty is " the bluest eye", which is not at all dissimilar to the association between white and good, desirable, graceful and between black and bad, undesirable, shameful - is undeniably a societal construct. " Ugly" is a disgraceful qualifier and reveals the pettiness and malevolence of the assessor and this assignation is even more terrible as it is flung into the face of a child. Traces of expected behaviour are present in the text and they reveal the mind-

numbing comforts of conformity and they illustrate the consequences of adopting re-regurgitated opinions and value systems at stark face value. The caveat is worded through the agency of pre-text, which Agnes Suranyi interprets thusly: “ The three-fold repetition of the pre-text, a descent into chaos, shows the lack of meaning of the text for poor black children; the text without spaces challenges the reader to make sense of a senseless world and calls for compassion.” (14)

Compassion, empathy and understanding represent terms of great aesthetic value, especially when viewed from the perspective of ethics. Torrents of pages can and have been written on these topics. Sermons encompass them, speeches, meetings, summits, social work ethics, and the list goes on and on. But when placed upon a pedestal of high and mighty philosophic argument solely for the looking or when beaming from the firmament of social conduct, they lose all their potential for and idealized virtue. “ Poor black children” (14) are the moot arguments of social justice and society. A caveat we must observe is that, in spite of the impression of general truths being conveyed, these assertions should not be taken to mean that nothing has changed and that racial formation is still at the apogee of blatant abuse, but rather they should be viewed from the stance of Toni Morrison’s first-hand experiences in the sixties’ America and the observations she makes, conclusions she reaches and ideas and interpretations she issues forth in her novels. They are given the “ cold shoulder” of ignorance and are denied the implicit succour of innocence and the compassion that should accompany it. This treatment will prove a terrible blow to a young person’s budding of self-confidence and self-worth. As he recounts his own “ rape” by white men,

Cholly reveals the emotional abuse that stifles his spiritual and physical development and leaves a scar that can never be erased, even by heavy drinking.

Sullen, irritable, he cultivated his hatred of Darlene. Never did he once consider directing his hatred toward the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless. His subconscious knew what his conscious mind did not guess—that hating them would have consumed him, burned him up like a piece of soft coal, leaving only flakes of ash and a question mark of smoke. He was, in time, to discover that hatred of white men—but not now. Not in impotence but later, when the hatred could find sweet expression. For now, he hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. (The Bluest Eye 157)

The hegemony wielded by the white men, purposefully hyperbolized to such a definitive extent, has deleterious consequences on the young Cholly who displaces his unwarranted shame on someone even more innocent than himself: Darlene. This deeply-ingrained perceived inferiority will follow him for a long time, as we are led to believe and mechanism of defence such as hatred will follow suit later on, at a time when they are less useful than at the time of the “rape”. This displacement of guilt is very significant because it reinforces an earlier account of African-American women’s evolution from girlhood all the way to very old age when pain and death have already given their worst. From this account we learn that African-American women are the unsung sacrificial lambs of the African-American community in Lorain Ohio

who must be ready to accept any blow dealt their way and still live up to the claim of their feminine charm and innate sensitivity their gender role ascribes them:

“ They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep.” (142)

The generalization of this assertion can be swept and stretched to cover most of the entire North American territory and can also be taken to mean something more absolute and general, given the still lingering makeup of society all over the world. This standpoint (i. e. concerning African-American women) is expressed over and over by Toni Morrison, who celebrates the valour, resolve, industriousness, ingenuity and resilience of African-American women who took abuse from everyone; “ The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other” (142). All these tribulations are not uplifting and they do not provide positive character-shaping experiences. They only erode physical beauty which is tentatively perceived, unstable and fleeting anyway, but their baptism of fire finally comes to fruition when they are awarded freedom.

However, Pecola herself fails to develop resilience strong enough to withstand all these calluses inflicted upon African-American women by family and community. As previously stated, the author herself does not cater for the faint of heart. In order for us to know the truth, we need to know all of it,

not just the palatable pieces. There is an episode in which Pecola wants to make a purchase from a store owned by a white man who would not take her money. He would not take her money not because he is fond of the little Pecola. On the contrary, he is disgusted to touch the black hands that innocently extend him the money for her purchase. One cannot express one's rage and stupor aptly enough to rise to the fiendish occasion. The palimpsest of races and ethnicities also gives leverage to one group over another and this is seen on more than one occasion. This reaches such absurd proportions that parents teach their children to avoid the company of other children who are darker-skinned than themselves; hence Pecola's dream of blue eye(s). Even more absurd and painful is the fact that Pecola's own mother loves her less than the white child of the family in whose household she serves. To her Pecola is exactly the way society varnishes her: ugly.

