

Introduction to the History of African American Literature

Dear students, before introducing you to the life and works of Toni Morrison, an African American author, it is pertinent to have a brief introduction to the history of African American literature. African American literature is the body of literature written by Americans of African descent. They have been called Negroes, coloured, blacks and Afro-Americans at different times in history. Because of the negative connotations of the words in the American history, Negroes and coloured/colored have become rare in usage in recent times. Black and, especially, African American are more favourable terms. The slave trade and slavery of the 17th to 18th century is responsible for the presence of most African Americans in the United States of America today. Slavery in America began when the first African slaves were brought to the North American colony of Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619, to aid in the production of such lucrative crops as tobacco. Slavery was practised throughout the American colonies in the 17th and 18th centuries, and African-American slaves helped build the economic foundations of the new nation. The invention of the cotton gin in 1793 solidified the central importance of slavery to the South's economy. The period of slavery was indeed a horrible time for the African Americans, as they suffered in every area of their lives - the disintegration of families (being constantly resold by their owners), sexual abuse of the female slaves by their owners (many times with the knowledge of their black helpless husbands who would lose their lives if they intervened), reckless killing by their masters or other whites for minor offences or just for sport and the show of total control over the life of a black, and mistrust engendered by the stratification amongst them occasioned by the different duties they performed on the farms and plantations. Slave labour took a very long time to be erased and was done in stages with different parts of America emancipating their slaves at different times. Abolition faced stiff opposition in some states of America with the Southern states being the last to let go because of the economic relevance of the slaves, especially as the crops like cotton have become export crops. With the abolition of slave trade by the 13th Amendment to the Constitution on December 18, 1865, slavery ended in the United States only in name. The blacks were still under the same kind of demeaning treatment from their white counterparts, only this time it had found other names: racial discrimination, denial of human rights, and the black population were still employed to do mean jobs since industrialization was still rising. The slave trade,

slavery and the accompanying ill treatment raised different reactions. Abolitionists went to work with their protests, campaigns, writings, etc. and gradually erased slavery. Niagara Movement and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in the early 1900s fought against the Jim Crow laws that promoted racial discrimination. The Civil Rights Movement (1955-1968) brought about the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Black Power Movement encouraged African Americans to look to their African/Black roots for inspiration and emphasized black solidarity.

African American literature began in the latter half of the 18th century when some of the members of this community expressed their ideas and feelings in literary form. The history of African American literature can even be looked at as the history of African American people in America as it gave a faithful depiction of the many ups and downs in the personal, social, cultural and political lives of these people. Though it was only after 1970s that this literature was widely acclaimed for its richness, it was there for more than two centuries, attempting to come on the surface of American mainstream literature. As the socio-political conditions of the time were unfavorable for the existence of the Black people, they had to fight for every single necessity of their life. Their lives were full of sufferings and atrocities. Naturally, these writers expressed their personal emotions along with the agonies of their community. Their attempts were directed to establish their self-identity as an individual as well as the identity of the African American community. With the hard efforts of these writers, they succeeded in demonstrating their intellectual capabilities. The early 19th century African American literature emphasized the urgent need of abolition of slavery. The writers of this period focused upon the inhuman conditions in the lives of Black people and tried to attract the attention of the world towards the problem of slavery in America. To fulfill their purpose these writers tried their hands at the writing of essays, poetry, fiction, and journalism. Towards the end of the first half of the 19th century, there started the tradition of writing slave narratives. The narratives drew on Biblical allusion and imagery, the rhetoric of abolitionism, the traditions of the captivity narrative, and the spiritual autobiography in appealing to their (often white) audiences. These narratives, both ante-bellum and post ante-bellum were basically appeals from ex-slaves to white audience and they were meant to arouse the sympathy of the white audience stressing the evils of slavery. For example, Frederick Douglass in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by Himself* emphasizes slavery as a wholesale assault on everything precious to humankind. Douglass' *Narrative* helped to raise voices towards changing the slave system.

As the world turned with social and political changes, new cultural expression began to emerge. African-Americans had always found a way to express

themselves, even during slavery. They did this to preserve the culture of their ancestry and articulate both their struggles and hopes in their own words and images. During the Reconstruction era several black artists and writers, particularly females, surfaced. The literature of the Reconstruction era introduced creative writers such as Charles W. Chesnutt, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Alice Moore Dunbar Nelson. The era also presented amazing inspirational literature for African-Americans like Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery*, Anna Julia Cooper's *Womanhood a Vital Element in the Regeneration and Progress of a Race*, and of course W.E.B Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*. The reconstruction was a great era for political, social, and creative change, reform, and expression. Black writers strongly encouraged the independence of blacks in their works. Paul Laurence Dunbar wrote to represent African-Americans in a suitable manner. African Americans continued to contribute literature, art, agricultural skills, foods, clothing styles, music, language, social and technological innovation to American culture, as times continued to change. The creative work of blacks showed the surge in relationships, and the advancement of families. After emancipation it was important for African-Americans to identify with the new expressions of blackness. Whether this expression came through literature, art, dance, or social reforming, blacks began to identify themselves under their own terms. Authors pushed and supported black movements and the individuality and defining of blacks. The New Negro Movement actually as documented by Alain Locke defined a new era for African-Americans everywhere who sought equality and self-identification as a people. This was a time for great beginnings and a surge in the black arts. This collection of literary and intellectual arts moulded a new identity for African-American culture. The movement both as literary and cultural movement raised significant issues affecting the lives of African Americans through various forms especially in literature, art, music, drama, painting, sculpture, movies, and protests. The theme of the divided man is also clearly expressed in post-slavery African-American literature. It was W.E.B Du Bois who hinted at 'double-consciousness' 'two souls in one body' and the fusion of both 'selves'.

Although African-Americans continued to contribute much to the progress of the United States during this time, it was a time of disappointment, discrimination, and danger. For example, historian John Hope Franklin notes that more than 2,500 lynchings, mostly of blacks, occurred in the South in the last two decades of the 19th century. Despite this dire period in African-American history, many black authors were still able to publish their work in magazines, newspapers, and occasionally, through an established press. African-American literature was marked by tales of overcoming trials and hardships while demonstrating the capabilities of African-Americans as authors despite difficulties being published. Because African

American authors had more difficulty getting their works published, many turned to the African American press, an institution heavily reliant on African American church leaders. Through presses such as the National Baptist Publishing Company, many writers published songs, poems, fiction, and autobiographies. In slavery, African Americans overcame seemingly insurmountable odds to survive. During Reconstruction, former slaves drew on their past as motivation to overcome the current injustices which they suffered as free men and women and to inspire others to do the same. Whites could put up a wall, but blacks would climb over it again and again. They demonstrated perseverance in their lives and in their writing. From available literature, it is glaring that even after the declaration of emancipation for slaves in America; ex-slaves were still seen as sub-human and incapable of mastering “the arts and sciences.” The main goal of early African American writing was to demonstrate that they could create literature that rivaled or surpassed that of the white community. African-American writers shared a common burden over time: the burden of representing not only themselves but the African American race as well. Maintaining the position of what it means to be black in America allowed them, as it were, to establish an African American identity that transcended the individual.

The Harlem Renaissance is seen as a significant social and cultural movement which took place in the 1920s and 1930s following the Great Migration during which thousands of Africa-Americans left the south and moved north and west. The Harlem Renaissance marked a turning point for African American literature. Before this time, books by African Americans were primarily read by other Black people. But with the renaissance, African American literature as well as black fine art and performance art began to be absorbed into the mainstream of American culture. The outcome is the flourishing and enduring art, music and literature that reflected the history and experience of the African-American. The artistic, literary and musical contributions of Harlem Renaissance artists continue to serve as an inspiration for artists even today. The Harlem Renaissance is considered a heroic moment in American history. Its primary aim was to give African Americans the same citizenship rights that white Americans took for granted. The Harlem of 1919-1940 was blooming with African American creativity. This era juxtaposed the poverty and racism African Americans faced with avant-garde advances in music, dance, art, and literature. The movement is not traceable to any definable origin but many believe that New York City enticed frustrated African Americans who were fleeing from the segregation and violence of the South. These men and women were in search of a better life that could translate to quality housing and decent wages in the industrial factories, so African Americans migrated in droves to the cities in the North. As all Americans grew more interested in the

African American culture, Harlem was dubbed “the Negro capital of the world” by James Weldon Johnson. The publication of the avant-garde *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912) encouraged black writers to extricate themselves from the stereotypes that had imprisoned African American literature for years. They confronted difficult conflicts regarding black identity, black art, and the political role of culture. Great voices came out of Harlem of 1920s and 1930s. The most prolific writer of the Harlem Renaissance was Langston Hughes. Hughes cast off the influences of white poets and wrote with the rhythmic meter of blues and jazz. Claude McKay was another great voice from the Harlem Renaissance; he came out and urged African Americans to stand up for their rights in his powerful verses. Jean Toomer wrote plays and short stories, as well as poems, to capture the spirit of his times which was black pride and identity. Book publishers soon took notice and patronized many of these talents. Zora Neale Hurston was in this stead noticed especially with her moving novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Music met prose in the form of musical comedy. The 1921 production of *Shuffle Along* is sometimes credited with initiating the Harlem movement where actor Paul Robeson electrified audiences with his memorable stage performances.

Harlem Renaissance was a remarkable time when African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts. Challenging white paternalism and racism, African-American artists and intellectuals snubbed mere imitation of the styles of Europeans and white Americans and instead celebrated black pride and creativity. Declaring their freedom to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, they explored their identities as black Americans, celebrating the black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa. The images created during the Harlem Renaissance represented African American culture which served as inspiration and comfort to the black artists that succeeded the movement. Though Harlem Renaissance ended with the advent of the Great Depression, it was still a remarkable era for black creativity in that African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts. They were able to challenge white paternalism and racism even in the face of persecution.

The Civil Rights Movement is said to be a heroic episode in American history. Its purpose was to give African Americans the same citizenship rights that whites took for granted. It was a war waged on many fronts. In the 1960s it achieved impressive judicial and legislative victories against discrimination in public accommodations and voting. It had considerable success in combating job and housing discrimination. The migration which had given birth to Harlem also empowered the growing American Civil Rights Movement and this made a powerful impression on Black writers during the 1940s, '50s and '60s. Just as Black activists were pushing to end segregation and racism and create a new sense of Black

Nationalism, so also were Black authors attempting to address these issues with their writings. One of the first writers to do so was James Baldwin, whose work addressed issues of race and sexuality. Baldwin, who is best known for his novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, wrote deeply personal stories and essays while examining what it was like to be both Black and homosexual at a time when neither of these identities was accepted by American culture. In all, Baldwin wrote nearly 20 books, including such classics as *Another Country* and *The Fire Next Time*. Baldwin's idol and friend was author Richard Wright, whom Baldwin called "the greatest Black writer in the world for me". Wright is best known for his novel *Native Son* (1940), which tells the story of Bigger Thomas, a Black man struggling for acceptance in Chicago. Baldwin was so impressed by the novel that he titled a collection of his own essays *Notes of a Native Son*, in reference to Wright's novel. Among Wright's other books are the autobiographical novel *Black Boy* (1945), *The Outsider* (1953), and *White Man, Listen!* (1957). There were other great novelists of the era; like Ralph Ellison, best known for his novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), which won the National Book Award in 1953. We equally know that the *Invisible Man* was such a powerful tool for the Civil Rights movement as well as an influential document of African-American literary history. After Ellison's death in 1994, a second novel, *Juneteenth* (1999), was pieced together from the 2,000-plus pages he had written over 40 years. Other writings came up later, for example, writers such as the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, who became the first African American to win the Pulitzer Prize when it was awarded for her 1949 book of poetry. We also have Nikki Giovanni, Sonia Sanchez, Lorraine Hansberry, whose play *A Raisin in the Sun* focuses on a poor Black family living in Chicago. The play won the 1959 New York Drama Critics' Circle Award; we also have Amiri Baraka, who wrote controversial off-Broadway plays such as *Dutchman*. It is also worthy of note that a number of important essays and books about human rights were written by the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement. One of the leading examples of these is Martin Luther King, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail".

The Black Arts Movement began in 1964 with circles of writers, artists, and activists spread far and wide so much so that blacks worldwide began to tap of its beauty and pride. One way to distinguish the Black Arts Movement from African American artistic and literary production before 1960 was to turn to the various orientations these works have toward both Africa and America. Before 1960, black artists were not focused on Africa as a place of origin but after the revolution, it became imperative to look up to Africa for definition. Many black authors, such as Ellison, wanted to imitate and surpass Western (white) artistic models that already existed but after 1960, black artists wanted an original aesthetic that emphasized black personhood as different from that of white personhood. Africa often served as

the source of inspiration for these artists. With this insight, African Americans celebrated “Afrocentricity” by showing African pride through poetry, drama, and fiction. During the Black Arts Movement, writers recuperated the vernacular of the black community, they celebrated their unique speech which had hitherto been considered inferior, they rose to the challenge of celebrating what is uniquely black with its root in African languages and cultures. Writers such as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston and very many others, very much like their artistic ancestors, wrote in black vernacular and developed themes of spiritual and political liberation, the leading voices of the Black Arts Movement were interested in building a black audience, not in dancing to the tunes of a white audience. They found support in the proliferation of new publishing companies and periodicals that focused on the black experience. The Black Arts Movement was also strengthened by the advent of black studies in American universities. The Black Arts Movement set the tone for a new era in the lives of many African Americans. By the close of the 20th century, African American literature immensely represented the Black culture. It had become a force in itself. Toni Morrison won Nobel Prize for literature. Other outstanding African American authors include Charles Johnson, John Edgar Wideman, and Alice Walker. Through their works, these writers acknowledged the multiplicity of African American identities and renewed interest in history. As writers, they successfully imagined the psychological and spiritual lives of African Americans during slavery and segregation.

Short answer questions:

1. Write a short note on Harlem renaissance.

Ans. The Harlem Renaissance is a significant social and cultural movement which took place in the 1920s and 1930s following the Great Migration during which thousands of Africa-Americans left the south and moved north and west. Its primary aim was to give African Americans the same citizenship rights that white Americans took for granted. Harlem Renaissance was a remarkable time when African American artists created positive and memorable standards in all the arts. Challenging white paternalism and racism, African-American artists and intellectuals snubbed mere imitation of the styles of Europeans and white Americans and instead celebrated black pride and creativity. Declaring their freedom to express themselves as artists and intellectuals, they explored their identities as black Americans, celebrating the black culture that had emerged out of slavery and their cultural ties to Africa.

Toni Morrison: Introduction to her Life and Works

Toni Morrison is one of the most celebrated authors of the second half of twentieth century America. Through her works, she reveals the consciousness of African Americans who had to bear affronts on various levels —physical, mental, psychological and, more important than these, on the racial level. Further, she eloquently speaks about an African -American woman who has been suffering indignities in the US on account of her being doubly oppressed—as a black in America and also as a woman in a patriarchic social set up. She is the first black woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Growing up in a black community, she has witnessed and felt its problems, sufferings, pain, anguish, and the trauma that goes with all this. Morrison, through her novels, wants her readers to actively participate in her fictional world and what happens there. This involvement of the readers helps her create and construct her characters in most significant way and lend them hue and contours of a real being. Listening to the varied experiences of her African Americans ancestors, Morrison formed an attachment with her ethnicity and celebrates that in her literary output. She even identifies the supernatural and the improbable and generates a world of ‘magic realism.’ Deeply rooted in history and mythology, her work resonates with mixtures of pleasure and pain, wonder and horror. Since every writer is a product of his own age and depicts what he experiences in life, it seems imperative to have a brief look at the life of Morrison in order to see how different thematic strands get crystallized in her works. Toni Morrison was born Chloe Ardellia Wofford on 18 February 1931. She was the second oldest of four children. Her parents, George and Ramah Wofford, were the descendants of sharecroppers from Alabama and Georgia. Morrison grew up in the small steel -mill town of Lorain, Ohio, located on Lake Erie, twenty-five miles west of Cleveland. The population of Lorain consisted largely of European immigrants, and schools were not segregated. In fact, when Morrison started grade school, she was the only black child in her class and the only one who could already read. Despite the fact that her school was integrated and that she was the best student in her class, Morrison experienced the effects of racism early, for even the children of newly arrived immigrants who could not speak English were immediately taught that they and their families were not at the bottom of American society but that blacks were below them. Moreover, Morrison also experienced racist attitudes at home. She admits that she grew up in a basically racist household with