Even her drunken father saw her as such. He saw himself in the same light and was flummoxed by the amount of love he received from his daughter, in spite of everything. He realises that she is unloved and decides to correct that himself, but is remiss about the moral implications of physical love he subjects Pecola to. Realising his deeds, the father flees, following a pattern of neglectful husband and fathers that Toni Morrison rightly exposes. Pauline Breedlove (or Polly, as her moniker goes in the white household she serves) fails to heed her daughter's pain or offer her any consolation. Her surname itself would make one think positive thoughts, but no more scathing an oxymoron could have been thought for Pecola instead. Society itself washes its hands and distances itself from Pecola, who might as well have been a

leper. It wills her baby's death, ascribing it with anomalies and swaddling it with a shroud of abhorrence and achieves this (if not necessarily by direct implication). All in all, Pecola Breedlove is the beautiful dandelion whose categorization as undesired weed precludes its aesthetic value and inner beauty and she is viewed as such by the community that would rather have nothing more than this "weed" "removed".

Sula is Toni Morrison's way of addressing the issue of friendship between African-American women. Even advertised as such, the novel would certainly spread a tantalizing aura of awed interest, but its reaches are far deeper than that. The multilayered theme and scope of the novel ranges from conflicts of generations, to friendship between African-American women, to the impact of family and community upon the individual in the pursuit of friendship, love, and happiness, to life in a "black" enclave and to the relationship of this community with the outside world - to name but the more salient ones.

Whether intended or not, the story of Sula and the aftermath of her demise is a sort of novelistic vendetta or rather a reversal of fate. It begins without her - in a time when the Great War had ended and the wounded African-American soldiers were returning to their homes, some more or less the object of other people's ridicule, like Shadrack being mistaken for a dissolute drunkard - and ends without her in complete and utter disarray. For sullyng and blaming her for evil she had not perpetrated, the unjust collective verdict of guilt given by the community dissolves them completely.

Except for the few blacks still huddled by the river bend, and some undemolished houses on Carpenter's Road, only rich white folks were building homes in the hills. Just like that, they had changed their minds and instead of keeping the valley floor to themselves, now they wanted a hilltop house with a river view and a ring of elms. 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. (Sula 167)

Toni Morrison's wrath and high moral ground fully endorse the ending which obliterates the community whose deleterious behaviour was always redeemed by Sula, who carried the cross of everyone's sins. The community had not been vast and numerous, rather it had been tightly knit, each member fulfilling a well-defined role. Even though it did not provide many amusements, it was fully functional and founded on mutual reliance. The "Bottom" was more than a place while Sula was still alive and the description we are given of it is that of a homey place built according to the plans of the American Dream.

They were on their way to Edna Finch's Mellow House, an ice-cream parlor catering to nice folks - where even children would feel comfortable, you know, even though it was right next to Reba's Grill and just one block down from the Time and a Half Pool Hall. It sat in the curve of Carpenter's Road, which, in four blocks, made up all the sporting life available in the Bottom.



Old men and young ones draped themselves in front of the Elmira Theater, Irene's Palace of Cosmetology, the pool hall, the grill and the other sagging business enterprises that lined the street. On sills, on stoops, on crates and broken chairs they sat tasting their teeth and waiting for something to distract them. Every passerby, every motorcar, every alteration in stance caught their attention and was commented on. Particularly they watched women. When a woman approached, the older men tipped their hats; the younger ones opened and closed their thighs. But all of them, whatever their age, watched her retreating view with interest. (54)

The pace of life is soft and languid and epitomizes the beatitude of suburban existence, replicating the iconic representation of white main street America, encapsulating its main features of closeness, cooperation, and convivial living. The boundness of the neighbourhood does not choke its inhabitants, but rather brings them together. The same markers of patriarchy are present, but in a more accepting and innocuous way, as if nothing more than a harmless joke or the whitest of lies. All in all, everything is as it ideally should and the community continues living a life.

But all is not well with the world: there are conflicts and discrepancies. The comfortable torpor is gradually dispersed. First Eva's, then her daughter Hannah's, and finally Sula's life are increments of this phenomenon. For this and other reasons, such as racial awareness, Nel's mother always looks down on Sula and her family for being "sooty", an unkind categorization, since she herself had "mixed" blood and not the moral high ground to make an assessment of their character, especially since she herself was the "

daughter of a Creole whore” (21). All this make-belief superiority, however, is exposed on a train ride. It is now that Nel realises her mother’s hypocritical side that beams such confidence in the midst of Helene’s community when, rebuffed by the conductor for sitting in an area lying outside the one clearly designated “ COLORED ONLY” she complies, smiling meekly and “ coquettishly”, to the disgust of the returning soldiers. It is clear then that for both she and – most likely – Nel, submission is the way to follow when not in the midst of the cloistered community. Wanting to detach herself from her mother’s legacy – a thought adamantly inculcated by her grandmother – Helene is in desperate need of extrinsic validation:

It was Helene who never turned her head in church when latecomers arrived; Helene who established the practice of seasonal altar flowers; Helene who introduced the giving of banquets of welcome to returning Negro veterans. She lost only one battle – the pronunciation of her name. The people in the Bottom refused to say Helene. They called her Helen Wright and left it at that. All in all her life was a satisfactory one. She loved her house and enjoyed manipulating her daughter and her husband. (23)

She manages to have a good reputation and enjoys managing the affairs of her household and even to have a powerful grasp on Nel, in spite of her friendship with Sula. Albeit their friendship affords them a special bond, the comforts of family life and the importance of marriage are transmitted to Nel by her mother and she cannot forgive Sula for sleeping with her husband.

While Helene’s mother had been a prostitute, Helene tried very hard to distance herself from all the immorality of prostitution. However, all three

generations of women in Sula's case have taken a different stance on this. Though Eva had a missing leg, the remaining one still wielded great attraction as the still young Eva still fancied male companionship, the vanity with which she treated her leg, stockings and shod it being the alluring factor.

Hannah's lascivious carriage and her selfless and disinhibited lovemaking really stirred unexpected waves in her community. The readiness and sensuality with which she attracted the married men forced their wives to reconsider their own coquettishness and sensuality. Her take on this is quite novel, so she doesn't end up making enemies. Still,

Hannah's friendships with women were, of course, seldom and short-lived, and the newly married couples whom her mother took in soon learned what a hazard she was. She could break up a marriage before it had even become one - she would make love to the new groom and wash his wife's dishes all in an afternoon. (50)

Sula only stands to learn from her mother's take on things. Of course, this behaviour is an exaggeration of one's freedoms, as it encroaches upon the other women's and though she learns from her mother that sex is not a vile or dirty thing, she may overstep the boundaries when she innocently engages her best friend's husband in adultery.

So she ended up a daylight lover, and it was only once actually that Sula came home from school and found her mother in the bed, curled spoon in the arms of a man. Seeing her step so easily into the pantry and emerge

looking precisely as she did when she entered, only happier, taught Sula that sex was pleasant and frequent, but otherwise unremarkable. (51)

The lesson she learns as a child is a memory that lingers on in her mind and affects her future significantly. Her detachment that other women in monogamous relationships do not enjoy is just as much a blessing as a curse. Her taking so much freedom and not yielding to anyone is perceived as a mark of evil by the narrow-minded community to which she returns from her extensive travels. Everyone in her community feels so much better and so much cleaner when they judge themselves against her wretchedness. Wives love their husbands; the young tend to the needs of the old, and ill-fitted mothers care for their peevish offspring. There is even the prospect of jobs looming from the tunnel-building project that is rumoured to incorporate black workforce. But as Sula extinguishes her breath so doth this bubble of communion burst. The tunnel comes crumbling down, wives grow weary and placid, the youth uncaring and disdainful, mothers lose their edge, many die, everyone moves away and white presence displaces the black one that can no longer revert to the old state of affairs in the old neighbourhood.

This ending of the chapter and of the novel is proper and fitting, worthy of Toni Morrison's reputation. While admitting to the fictionality of Sula, Toni Morrison traces a polyvalent avatar who will not yield to any one group, ideal, movement, category - racial or otherwise - or to the liminal borderline between good and evil that certain people, novels, or writers require.

Her indomitable character will not be undone even by the pressures of society, or her grandmother's strong and decisive rebuke. She has no

compassion for Eva as she puts her in a dilapidated nursing home, but then again neither does Sula receive any when her grandmother won't even attend her funeral. While Pecola is overrun by these pressures of the family and her community, and Sethe is rescued by hers (at long last), Sula is her own woman and she enjoys and celebrates this fact and herself, and though unaware of it, the Bottom neighbourhood falls apart when the glue that holds it together - Sula - dies.

It's a bad word, 'belong.' Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn't be like that.

(Song of Solomon,

Toni Morrison)

In a study called "Identity Formation, Agency, and Culture - A Social Psychological Synthesis", social psychologists James E. Côté and Charles G. Levine study individual formation, a phenomenon that only emerged after feudalism. In pre-modern times, we are told, identity was a very rigid construct, the individual being coerced into a slotted gender assignment that one had no right to challenge.