more than a child's share of contempt for white people. She imbibed this contempt from her father, who had witnessed whites committing atrocities against blacks in the South. From both her father, George Wofford, and her grandmother, Ardellia Willis, Morrison inherited a love of storytelling, especially ghost stories. In several interviews, Morrison reports that one of her family's evening pastimes was to take turns telling stories and that the children were invited to contribute. Because of these stories, Morrison says, she became intimate with the supernatural from an early age. During high school, Morrison developed a love for literature, studied Latin for four years, and formed the decision to become a teacher. After graduating from high school with honors, Morrison enrolled as an English major at Howard University in Washington, D.C. and changed her first name from Chloe to Toni. Having received her B.A. degree from Howard in 1953, she entered the graduate program in English at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. There she studied under David Daiches and wrote a master's thesis entitled "Virginia Woolf's and William Faulkner's Treatment of the Alienated." After receiving her M.A. degree from Cornell in 1955, Morrison taught for two years at Texas Southern University in Houston, before she joined the faculty at her alma mater, Howard University. While teaching at Howard, she married the Jamaican architect Harold Morrison and gave birth to two sons, Harold Ford and Slade Kevin. Her marriage ended around 1964, the year that she was denied tenure at Howard University because she did not have a Ph.D. degree. The mid-1960s were the most depressing years of Morrison's life. After living with her parents in Lorain, Ohio, for a while, she moved to Syracuse, New York, where she worked as a textbook editor for L. W. Singer, a subsidiary of Random House. To overcome her depression, Morrison decided to rework a short story she had written at Howard University and to turn it into a novel. That novel became *The Bluest Eye*. Morrison had a hard time getting it published. Several publishers turned it down before Holt, Rinehart, and Winston finally printed it in 1970. In the meantime, Morrison had moved to New York because Random House had promoted her to senior editor in charge of black literature. In that capacity, she advanced the careers of several black women writers, including Toni Cade Bambara and Gayl Jones. She also edited an important book on African American history, *The Black Book* (1974), and she occasionally wrote for The New York Times Book Review. In the 1970s, Morrison suddenly got fame. When she published *Sula* (1973) and *Song of Solomon* (1977), she became recognized as one of the most important new voices in American fiction. The success of *Sula* earned Morrison an appointment as lecturer at Yale University, and *Song of Solomon* won her the National Book Critics' Circle Award. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter appointed her to the National Council of the Arts, and in 1981, she was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Also in 1981, Morrison published her fourth

novel *Tar Baby*. Although the novel drew mixed reviews, *Newsweek* put Morrison's picture on its cover and published a long interview article on her life and work. Three years later, in 1984, Morrison left Random House to devote herself exclusively to her writing and to teaching, her first career choice. All along, she had been teaching in various places on the side, including Bard College and the State University of New York at Purchase. In 1984, Morrison was appointed to the Albert Schweitzer Professorship of the Humanities at the State University of New York in Albany. While she was at Albany, she wrote and directed the performance of a play, *Dreaming Emmett* (1986). But more importantly, she also wrote and published *Beloved* (1987), the novel for which she received the Pulitzer Prize. Since 1989, Morrison has been Robert F. Goheen Professor in the Humanities at Princeton University. She has also lectured at many universities, among them Harvard; and in 1992, she published three of her Harvard lectures under the title, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. That same year, she also published her sixth novel, *Jazz*, which received moderate praise. Morrison's lasting fame was secured in 1993, when she was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. She was the first black person and only the eighth woman to receive that recognition. Recurring themes in the fiction of Morrison are the failure of love; the quest for an authentic identity, or, conversely the failure to achieve such an identity; the clash between material and spiritual values. Moreover, on some level Morrison always deals with the role of women in African-American society. In Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), the two most important themes are the failure of love and the reasons some African Americans repudiate their racial identity by adopting the values of white society. The novel tells the story of a young protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, who is marginalized by her race, gender, and class. Pecola's eventual destruction haunts the narrator, Claudia MacTeer, who feels retrospectively that there was something more she should have done or should have been able to do to prevent Pecola's downfall. Morrison's second novel, *Sula* (1973), has a less contrived structure, and its style comes closer to that of folk narrative. The central concern in *Sula* is the quest for personal identity. Morrison has explained that the protagonist, Sula Peace, and her best friend, Nellie Wright, are symbolic of good and evil. *Sula* is the story of a friendship between two African-American women that begins in childhood and is damaged by the inability of the surrounding community and of the women themselves to recognize the primary significance of that relationship. The novel questions the assumptions that limit women's lives and leave them with no sense of themselves outside of their roles as mothers, wives, and daughters. Like *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* was well received critically, but did not find a large audience. The novel was featured in the national women's magazine *Redbook*. Although it did not win, in 1975 the novel was nominated for a National Book Award, one of the most

prestigious awards for fiction in the United States. The novel did win the Ohioana Book Award. Morrison's next novel, *Song of Solomon* (1977) isn't a novel at all but a romance. The novel tells the tale of the Dead family, who are deeply disconnected as a result of their collective ignorance about their family's narrative and, therefore, themselves. The son of the family, Milkman Dead, undergoes tremendous growth as he uncovers the narrative of the Deads and trades his avariciousness and selfishness for true self-knowledge and wisdom. *Song of Solomon* received the National Book Critics Circle Award. It was also Morrison's first novel to receive commercial as well as critical validation. In her next novel, *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison gives a new twist to the familiar themes of the repudiation of racial identity and that of the conflict between material and spiritual values. Six years after *Tar Baby*, Morrison published *Beloved*, which explores and throws light on the history of the treatment that black female slaves have received from whites ever since they were packed onto the slave ships that brought them to America. *Beloved* (1987) is the story of Sethe Garner and Paul D Garner, two former slaves whose traumatic experiences as slaves on a Kentucky farm called Sweet Home cause them to share critical memories. Sweet Home binds them together even after they are no longer enslaved. Paul D's traumas emerge in part from the emasculation inherent in slavery. He is uncertain about what it means to be a man since the autonomy and strength traditionally attributed to that label have been denied to him for most of his life. Sethe tries to live in the wake of her decision to kill her children rather than to have them returned to slavery after her successful escape with them is undone. Sethe tries to manage the consequences of her decision and finds herself isolated and living half a life. Morrison got her idea for her sixth novel, *Jazz* (1992) from a book of photographs of dead Harlem residents entitled *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, for which she wrote the Introduction. The novel tells the story of the New York neighborhood, Harlem, from the perspective of its ordinary inhabitants, namely Joe and Violet Trace. The couple is at the center of the novel's investigation of the complexities faced by the millions of African Americans who moved from the rural South to the North during the Great Migration in search of jobs and a better life in the cities. Joe and Violet have to negotiate the stories from their pasts they bring with them to the city. These foundational tales continue to haunt and to define who they are even as they begin, or try to begin, new lives in the city. The skills, knowledge, and information that they acquire as they mature in the southern countryside both equip and disable them for their lives as urban residents. Morrison's seventh novel, *Paradise* (1998), breaks new ground because it doesn't focus on a single protagonist but develops a conflict between two opposed groups of people, because its central theme is that of bigotry among African Americans, and because its vision of life has strong religious undertones. Morrison

seems to be at the height of her powers in her next novel *Love* (2003). This is a demanding novel and needs serious attention for it is very rich and satisfying in it sweeps the readers into a subtle world that they need time to take in. It is not only the workings of history through the novelist's prose that is mesmerizing but also the audacious vision of the nature of love —its appetite, its sublime possession, and its dread that Morrison has depicted. Morrison's next novel *A Mercy* (2008) explores the root of what humanity is. Her latest novel *Home* (2012) tells the story of Frank Money, a 24-year-old African-American veteran of the Korean War, and his journey home a year after being discharged from an integrated Army into a segregated homeland. The fictional world of Toni Morrison is the rainbow of African - American life and its various contours. Her characters are, as a matter of fact, contemporary human beings who are torn between varied worlds of sense and sensibility. It is not the characters and the setting only that plays a vital role in Morrison's novels. She, as a creative artist, has created a special niche for herself in contemporary fiction by dint of her narrative technique and other literary devices which surpass other writers' capabilities to highlight contemporary man's complex predicament. Her narrative techniques, blended with magic realism, fill the readers with awe and wonder and, sometimes, pester their understanding for they find the novels at first a bit difficult to understand. The dual narration, nonetheless, is spell binding and a hall mark of the novelist that brings sensations and propels the mind to focus on what is going on in the text.