The role of parenthood, society, religion, as well as that of other confining forces would be very strict and the mere contemplation of defiance or the unspeakable failure to observe this implacable matrix of constraints would have meant banishment or at least severe reproof. From the point of view of developmental psychologist James Marcia, the young people - on the cusp of maturity finding themselves at this crossroads - who choose to acquiesce in

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this pre-established state of affairs with blandness, inertia and resignation are called " identity-diffused", or " identity-foreclosed" if they accept to walk in the furrows of their parents' choices with unflinching resolve. The other two stages that can be conferred on those who attempt and succeed to assert their own identity are " identity achievement" and " identity moratorium", in the case when personal identity is explored but no commitment is made to it. Of course, this hierarchy of identity achievement would find an unjust application in the study of pre-modern societies, but it is fully germane to the study of Toni Morrison's characters and the way they address this issue of asserting, embracing, and accepting the consequences of their assumed freedoms. Nevertheless, one is not to assume that this framing of identity from the stance of psychological study is sufficiently exhaustive. To this end Că'té and Levine address the dichotomy that exists when regarding the approach of identity from the psychological and then from the sociological viewpoint. He identifies this divergence and explains the psychological stance thusly:

Perhaps the best starting point in terms of understanding differences between psychological and sociological approaches to identity is to note differences in the " locus" of identity. Most fundamentally, psychologists tend to look for the locus of identity within the individual-as part of the psyche or " inner workings." Identity is in " unit relation" with the person, and is therefore that person's " property" (cf. Heider, 1958). By implication, the individual is largely held responsible for that identity, in terms of both its merits and failings. (48)

and then proceeds to discuss the sociological interpretation that focuses on the importance and involvement of community:

In contrast to psychological understandings, sociological understandings of identity tend to assume that it is not the exclusive "property" of the individual, but rather something that is "realized strategically and circumstantially" through one's interactions with others (cf. Weigert et al., 1986, p. 23). For sociologists, identity is both "internal" and "external" to the individual. It is internal to the extent that it is seen to be subjectively "constructed" by the individual, but it is external to the extent that this construction is in reference to "objective" social circumstances provided by day-to-day interactions, social roles, cultural institutions, and social structures. (49)

At this point we may realise that the focus of identity on internal and external forces to be equalled to individuality and community, respectively, is a corollary of the importance of family and community. The individual may not be separated from the community that surrounds them and nor can community be conceived in absence of iterations of individuals.

Going back to Toni Morrison, she has been an utterly selfless and proactive ambassador of identity development in spite of social tenets. Her views are phrased with convinced / convincing fierceness and they stem from hands-on experiences. Having been a single mother to her children, and consequently the head of the family, she finds it unbearable that so many young African-American women give in to male dominance rather than assert themselves and their self-reliance. She has boundless admiration for the enslaved

African-American women who managed to free themselves spiritually and thus impress their own identities on the fabric of their respective communities and their race. Her pride runs parallel to the indignation stirred in her soul by those women who bow their heads and resign their fates to husbands, due to the outmoded idea that they cannot exist outside the validation of the community, which comprises a mesh of familial nuclei, which in turn pivot around the male presence of the household.

You think because he doesn't love you that you are worthless. You think that because he doesn't want you anymore that he is right - that his judgement and opinion of you are correct. If he throws you out, then you are garbage. You think he belongs to you because you want to belong to him. Don't. It's a bad word, 'belong.' Especially when you put it with somebody you love. Love shouldn't be like that. You can't own a human being. You can't lose what you don't own. Suppose you did own him. Could you really love somebody who was absolutely nobody without you? You really want somebody like that? Somebody who falls apart when you walk out the door? You don't, do you? And neither does he. You're turning over your whole life to him. Your whole life, girl. And if it means so little to you that you can just give it away, hand it to him, then why should it mean any more to him? He can't value you more than you value yourself. (Song of Solomon 305)

This advice Toni Morrison gives comes from her heart and she seeks to gain nothing other by it than to give something to her community. Even though the views she expresses towards this group can sometimes be construed to be somewhat slighting, she cannot help but show her deep communion and



attachment to the African-American race, which, if viewed through its hegemonic existence in America, is going through a very long and painful development of its own identity. This idea she succinctly puts in the following manner: " In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." (qtd. in Hughes 150). The message Toni Morrison relays is loud and clear and it exposes the heart-rending suffering the deleterious effects of Americanization and its politics of insidious assimilation which managed to shake the self-confidence of an entire race have had so far.

To perform a more in-depth scrutiny of this issue of identity referenced by and projected along the direction of individual and cultural perspectives, we should first do a rereading and reinterpretation of the characters in *Beloved* for the purpose of evincing the emerging interdependencies and the way they permute and recombine to etch their meaning on the metaphysical double helix of identity.