A Critical Analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* reveals the long-lasting effects of slavery on individual black men and women and their communities, and records the destruction and tough survival of the African people. The story revolves around Sethe, a former slave, and her great effort to move on from the past and hold her freedom. The novel's manifold and disjointed plot lines form a complex narrative structure. *Beloved* consists of three parts, arranged into unnumbered chapters. The action of the novel takes place during the period of Reconstruction (1870-90). The novel does not have a linear, chronological design but a series of flashbacks from past to present slowly reveals the central characters' stories. We are not giving you chapter-wise summaries. Our effort is to elucidate the text. We have tried to analyze important aspects of the text. Kindly go through the original text first and then study these lessons. The novel opens with the house of Sethe Garner and her family. Sethe is a former slave who escaped to 124 Bluestone Road, while pregnant with Denver. Denver was born just as Sethe arrived on the banks of the Ohio River. Nine years ago Sethe's two sons, Buglar and Howard, left the house, as they could no longer bear the fear and uncertainty of their home. Their grandmother, Baby Suggs, died after the boys left. The current occupants of 124 Bluestone Road are Sethe and her daughter Denver. They are sure that their house is haunted by *Beloved*, Sethe's dead daughter and Denver's sister. In the beginning, Sethe's thoughts turn around her infant daughter, who now haunts the house. She remembers that when the infant died, she traded her body in a sexual exchange with the engraver to have the letters carved on her dead daughter's tombstone: "Ten minutes for seven letters." The ghost is a symbol of the past, a reminder of the effects of slavery. Sethe's strategy for survival revolves around remembering as little about the past as possible. But the past becomes more difficult to suppress when Paul D, one of the slaves in Sweet Home, comes in the house of Sethe unexpectedly. Sethe and Paul D have not seen each other for eighteen years. Sethe and Paul D's shared past revolves around Sweet Home, a Kentucky plantation. Mr. and Mrs Garner were the original owners of Sweet Home. There were six slaves: Baby Suggs and her son Halle, Paul A, Paul D, Paul F, and Sixo. When Halle buys his mother out of slavery, the Garners replace Baby Suggs with thirteen-year-old Sethe. After being freed, Baby Suggs starts preaching in the Clearing, a beautiful outdoor sanctuary. She is an unchurched preacher who speaks and dances

in the Clearing. There she cries for the living and the dead and tells the community to do the same. Her house is one of the centers of the community, where people stop by to share news and leave messages. She helps her neighbors in many ways and is referred to often as Baby Suggs, holy.

Paul D's arrival provokes Sethe's memories and interrupts the routine of Sethe and Denver. As Sethe and Paul D share stories of Sweet Home, Denver feels left out of the conversation. Denver's life is defined by her mother's stories, by the absence of other people, and by the tangible presence of the ghost she believes is her sister. Sethe tells her daughter about Schoolteacher, the overseer at Sweet Home and brother to Garner, who took over the farm after Mr. Garner's death. Schoolteacher arrived at Sweet Home shortly after Mr. Garner's mysterious death, bringing with him two young men, both called nephew. When Schoolteacher replaced Garner after he died, however, Sweet Home dissolved into a nightmare of humiliation, beatings, and murders. Schoolteacher wrote down all of his observations about the slaves at Sweet Home. At one point, Sethe overhears him discussing the animal and human characteristics of the Sweet Home slaves and she realizes the extent of schoolteacher's inhumanity and the danger that his disregard presents for herself and her family and friends, especially for her children. Schoolteacher and his nephews rob Sethe of her maternity by forcibly taking her milk. "I had milk," she tells him, "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar" to join their grandmother in Ohio (16). She continues:

Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. (16)

Sethe tells Paul D that before she could escape, "those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (16). When they find out Sethe has disclosed their violation to Mrs. Garner, one of the boys whips her until her back "open[s] up," ultimately developing scars like a tree (17). Sethe is treated as an animal to be milked. For Sethe, this assault is a violation worse than the beating that followed. The "tree" is one of many physical reminders of the horror of slavery. The scene shocks the reader with unspeakable horror and reveals slavery's cruel effects on the imagination and the inner life.

Paul D clears 124 of its ghost. Sethe begins to imagine that she, Paul D, and Denver might make a life with each other, a life free from the horrible memories of

the past. Denver is not at all pleased by the proposal that Paul D might stay with them for an extended amount of time. Paul D says to Sethe that he believes that the three of them can share a life. The three go to a local carnival. Paul D serves as connection to a community from which Sethe and Denver have been estranged and alienated. Denver enjoys the carnival and begins to think that having Paul D around may not be so unbearable. As they walk home, the shadows of their hands are connected. When Denver, Paul D, and Sethe return from the carnival, they see a voraciously thirsty, well-dressed, and relatively young woman sitting outside of 124. Upon seeing the woman, Sethe runs to urinate. Later the woman reveals her age to be 19. She tells them her name is Beloved. Images of infancy surround Beloved: her neck seems unable to support her head, her skin is soft and unlined, and she drinks as greedily as a nursing infant. After arriving, Beloved sleeps for four days. Beloved adores Sethe and wants nothing more than to hear the stories Sethe sometimes tells. Sethe tells her about a pair of crystal earrings she once had. Sethe also tells Beloved and Denver about her own mother and one of her very few memories of her. Beloved greedily feeds on Sethe's stories yet reveals nothing about herself. Paul D gets suspicious and asks her motivations. Paul D confronts Sethe and says to her that he thinks Beloved needs to go. Sethe disagrees. They get into a conversation about the past, and Paul D tells Sethe why her husband, Halle, did not meet her as was planned when she ran away from Sweet Home. Halle saw the moment when Schoolteacher and his nephews tied Sethe down, beat her, and suckled her breast. Witnessing this wicked violence and not being able to act to prevent it or to effectively intervene sent Halle into insanity. Paul D confesses to Sethe that he could not help his friend because he was chained with a bit in his mouth. Paul D recalls his own humiliation under the gaze of Mister, the plantation's rooster. Both Sethe and Paul D are trauma victims, and one way to deal with their horrors involves repressing painful memories. Although Sethe and Paul D attempt to suppress the past, it emerges in broken threads and pieces, and these memories eventually allow them to come to terms with the trauma they suffered. What Sethe terms "rememory" moves the narrative back and forth between past and present; it is a way to reconstruct what has been forgotten.

Denver and Beloved dance in the attic. Beloved asks Denver to tell her the story of her birth. Denver tells the story with the hope of ensuring that Beloved will not leave, a fear that haunts her growing relationship with the girl. Denver hopes that her own stories will be as compelling to Beloved as Sethe's and that the stories will help bind Beloved to her side. Missing the spirituality and strength of Baby Suggs, Sethe takes Denver and Beloved to the Clearing to "pay tribute to Halle." The narrative moves back to the story of Denver's birth. Sethe, after her escape from Sweet Home, meets Stamp Paid, a conductor for the Underground Railroad—a

system of safe houses that hid and supported slaves until they could reach “free” states or Canada. Stamp Paid ferries her across the Ohio River to freedom. Another one of the Railroad’s agents, a young woman named Ella, brings news to Sethe that Stamp Paid has already safely brought Sethe’s three children to Bluestone. Then, for the first time, Sethe meets Baby Suggs, and she is reunited with her children. During those twenty-eight days, Sethe experiences the freedom of “unslaved life.” As Sethe remembers these times and considers the possibility of a new life with Paul D, invisible fingers, which she assumes belong to Baby Suggs, caress her neck. However, these invisible fingers suddenly strengthen, leaving bruises around Sethe’s neck. Denver knows the hurtful fingers do not belong to Baby Suggs, and later she accuses Beloved of choking her mother.