The most striking element of the novel is *Beloved* herself. She propels the novel beyond the narrow (if well-meaning - at least in this case) scope of realism and transports us to a magical world of deeper meanings and significances. But for us to gain access to this place we must leave something of ourselves behind; we must tear through veils of preconceived ideas and ethical values. Also, we must learn to employ a different judgment rather than a purely philosophical and rational one. If we jettison that side of ourselves that revels serenely in the mire of complacency and take on the risks and responsibilities learning the truth entails, we will be truly regaled with this magnificent read, just like Paul D is tempted with the opportunity to

delve into a deeper and more meaningful inner self, in exchange for calling her name. This, of course, is a symbolic entreaty, for it beckons us to reread the beginning and commemorate the “ sixty millions and more” (Beloved 5) for their hardships they endured and for the importance they had for the well-being of the nation.

If we think back to past historical events, we will surely remember that the ancestors of Sethe and Beloved were brought from Africa in shackles and they were linked together with chains and rings. Even though Beloved herself could not have experienced this plight firsthand, her consciousness is impregnated with the memory of the painful displacement and subsequent enslavement. Beloved begins and ends her stream of consciousness with the same words, stating her identity and her mother's which she shares; throughout her stay at 124 she keeps focusing on Sethe, wanting to know her, to know her past, to belong to her and to what Sethe symbolises.

I am waiting no iron circle is around my neck no boats go on this water no men without skin [...] I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter it belongs to me she is the laugh I am the laugher I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the place where we crouched now she is going to her face comes through the water a hot thing her face is mine she is not smiling she is chewing and swallowing I have to have my face I go in the grass opens she opens it I am in the water and she is coming there is no round basket no iron circle around her neck she goes up where the diamonds are I follow her we are in the diamonds which are her earrings now my face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am loving my face so

much my dark face is close to me I want to join she whispers to me she  
whispers I reach for her chewing and swallowing she touches me she knows I  
want to join she chews and swallows me I am gone now I am her face my  
own face has left me I see me swim away a hot thing I see the bottoms of my  
feet I am alone I want to be the two of us I want the join I come out of blue  
water after the bottoms of my feet swim away from me I come up I need to  
find a place to be the air is heavy I am not dead I am not there is a house  
there is what she whispered to me I am where she told me I am not dead I sit  
the sun closes my eyes when I open them I see the face I lost Sethe's is the  
face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face  
is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at  
last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing I AM BELOVED and she is mine.  
(246)

The iron circle is a recurring symbol and even though Beloved does not wear it, her identity is bound to it - not the physical one, but rather the metaphoric and spiritual representation of it. This symbolic circle links her strongly to Sethe as she confesses: " now we can join a hot thing." (246). At this stage, after a long and enduring effort to commune with the " dark face" (246), which she so enthusiastically embellishes and which bears her smile, her loving and beautiful identity that words cannot even describe, she can finally rejoice and liberate herself. Referring to Marcia's categorization, Beloved's construction of identity can be labelled as mirrored / inverted foreclosed identity, or more accurately, since she and Sethe are joined in an indissoluble spiritual bond, we may say that Beloved belongs to the category of individuals who share a palindromic foreclosed identity. Viewed from

another perspective, *Beloved's* identity construction is an archetypal instancing of an achievement that would be extended even beyond the 20th century. Also mirrored is the enthusiasm she displays in wanting so badly, being so eager, ecstatic and forthcoming, to also adopt her cultural heritage which is so despised – even scientifically and religiously so – for the dangers and plights it purports. Her attitude and outstandingly anachronistic alacrity: “ I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join” (246) are Toni Morrison’s way of debunking the cloud of negative connotations which hover over the innocent lives of so many African-Americans.

But this is only natural since *Beloved's* embodiment of a revenant in the novel is the allegoric summation of the indomitability and valour of the African-American spirit that is concealed to and browbeat by mainstream society’s ignorance and exploitation. This burst of eagerness to be suffused with the stigmata and marginalisation of her race: “ I am alone I want to be the two of us I want the join” (246) sweeps the reader’s mind and consumes the ignorance and latency brewed by stereotyped and pre-processed perceptions like a wildfire. This mental rush of racial pride and awareness, to which her avid and fierce wish of owning and belonging to her mother ends with the reiteration of her identity: “ I AM BELOVED” (246), which not only isn’t submissive or subservient, but it even becomes monolithic. The inherent audacity which she so valiantly voices in this dreamlike state of pensiveness tears through so many veils and boundaries that we may not dare embrace the comforts of forgetfulness and revert to our state of lackadaisical ignorance of the plights of millions anymore. Her voice is also

underscoring Toni Morrison's view on African-American slave women finding themselves in postmodern situations, for if we remove *Beloved* from her time frame she may as well be a contemporary or even futuristic heroine.