The narrative presents Paul D’s life after Sweet Home in a series of flashbacks. Paul D is sold to a man named Brandywine. After Paul D tries to kill the man, he is sent to work on a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia. The men on the gang sleep chained together in separate wooden cages embedded in the earth. While in Alfred, Georgia, Paul D and his fellow slave/prisoners are forced to endure every type of torture and abuse, from starvation to sodomy. The men’s salvation is their communication through the songs they sing as they work. They sing about their lives, their longings, and their loves, and, through this ritual, they preserve their humanity. They experience a seemingly endless rain that threatens to drown the men in their in-ground prisons. One man discovers that the earth underneath the boxes is soft enough to get through, but in order for one to escape, they all must. So the men communicate through the chain and all 46 come up through the mud to safety. The men get help from a group of infirm Cherokee who feed them and help them to break the chains that so fiercely bind them together. Paul D follows the blooming trees north to freedom. He attempts to lock all of his experiences away in a rusty recess of his heart. He calls his heart a tobacco tin and stores his feelings and memories there in order to avoid encountering the painful past.

Throughout the novel, each of the main characters—Sethe, Paul D, and Denver—responds to Beloved differently. For Sethe, it is mothering; for Paul D, his ability to feel; and for Denver, her loneliness. Their individual reactions to her reflect their respective voids and reveal their deepest selves. As Part I follows the three characters’ relationships with Beloved and the effect she has over their own development, Beloved goes through several incarnations in the novel; she acts as an infant, a sexual woman, a daughter, and a sister. Baby Suggs, although dead, is brought back into the narrative to recall her joy over the arrival of Sethe and her children, and her anguish over her son Halle, who she assumes is dead. After their arrival, Baby gives a party for all the neighbors where she supplies food in such abundance that it stirs up feelings of resentment in the neighbors, as if she were

making herself better than they were—that she could afford to be so generous with her resources. She smells disapproval after she has the blackberry party and people see her as too proud. The community makes assumptions about Baby Suggs's prosperity and freedom, and their resentment leads to passivity: by not warning Baby Suggs of the approaching horsemen, the community fails to protect her family. The novel stresses the importance of community, of sharing collective memories and healing each other, and with this breakdown of solidarity, Baby Suggs and her family become vulnerable to the approaching doom. This doom reveals itself in Part one. Schoolteacher has come to take Sethe and her children back into slavery, an action that was legal under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, which stated that runaway slaves could be reclaimed even from a free state. The reader is uncomfortable and shocked as the scene of infanticide unfolds. Now, through the perspective of Schoolteacher, Sethe, the protagonist, is described to the reader as a “nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest.” Schoolteacher, shows no sympathy for the dead and is only irritated that he has lost his “property”: “Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim.” Schoolteacher does not claim Sethe, as he believes that she is crazy for killing her child. He does not realize that Sethe loves her children so much that she would rather kill them than allow them to be dehumanized by slavery. The narrative has revealed Sethe's story in fragments, giving the reader the opportunity to interpret and piece together the parts. The narrator retells Sethe's act of infanticide from Stamp Paid's point of view. The narrative then returns to the present, with Stamp Paid showing Paul D the newspaper clipping that describes Sethe's crime. Paul D, who cannot read, rejects the truth, arguing the picture is not her: “That ain't her mouth.” Although Paul D refuses to believe this story, Sethe convinces him that it is true. Sethe is allowed for the first time to express her own repressed memory of the day. However, she has trouble articulating the story. Sethe's first priority has always been her children, she insists, as she talks about freedom and her “big” love for her children. Paul D tells Sethe that her love is too much. He tells her that what she did was wrong. Then, as if adding insult, he tells her that she is not an animal but a person. Paul D then leaves Sethe, her story, and her house.

Part Two marks the shift in the reader's position from incomplete to complete knowledge of Sethe's act of infanticide. Furthermore, the stories of Denver's birth and Paul D's past in Alfred, Georgia, have reached completion. Part Two also builds on Sethe's present relationship with Beloved. Stamp blames himself for Paul D's departure, and he approaches 124 to make amends. As Stamp Paid approaches 124, he hears choruses of loud voices of what he believes are spirits. Stamp never actually visits Sethe because he cannot bring himself to knock on the door. The doors of all of the houses in the community have always been open to him, and he

does not know what to do with the silent and shut door of 124 or about his uncertain welcome. Sethe tries to reconcile herself to Paul D's decision to leave and decides not to dwell on the departure.

Sethe, Denver, and Beloved go ice skating. When they return from the skating and huddle before the warm fire, Beloved begins to hum a tune that Sethe created as a lullaby for her children. The fact that Beloved knows the song confirms for Sethe her belief that this woman-child is her dead child come back to life. Sethe hopes that with the return of Beloved she will no longer have to remember or explain, because Beloved "understands it all." However, for the rest of the novel, she tries relentlessly to explain to Beloved why she killed her, begging for forgiveness. Having back the woman she believes is her dead child, Sethe begins to enjoy and experience the world in ways that she has not allowed herself since the death of her child. She also remembers the last day on Sweet Home—how she did not want to leave without Halle and how she told Mrs. Garner that Schoolteacher and the nephews had beaten her and stolen her milk. She speaks about how she sold her body, her sex, for Beloved's headstone and recognizes that she came close to being a prostitute. But for Sethe none of that matters anymore because she believes her daughter has returned to her and she can claim her place as Beloved's mother.

Denver also claims Beloved, as she has since her arrival, as her sister. She reveals her love for her mother but also admits that she fears Sethe because she knows that Sethe killed her sister and tried to kill her brothers. Denver comments on the fact that, except for two times after she stopped attending school, she has never left the house. She thinks that Beloved came to her—that Beloved belongs to her. Denver thinks that she has to protect Beloved from Sethe. She remembers being in prison with Sethe and knows how tangible bad events can be. Denver imagines that when Sethe combs Denver's hair each night, she cuts her head off. Denver reveals that she spends a great deal of time imagining that her father is coming back.

When Paul D arrives, she thinks that he might be Halle and is disappointed to find out that he is not and that he came looking for Sethe, not Denver. Baby Suggs told Denver about her father—how much he loved soft fried eggs, what a good man he was, how well he could read and do figures— what kind of man he was. Denver thinks Beloved came to wait with her for Halle's return. She claims Beloved as her own.

Beloved gets the opportunity to tell her story in part two of the novel. This part contains one certain statement by Beloved: "I am beloved and she is mine." This chapter, told from Beloved's point of view, is constructed in sentences, without use of punctuation, and provides ambiguous images relating to her background. Beloved remembers a woman gathering flowers in a basket, and she longs for a clear

view of and connection to the woman's face. She remembers being in a small place where she cannot stand up and where she is crowded in with others and where some of the others are dying. The place she describes resembles accounts of slave ships. She seems to recount the experiences on the deck of a slave ship with some dead piled up nearby. The woman she longs for earlier is there, and Beloved wants to free her from the chains that are around her neck. The woman is lost to the sea. The woman Beloved longs for has something shining by her ears. Clouds separate her from the woman. Beloved longs for the woman's face. The men and women are separated until a storm mixes everybody together and Beloved ends up on the back of a man who sings to her. He sings about the place before the clouds where a woman is gathering flowers. The man dies. The dead man and his song reconnect Beloved to the woman she has lost to the sea. The woman jumps into the sea. She goes into the water of her own accord. Later, Beloved is standing in the rain and trying not to fall apart while someone or something unnamed is violating her. Then she is alone at a bridge for some time. Everything that she has experienced is in the water, including the face that she craves. She sees the face she loves in the water and wants to join with it. The woman seems to consume her, and they are one and then they are not. The connection is short. Then she is alone. Beloved comes out of the water. She is not dead. She says that Sethe is the face that she lost. Now Beloved believes that she can have the face that she lost, that she can join with Sethe. Beloved explains that Sethe is the woman that she lost three different times in her dream-like memories. She believes she has found her and is determined not to lose Sethe again. Sethe, Denver and Beloved enter into a conversation where each woman tries to define herself based on their relationship with the other. Repeatedly, the women locate and relocate each other in their pasts. Their needs, desires, and losses create a circle of connection that is fueled by the interaction of love and possession.