For Pecola Breedlove, the path leading to the assertion and consolidation of her identity is violently cut. The refractions of social interactions bear a heavy impact on the physical and mental development of Pecola. To these are added the strenuous relations between the two polarities: African-Americans and those close-r(-est) to the lighter skin colour. These confrontational situations are spanned over and across the entire structure of society and they are felt by adults as well as by the most innocent members of it: the children.

That they themselves were black, or that their own father had similarly relaxed habits was irrelevant. It was their contempt for their own blackness that gave the first insult its teeth. They seemed to have taken all of their smoothly cultivated ignorance, their exquisitely learned self-hatred, their elaborately designed hopelessness and sucked it all up into a fiery cone of scorn that had burned for ages in the hollows of their minds - cooled - and spilled over lips of outrage, consuming whatever was in its path. (*The Bluest Eye* 66)

The blatant injustice that is evinced in this excerpt is commented upon with due indignation: to impress upon a young mind so painful a stigma and make this young mind perceive the full extent of its implacability is heart-breaking. This scorching ostracism and humiliation that has been promoted throughout the ages affects every new generation and leaves scars that take very long

to heal and Pecola is one victim who isn't going to get over them. Growing up among friends and family she feels resented by her mother and her peers treat her in different ways. At school the most popular girl is one who is lightest-skinned of all. This singles her out and confers her all the advantages, surrounding her in an aura of beauty, elegance; she is the envy of everyone else, even the girls: " Frieda and I were bemused, irritated, and fascinated by her. We looked hard for flaws to restore our equilibrium, but had to be content at first with uglying up her name, changing Maureen Peal to Meringue Pie." (63). This stems from the cultivation, perpetuation and preservation of arbitrary aesthetic values which are ingrained even in the familial atmosphere:

If Cholly had stopped drinking, she would never have forgiven Jesus. She needed Cholly's sins desperately. The lower he sank, the wilder and more irresponsible he became, the more splendid she and her task became. In the name of Jesus. No less did Cholly need her. She was one of the few things abhorrent to him that he could touch and therefore hurt. He poured out on her the sum of all his inarticulate fury and aborted desires. Hating her, he could leave himself intact. (42)

As is customary in postmodernist fiction - and in Toni Morrison's novels as well - the characters rather than having uniquely contoured identities, they often exhibit overlapping, complementary, supplementary, &c. identities. Embedded in this meld is the necessary ugliness and depravity that holds together Pauline and Cholly. Even from the time they first met, in spite of the still smouldering flame of passion dying out, the two still needed to jettison

their own shortcomings and gain purification through the agency of each other, and since the opposite of handsomeness or beauty is ugliness, then they might as well debunk their hatred.

It is in this atmosphere of moral lassitude that Cholly commits the rape of his daughter. In spite of the child's love for him - which he cannot find a rational explanation for - he has mixed feelings about Pecola growing up unloved and, in his confusion, ends up raping his daughter, as earlier mentioned. But this is not a solitary act, nor is it the only thing that thwarts Pecola's identity formation process. Another secondary character we are introduced to - Soaphead Church - shies away from overall normal everyday interactions with society and its members, but he does not from raping young girls. His whole identity is focused around this obsession and sickly approach to things when he exacerbates his proclivity towards cleanliness.

He, however, is not the only one obsessing about something. Pecola's entire existence - at least from around her rape until the end of the novel, and her life, one could safely assume - is concentrated on getting the blue eyes which would ensure her beauty and single it out for everyone's envy.

" What can I do for you, my child?" She stood there, her hands folded across her stomach, a little protruding pot of tummy. " Maybe. Maybe you can do it for me." " Do what for you?" " I can't go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me." " Help you how? Tell me. Don't be frightened." " My eyes." " What about your eyes?" " I want them blue." Soaphead pursed his lips, and let his tongue stroke a gold inlay. He thought it was at once the most fantastic and the most logical petition he had ever received. Here was

an ugly little girl asking for beauty. A surge of love and understanding swept through him, but was quickly replaced by anger. Anger that he was powerless to help her. Of all the wishes people had brought him - money, love, revenge - this seemed to him the most poignant and the one most deserving of fulfillment. A little black girl who wanted to rise up out of the pit of her blackness and see the world with blue eyes. His outrage grew and felt like power. For the first time he honestly wished he could work miracles. Never before had he really wanted the true and holy power - only the power to make others believe he had it. It seemed so sad, so frivolous, that mere mortality, not judgment, kept him from it. (185-186)

Though only a mere charlatan who claims to mediate certain powers from God for the purpose of fulfilling people's needs, Pecola has no other choice but to believe that she can be granted her fondest and innermost wish. Her individual and cultural identity are so strongly fused and concentrated on getting the bluest eyes that Soaphead Church is genuinely awe-stricken. The shock he feels is so powerful that it causes a surge of motivation and the wish for prompt action, which cannot be undertaken and which is replaced by this unbearable sentiment of helplessness.