Paul D is staying in the Church of the Holy Redeemer feeling as if everything has fallen apart. Because of slavery, Paul D has been separated from most of his family all of his life. Sweet Home was a kind of surrogate family where, for 20 years, he lived with his brothers, two friends, and was treated better than most slaves. When Garner died, or was murdered, the vulnerability of their situation became apparent. Paul D tries to remember the things that went wrong with their escape plan from Sweet Home. They did not count on Sethe's pregnancy, unexpected visits from neighbors, Sethe having more demands on her time, and Sixo being locked up at night. When they got the signal to meet the other runaways in the cornfield, Halle went to tell Sethe that she needed to bring the children to the corn that night. No one knew what happened to Halle. The next time anyone saw him, he had already lost his mind after seeing Sethe molested by the nephews and beaten by

schoolteacher. Paul A never showed up. The Thirty-Mile Woman escaped. Schoolteacher caught Paul D and Sixo. They tried to burn Sixo alive. As he died, he called out Seven-O in acknowledgment of the pregnancy of the Thirty-Mile Woman. Because the fire was not hot enough, they ended up shooting Sixo to kill him. Paul D was destined for Alfred, Georgia. Stamp Paid comes to find Paul D to apologize to him for telling him what Sethe did. He says that the people should have offered Paul D some place to stay and that he apologizes on behalf of the community. Paul D tells Stamp that the minister did offer his house to him but that he, Paul D, wanted to stay by himself. Stamp Paid then tells Paul D the story of his wife, Vashti. He tells how he was powerless when the master wanted his way with her. When the master tires of her, Stamp Paid restrains himself from killing her and escapes. All of this conversation is but an introduction to what Stamp Paid really wants to talk to Paul D about: Sethe and what happened with her when schoolteacher came to recapture her and her children. Stamp tells Paul D that he was there and that what Sethe did, she did out of love. Stamp Paid also asks Paul D about the girl who is staying in Sethe's house, and Paul D tells what he knows about Beloved. Stamp Paid says that around the time of Beloved's arrival, a dead white man was discovered. The man was known to have kept a young black girl locked up in his house against her will. The girl disappeared. Stamp Paid speculates that Beloved might be that girl. Paul D shivers in the recollection of all of that misery and asks Stamp how much a person is supposed to be able to take. Stamp answers that a person has to take all he is capable of managing.

In Part Three, the bond between Sethe and Beloved tightens to reveal its destructive quality. The novel began with Denver crying because of the isolation and loneliness of 124; now she steps into the public eye, growing stronger as she enters the community. Denver begins to realize that it is not Beloved who is vulnerable but Sethe. Denver decides that she is going to have to leave the yard of 124. Denver remembers her grandmother and her comforting words. Denver transforms from an isolated and sheltered girl into the outgoing heroine of the novel. She takes responsibility for herself and her family. She sets out for work, approaching the abolitionist couple, the Bodwins. When she tells their servant, Janey Wagon, about her mother and Beloved, Janey assumes Beloved is a ghost: "She got any lines in her hands?" Denver seeks out the last adult person she had any contact with, Lady Jones, the schoolteacher. Lady Jones is a mixed race woman who hates her complexion and marries a dark-skinned man. She has always been kind to Denver and helps her out again in this situation. When they learn of Sethe and Denver's plight, the women of the community rally and begin leaving food for them. Denver takes over the care for her mother and Beloved. Sethe continues to try to persuade Beloved that she did the right and only thing in response to Schoolteacher's arrival

in the yard. Beloved does not understand or care and continues to demand all of Sethe's attention and resources. Some of the women of the town gather to go and confront the specter they believe has overtaken Sethe's home and life. Thirty of them gather and walk down Bluestone Road at three in the afternoon. When they arrive at 124, some of the women drop to their knees and start a wordless singing sound. When Beloved and Sethe appear outside, the women see Beloved as a beautiful, pregnant, dark-black, naked woman. When Sethe sees Edward Bodwin approach, she is immediately taken back psychologically to the day the schoolteacher appeared in her yard and runs toward him wielding the ice pick she is holding. The women stop her before she can hurt Bodwin and he never knows what happened. Paul D returns to 124 to see if Sethe is all right and to discover if anything can be resurrected from their aborted relationship. Before Paul D returns to the house, he runs into Denver in town. The two converse. Paul D asks Denver who she thinks Beloved was. Denver is uncertain and replies that Beloved may have been her sister but that she also was more. Denver tells Paul D he can visit Sethe, but that he has to be careful what he says to her. Paul D reenters the house slowly reflecting on his behavior while there and the mistakes he made. He looks for Sethe and finds her in Baby Suggs's old room singing the lullaby she created for her children. Sethe tells him that she is tired. The statement reminds Paul D of what Sethe told him about Baby Suggs's death, how she finally gave up, and he realizes that he has to pull Sethe out of her resignation. Sethe thinks of all of the people she has lost and tells Paul D that Beloved has left her too. She says that her child, the one she killed, is the most valuable thing in her life. Paul D, believing that the two can build a life together, tells her that she is her own most important thing. The novel ends with a conclusion that is more like a refrain. It describes two kinds of loneliness, loneliness that can be contained and loneliness that drifts and spreads. Then it tells of a lost woman who has no name and, not belonging, breaks into pieces. Beloved eventually is forgotten. She blurs at the edges of memory until she is indistinct and hazy. Yet she remains at the margin of things that cannot be explained. Her footprints appear and disappear, however, and the human choice for explaining the inexplicable most often is in the shifts and changes of the natural world and elements, not in something as difficult and incomprehensible as the supernatural desire of a lost beloved.

Major Critical Aspects of the Novel *Beloved*

Morrison's *Beloved* tells the stories of generations of women who have given birth, suffered loss, and been denied the chance to be mothers, to be daughters, to love and be loved. In *Beloved*, Morrison explores the way in which slavery's traumas are gender specific and portrays the debilitating effects that the severance of the mother-daughter bond, perpetuated by slavery, has upon black women. The bond of motherhood is severed throughout the text, and Morrison exemplifies this severance through the image of maternal milk. Sethe's own mother was allowed just a week or two of nursing before being sent to fieldwork after which Sethe was breastfed by Nan, the plantation wet-nurse. Sethe explains that "all the little white babies" were fed first while she was entitled to whatever milk, if any, was left. When Sethe speaks of her early mothering at an ironically named Sweet Home, she emphasizes how difficult it was to provide a nurturing and safe environment for her young children: "[The] children cannot play in the kitchen anymore, so she is dashing back and forth between house and quarters – fidgety and frustrated trying to watch over them. They are too young for men's work and the baby girl is nine months old" (223). Sethe has scant memories of her mother because she had little contact with her mother. Slave culture vehemently denied black children their basic humanity and actively prohibited slave mother from loving their children and being attentive to them. The ideas of family and motherhood mean different things for Sethe as she is located in the system of slavery. During years of enslavement, her identity as a slave woman denies her the right of 'proper' motherhood, partly because she is perceived as an animal rather than a human. Schoolteacher and his nephews rob Sethe of her maternity by forcibly taking her milk. Sethe's "stolen milk" metaphorically signifies the mother love that is denied to her as a slave woman. Sethe's language as she recounts the theft of her milk to Paul D suggests the importance of claiming it, too, as her own. "I had milk," she tells him, "I was pregnant with Denver but I had milk for my baby girl. I hadn't stopped nursing her when I sent her on ahead with Howard and Buglar" to join their grandmother in Ohio (16). She continues:

Anybody could smell me long before he saw me. And when he saw me he'd see the drops of it on the front of my dress. Nothing I could do about that. All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me. Nobody was going to get it to her fast enough, or take it away

when she had enough and didn't know it. Nobody knew that she couldn't pass her air if you held her up on your shoulder, only if she was lying on my knees. Nobody knew that but me and nobody had her milk but me. (16)

Her repetition emphasizes her sole ownership of maternal knowledge, along with the physical possession of her milk. The theft of her milk reinforces her sense of ownership over it and dedication to protect her children from suffering a similar fate. Sethe tells Paul D that before she could escape, "those boys came in there and took my milk. That's what they came in there for. Held me down and took it" (16). When they find out Sethe has disclosed their violation to Mrs. Garner, one of the boys whips her until her back "open[s] up," ultimately developing scars like a tree (17). Paul D's incredulous response to learning that Sethe was whipped counters her repeated indignation that her milk was stolen; from her perspective, this violation exceeds all others.

"They used cowhide on you?"

"And they took my milk."

"They beat you and you was [nine months] pregnant?"

"And they took my milk!" (17)

Indeed, Sethe's desire to nurse Beloved and reunite with her children is a major impetus, spurring her on to Cincinnati after she escapes Sweet Home. Mother and daughter are also separated when Sethe sends her children ahead to Baby Suggs in Cincinnati. When Beloved is sent ahead, Sethe is still breast feeding her and the milk stains on Sethe's dress testify to the unnatural and premature separation of mother and daughter.

In *Beloved*, Morrison interrogates and subverts Western ideological notions of maternity through the character of Sethe. Convention holds that it is 'natural' for a mother to be a certain way and to do certain things and that it is 'unnatural' to be otherwise and do different things. This supports an existing dualism in which qualities such as selflessness, nurturance, self-sacrifice and protectiveness are associated with motherhood. In this dualistic framework, maternal infanticide is in direct opposition to these traditional and culturally accepted qualities of motherhood. In acting in a way that is 'unnatural' – by attempting to kill her children – Sethe transgresses the boundary between that which is socially and morally acceptable and that which is not. She moves from a position in which she conforms to what her society prescribes and encourages – a nurturing maternity – to a position in which she expresses her nurturing maternity in a manner that is proscribed and condemned by her society. The trigger that causes Sethe to attempt the salvational murder of her children is her personal experience of pain and suffering under slavery, combined with her compassion for her children. Sethe's actions cannot be evaluated outside the context of American slavery. Although the

practice of infanticide is commonly noted in accounts of slavery, Morrison analyses the psychic anguish that emerges in the perpetrator of the act. Sethe's own mother murdered her children that were fathered by slave owners who demeaned her. Her attempted murder of her children was meant to prevent them from being defined as racially inferior and animalistic. After hearing Schoolteacher discuss her supposed animal traits with his pupils, Sethe is moved to resistance. Her resistance is not only for herself, since at its root lies a mother's love and concern for her children. It is to ensure the safety and freedom of her children that Sethe flees from Sweet Home. In a conversation she has with her husband, Halle - after overhearing Schoolteacher and his pupils - Sethe realizes that she will lose her children and they, like her, will lose their identities -- and possibly even their lives -- to slavery.

When she flees from Sweet Home, she moves from a position in which others define her identity for her, to a new position in which she defines it herself. As she actively attempts to liberate herself from the oppression, abuse and pain that marked her life as a slave, subjection transforms into subjectivity and subjectivity becomes subversion. This act of self-actualisation Morrison calls Sethe's 'claiming' of herself. Sethe's acquaintance with choice is significant, as this empowers her to choose to kill her children rather than have them enslaved. Her killing of her child(ren) is the act of a free woman, since it is only as a free woman that she has the choice to either 'save' them by the only means available to her, or to let them go into slavery with Schoolteacher. This is the reason why she did not kill her children at Sweet Home, since it is only as a free woman that Sethe's choice to kill them carries the profound meaning of freedom. Under slavery - with no experience and true understanding of what freedom meant - murder or suicide was not a choice that she could have considered. However, after spending 28 days in freedom, her frame of reference changes, and a new choice arises. Under slavery, Sethe was an object; she was owned by someone who could do with and to her what he pleased. He could even kill her if he chose to do so. Her life was in the hands and at the mercy of her 'master'. As a slave in Kentucky, Sethe was subject to 'pure force', but as a free woman in Ohio, she is exposed to "power [that] is exerted only over free subjects ... over beings capable of being recalcitrant and intransigent" (Caputo 254). In the 28 days after her flight, she develops a sense of "freedom [that] is resistant and persistent enough [to] cause power to tremble' because of its 'irrepressibility', its 'refusal to contract into an identity', its 'twisting loose from historical forms of life' and its 'lack of nature and essence [and] capacity for novelty and innovation'" (Caputo 255). During her 28 days of freedom on Bluestone Road, Sethe learns the meaning of freedom - and of choice - which Paul D expresses as follows: "... to get to a place where you could love anything you chose - not to need permission for desire - well now, that was freedom" (162). In this state of newfound freedom, Sethe creates a new identity for herself by redefining herself as 'mother'.

I did it. I got us all out. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn't no accident. But it was more than that. It was a kind of selfishness I never knew nothing about before. It felt good. Good and right. I was big ... and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide. Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn't love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon - there wasn't nobody in the world I couldn't love if I wanted to. ... (162)

It is significant that her freedom is contained in a period of 28 days, which is a symbol of her femaleness and motherhood, as it is the length of a menstrual cycle. However, the blood that flows at the end of this cycle is not menstrual blood from her womb, but the lifeblood of her child.

Having been a slave all her life, then believing herself to be free, Sethe is confronted with the reality of a return to slavery with the arrival of Schoolteacher. The moment in which she recognizes Schoolteacher marks the disintegration of her newfound and self-defined identity. The approaching group of white men under the leadership of Schoolteacher is represented as "a portent of death" (Bouson 145) in their appearance as the apocalyptic "four horsemen" (148). The moment of Schoolteacher's approach marks Sethe's "giving way of reason" (Caputo 234), from which her act of unreason flows:

... she was squatting in the garden and when she saw them coming and recognized [S]choolteacher's hat, she heard wings. Little hummingbirds stuck their needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thought anything, it was No. No. No no. No no no. Simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. (163)

... she flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; her face beaked, her hands worked like claws, she collected them every which way: one on her shoulder, one under her arm, one by the hand, the other shouted forward into the woodshed filled with just sunlight and shavings. (157)

Sethe's murderous act is an attempt to save her children, not only from slavery, but also from the knowledge and truth of human existence - specifically 'black' existence - namely that they will always be subjected to definitions and identities imposed on them by others. Thus she articulates her maternal responsibility as follows: "It's my job to know what is and to keep them from what I know is terrible. I did that" (165).

When Sethe's human emotions of love, compassion, empathy and nurturance - which are deemed 'natural' for a mother - drive her to protect her children, she is, ironically, judged to be devoid of these very emotions and of humanity.

Sethe tries to explain her motivation for the killing to Beloved, who is "the only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love" (249). Morrison presents Sethe's justification as follows:

[Sethe] could never let it happen to her own [child]. The best thing ... was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing - the part of her that was clean. No undreamable dreams about whether the headless, feetless torso hanging in the tree with a sign on it was her husband or Paul A; whether the bubbling-hot girls in the coloured-school fire set by patriots included her daughter; whether a gang of whites invaded her daughter's private parts, soiled her daughter's thighs and through her out of the wagon. . . . And no one, nobody on this earth, would list her daughter's characteristics on the animal side of the paper. No. Oh no. Maybe Baby Suggs could worry about it, live with the likelihood of it; Sethe had refused - and refused still. (251)

Sethe's fears for her children under slavery are based on reality and not delusions. Under slavery, the threat of rape, murder, physical abuse and torture is a reality of everyday life. She is not overwhelmed by the reality and implications of motherhood, as such, but by the reality and implications of her inability, as a mother, to protect her children from slavery. Sethe further sees her children not as the bad part of herself, but as her "best thing" (251, 273) and thus killing them is, for her, a way to set them free of her - who had been "dirtied" (251) by slavery - rather than the other way around.

Sethe is allowed "to speak for herself, to speak her own name and the daughter's, to speak, after the eighteen years, her unspeakable crime to her daughter [the novel] allows Beloved to return so that mother and daughter speak to each other" (Hirsch 8). Beloved stands for the millions of unknown and forgotten enslaved Africans who were 'lost' under the system of slavery. The small scars on Beloved's forehead and throat - the only blemishes on an otherwise perfect body - are indicative of her relationship with the dead slaves of African American history. These scars are physical signs of Sethe's killing of her baby girl, an act intended to keep her children safe from slavery. Through reverse symbolism, the scars on Beloved's body - intended to keep her from slavery - become symbolic of the deaths of millions of Africans under slavery. It is in this context that Morrison's epigraph to *Beloved* gains its significance: "Sixty Million and More". Beloved's scars are symbolic of the break in continuity between the generations that call themselves African Americans and their ancestors, their history and their African roots. Through the identification of Beloved with distant social relations, Morrison succeeds in bringing the

distant close, for Beloved is not only Sethe's daughter and Denver's sister, she stands for every daughter and sister – the relation of every kind – that was lost because of slavery. Beloved is symbolic of social relationships that have ceased to exist and of a fractured community in need of healing and reconstruction.