Throughout the novel, Pecola is presented in conjunction with the ever-present blue eye of deep and intense coloration. Everybody and everything that stands for beauty or pleasantness must be blue. In one instance we find a black cat with blue eyes: " The cat rubbed up against her knee. He was black all over, deep silky black, and his eyes, pointing down toward his nose, were bluish green. The light made them shine like blue ice. Pecola rubbed



the cat's head; he whined, his tongue flicking with pleasure." (93) From the way the cat is described, two things can be convincingly inferred: that the cat is handsome-looking, in spite of its blackness, which is redeemed by the blue eyes and that Pecola is liked for once for who she is and what she represents. This feeling does not however last very long, for the cat is flung mercilessly against the wall and the blame thrown into the lap of the submissive Pecola.

It is no wonder then that she feels such strong disorientation when she is found guilty of every sin everyone else committed. In a sense her permanent lapse of sanity is a sacrificial offering her friends benefit from. Both Claudia and Frieda distance themselves from her, learning the lessons Pecola's precocity offered. Since society forsakes her completely, since the school she once attended expelled her, Pecola develops a dual personality.

You don't even go to school. You don't either. I know. But I used to. What did you stop for? They made me. Who made you? I don't know. After that first day at school when I had my blue eyes. Well, the next day they had Mrs. Breedlove come out. Now I don't go anymore. But I don't care. You don't? No, I don't. They're just prejudiced, that's all. Yes, they sure are prejudiced. Just because I got blue eyes, bluer than theirs, they're prejudiced. That's right. They are bluer, aren't they? Oh, yes. Much bluer. Bluer than Joanna's? Much bluer than Joanna's. And bluer than Michelena's? Much bluer than Michelena's. I thought so. Did Michelena say anything to you about my eyes? (206)

Not only does she have the realisation of her bluest eyes come true, but she also manages to conjure up an image of acceptance; a presence which can complement her, her beauty, and ask her about the envy she has spread, whose magnitude was so great everyone felt so threatened that she had to be expelled. The brisk pace of the dialogue, the short lines and rapid exchange is proof of Pecola's eagerness to stand out from the crowd and from this point of view her identity has undoubtedly received the status of accomplishment.

Coming back to Sula, we find Shadrack returning home from war in Europe, wounded and bitter from all the hardships he had been subjected to. His wounds render him bedridden for a very long time; long enough to cut him off from the outside world. The disparaging welcome he receives on reaching home from hospital is a serious blow to such a mentally shaken young man, whose identity had been rewritten and revised upon his return. The readjustment to social life is very difficult and the progress very awkward indeed. Shadrack is shaped in a way that he may be selected to epitomise the reception African-American soldiers received when returning home.

Shadrack's name alludes to the biblical Shadrach in the Book of Daniel. Readers of the Bible will know that Shadrach was "one of the three friends who were thrown into the fiery furnace by command of Nebuchadnezzar" for refusing to worship the king's god and his idol of gold. For this refusal Shadrack and his two compatriots are thrown into this metaphorical hell, yet the flames have no power to destroy them. Unlike his biblical namesake,

Shadrack does not come out of the fiery furnace of war safe and unsinged; on the contrary, he is "blasted" and "permanently astonished" (Suranyi 19).

Perhaps the allusion to the biblical context is a direct consequence of Toni Morrison's highly spiritual moral urge to focus on the shallowness of the treatment African-Americans receive and the falsity of the veneration of idols that society worships, such as vain and stereotypical considerations that scour the souls of the victims.

Again we are faced with a reversion of myths and stories, values and mores which are constantly disavowed by the cultural identity that was built on negative or opposing signifiers. The facet of African-American cultural identity embodied by Shadrack here can perhaps be traced in the finest, most cogent manner, from the way Toni Morrison describes Shadrack's limbs' clumsiness that "began to grow in higgledypiggledy fashion like Jack's beanstalk all over the tray and the bed".

His role is quite essential to the novel, even if his appearance is marginal in length. He institutes the "National Suicide Day": "On the third day of the new year, he walked through the Bottom down Carpenter's Road with a cowbell and a hangman's rope calling the people together. Telling them that this was their only chance to kill themselves or each other." (Sula 20) The call he makes is patterned and circular as he is again presented at the end of the novel. At first society rejects this idea and people are frightened or annoyed; at any rate he fails to be popular. But then, at the end of the novel, when the neighbourhood no longer thrived, everyone joined in and some even died: by accident or free will. The cacophonous ring of the bell - which

is worn by cows, which in turn are associated with lumbering and aimless walking - is a wake-up call to action that may not be so well guided or smoothly planned out. The message is loud and clear; it rings "it is now or never".

After his return, having also lost his mental faculties - first gradually and then all of a sudden - Shadrack finds himself out of place and it is only when his insanity is complete and he can no longer be idle that his voice becomes peremptory, persuasive, and inspiring to people who identify themselves with the same unyielding consuming passion.

Seen from this perspective, Shadrack is both the executioner of his community - when he carries out the vengeance incurred on occasion of Sula's death - and its redeemer, for he seeks to liberate souls who had been dormant for too long. He goes out to fight without the faintest trace of regret and the consequences of this overbearing state of mind are nowhere on his horizon. At this point, the brand of categorisation the community has applied on Shadrack he in turn applies on them: if he was made painfully aware of his gawkiness and shortcomings upon his return from war, now the community is taking on his outright insanity and indignation, which had been accumulating for a long time.

An even more powerful presence in the novel is Sula. The construction of her identity has indeed been very successful. Now she is able to not have to depend on anyone. She does not have to answer to anyone at all; she refuses marriage on account of the shallow sense of security it insures.

When I was a little girl the heads of my paper dolls came off, and it was a long time before I discovered that my own head would not fall off if I bent my neck. I used to walk around holding it very stiff because I thought a strong wind or a heavy push would snap my neck. Nel was the one who told me the truth. But she was wrong. I did not hold my head stiff enough when I met him and so I lost it just like the dolls. " It's just as well he left. Soon I would have torn the flesh from his face just to see if I was right about the gold and nobody would have understood that kind of curiosity. They would have believed that I wanted to hurt him just like the little boy who fell down the steps and broke his leg and the people think I pushed him just because I looked at it. (136)

Her views on anything are her own and everyone else's perception of her is completely inconsequential. One is not to say that she was selfish and her opinions and needs were the only ones that mattered. Society only wants to see that side of Sula that they want to see: the malevolent, trouble-seeking one. No one is supposed to go through life unloved and without offering it themselves and Sula is no exception. Behind the shell of ruggedness there is still human feeling and even vulnerability, as she is hurt by Nel's reaction to Sula's cheating on her by sleeping with her husband. She is taught to look at things differently, as her mother also embraced love and love-making liberally and without restraints, regrets, or disgust. While her connection with Nel used to be stronger in the past, the two friends are now on different sides of the same problem.

At the same time Sula is in a conflict with her grandmother, as well. The gap between generations is not necessarily the main reason of this, but rather the attitude each takes with respect to conduct in life in general.

" You think I don't know what your life is like just because I ain't living it? I know what every colored woman in this country is doing." " What's that?" " Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I'm going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world." " Really? What have you got to show for it?" " Show? To who? Girl, I got my mind. And what goes on in it. Which is to say, I got me." " Lonely, ain't it?" " Yes. But my lonely is mine. Now your lonely is somebody else's. Made by somebody else and handed to you. Ain't that something? A secondhand lonely." (143)

In this fragment Sula truly reaches the fountain of the truth which is embedded in the successful assertion of one's individuality free of outer constraints and dependencies. The loneliness she mentions is not the "secondhand" loneliness that is associated with the lack of fulfilment of certain needs addressing the acceptance, approval, and commendation of others, but with the loneliness that comes together with the status of identity achievement.

On the other hand, Nel, Sula's friend, is utterly dependent on validation and belonging and she is heartbroken when she is betrayed by her husband and best friend from childhood. What she is prevented to realise by the bafflement caused by being left is that her identity and spirit is intertwined with Sula's.

Suddenly Nel stopped. Her eye twitched and burned a little. " 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." It was a fine cry - loud and long - but it had no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow. (170)

The realisation is all the more painful since it is made after Sula is dead. The cry she utters is of utmost shock and desperation. Nel is lost, she is broken and displaced: her status in society is compromised by her husbandless life with only the comfort of her children and now her spiritual backbone is also shattered by the painful realisation of Sula's departure, who takes something more besides her dead body and solitude: her community's verve and Nel's spirit.

All in all, Toni Morrison's novels can be looked at quite significantly from this slant of identity formation and its interdependencies that are formed between the individual and his or her community. Her work adds flesh to the philosophical, sociological, and behavioural bone structure of discourse centring on identity development and the quest for it.

However, identity cannot be regarded outside of the concepts of race and racialisation, whether or not these are still the subject of concern today. Toni Morrison's works are more than a eulogy: she does not patronise and she

does not force any pattern or even suggest a course of action. Instead, we are offered a lesson in asserting our identity and allowing others to do so in freedom and equality.