Beloved is also linked to Sethe's own mother who, like the murdered granddaughter, remains nameless. Beloved forces Sethe to remember past with strategies such as her pointed and incessant questioning. Denver notices how "Beloved took every opportunity to ask some funny questions and get Sethe going The questions Beloved asked: 'Where your diamonds?' 'Your woman she never fix up your hair?' And most perplexing: 'Tell me your earrings'" (62-3). Ironically, Sethe believes that with Beloved's return all is forgiven and she can now forget the past; however, Beloved functions to remind Sethe of the past, rather than allow her to forget it. So in a reversal of roles, the daughter, Beloved engages the mother, Sethe, in "Rememory", a journey into self and back through time. Beloved prompts Sethe to remember all that she was resolved to forget. Sethe, in *Beloved*, learns to live with the past and to accept herself through a psychic journey of remembering. And it is the daughter who enables the mother to remember, accept and forgive. Thus, in and through relationship with Beloved, the embodiment of the African American matriline, Sethe finds her own lost matriline.

Thus *Beloved* explores the effects of slavery upon the mother daughter bond within three generations of African American women: Sethe's mother, Sethe herself, and Sethe's daughters: Beloved and Denver. Sethe's mother and Sethe's caregiver, Nan, represent the black women who were stolen from Africa and survived the Middle Passage: these women were literally severed from their homes and their families. Baby Suggs, too, is a member of this generation who speaks of how, because "slave life had 'busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue', she had nothing to make a living with but her heart" (87). Baby Suggs struggles to reunite these fragments of self and preaches of self-love and healing. Jennifer FitzGerald discusses how Baby Suggs' "response [to her newfound freedom] is to foster the selfhood which racism has denied to each of the ex-slaves. Her mother love extends beyond the bounds of the nuclear family, which Eurocentric psychoanalysis has universalized as the psychic environment" (681). Although Baby Suggs' mother love defies boundaries, her sense of self or any possibility of self-love does not begin to develop until she is away from Sweet Home.

The second generation of slave women, daughters of those who survived the Middle Passage, is represented by Sethe. The markings on these women, on Sethe, become more complex, more coded, as slavery becomes more sophisticated and more organized. While Sethe's mother is marked by a brand and Nan is missing a limb, Sethe's tree represents the increasing complexity of slavery and the fast rate at which the slave population is growing. The image of a tree and its ability to grow indicates how vital it is that the second generation be the last to be born within slavery, and signifies how resistance and escape

are more important than ever. Whereas Sethe's mother's escape was unsuccessful, Sethe's own escape allows Sethe to live a life in which she is physically "free" from the bonds of slavery. Although Sethe is free from Sweet Home, clearly she is not "free" from slavery, nor has she attained freedom emotionally or spiritually. Sethe, marked herself, does not want her children to be marked by slavery. Ironically, the only way to prevent this from occurring is to mark them herself, something her own mother refused to do. Sethe realizes the importance of allowing her children to grow up free, and this is why she will do anything to secure this freedom, including murder.

Sethe resists the exploitation of her body and her children's bodies by claiming these bodies as her own. Gurleen Grewal ascertains, "Sethe is the slave mother who dares to claim her children as her own property instead of the slaveholder's" (156). Indeed, Sethe does claim her children as her own and is fiercely protective and possessive of them. Sethe claims ownership of her children in the same way that slave owners such as the Garners and schoolteacher claimed ownership of her. Even though Sethe's possession of her children is premised on love, it is also informed by the dynamics of commodification at work within slavery, the only way of life Sethe has ever known. Ironically Sethe exhibits her love by sacrificing the very children whom she refers to as her "best things". Her murder of Beloved is an act of infanticide that contradicts the slave economy ideology that the children of slaves, especially if they were girls who could reproduce more slaves, were invaluable commodities that must be maintained and, in Sethe's case, recaptured at any cost. Sethe's murder of Beloved also "runs counter to the slave community's ... determined effort to keep alive family ties despite the master's attempt to sunder them" (Grewal 157).

The third generation of black women is represented by Sethe's daughters: Beloved and Denver. Like her mother and grandmothers, Beloved displays the marks of violence on the body, yet these marks, the fingernail scratches on her forehead and slice under her chin, are written upon her body not by slave owners or other whites, but by the hands of her own mother. These marks clearly symbolize the price of freedom; often, freedom for a generation of slaves escaping slavery is only available and possible in the form of death. The bodies of Sethe and Beloved are marked because Sethe has attempted to escape not only her enslavement at Sweet Home, but also to evade the order that relegates Beloved to a life of enslavement as well. Beloved is marked also because, unlike Denver, she is born into slavery even though she leaves Sweet Home at a young age when she is sent ahead to Cincinnati by Sethe. Denver, however, is born free during the escape from Sweet Home and Sethe's journey to Ohio. Although Denver is the only black woman of these three generations whose body does not have any visible external markings, her body still contains signs of trauma. After hearing of Sethe's murder of Beloved, Denver becomes deaf for two years. Despite the loss of her hearing, Denver nonetheless is free from the inscriptions of slavery upon the body because her mother, Sethe, vehemently declares, after being violated by schoolteacher's nephews and overhearing their listing of her animal

characteristics: “No notebook for my babies and no measuring string neither” (198). Sethe attempts to forge a life free of brutality and ownership for her children, and also struggles to disavow racist constructions of slaves as animals.

Major Critical Aspects of the Novel *Beloved*

A) Memory in *Beloved*

Memory works as a powerful force in Morrison's writings. Its power comes from its ability to shape experience. Her novels reveal a concern for African American history and cultural memory. She believes that, through memory, we keep in touch with our ancestors. In an interview with Susanna Rustin for *The Guardian*, in November 2008, Toni Morrison points out how growing up in the Midwest meant being involved with the African American culture which invariably was a legacy of the system of slavery. She says, "Yet the pressure was not to remember it, but to get over it. So when I was writing *Beloved*, part of the architecture was the act of forgetting." For Morrison, writing and publishing *Beloved* was a conscious act towards healing the painful wound of slavery, which is very much a part of the history of America, and yet not talked about. In accepting the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award on October 12, 1988, for *Beloved* Morrison observed that "there is no suitable memorial or plaque or wreath or wall or park or skyscraper lobby" honouring the memory of the human beings forced into slavery and brought to the United States. "There's no small bench by the road," she continued. "And because such a place doesn't exist (that I know of), the book had to." Inspired by her remarks, the Toni Morrison Society has now begun to install benches at significant sites in the history of slavery in America.

Beloved is created out of Morrison's own memories of the Margaret Garner case, specifically, and slavery, in general. The novel is Morrison's attempt to bring forward into literature the unbearable memory of slavery so that African Americans and society can move on at last. *Beloved's* plot is constructed to mirror the way that memories unfold. The plot emerges in nonlinear fragments, as different characters remember their experiences and share them with the reader and/or each other. Since many of these memories have been repressed for a long time, the process of uncovering them is slow and painful. The recognition of the past involved in memory requires the effort of the entire community, and cannot be accomplished by one individual. Like the central character, Sethe Suggs, readers of the novel must engage in the act of creative reconstruction. They have to piece together the fragments and different accounts in order to find coherent meaning for themselves. Morrison's narrative approach to memory in *Beloved* allows the novel to go back and

forth between the past and the present, and blurs the distinction between them. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses memory to show the reader the hidden side of slavery. The novel illustrates the relationship between history and memory. History provides the exterior view of slavery, and memory is the personal, interior view. Throughout her novel, Sethe tries to forget her experiences as a slave at Sweet Home plantation, but memories keep surging up and frustrating her attempts. Morrison uses the term “rememory” instead of “memory” in *Beloved*. Rememories represent racial memory. Forgetting is called “disremembering,” which is the opposite of remembering, and implies an almost conscious choice. For much of *Beloved*, Sethe struggles to resist “rememories” by “beating” back the past and claiming to “disremember,” but fails. In *Beloved*, Morrison investigates the role of individual and cultural memory in relationships. Paul D Garner keeps his memories locked up inside him and does not want to acknowledge them. However, the narrator points out that in order to make a life with Sethe, Paul D must put his memories next to hers. Paul D is as devoted to keeping his memories dead as Sethe is to keeping her memory of Beloved alive. Throughout *Beloved* the narrator reminds us that the story is not one to pass on. On the one hand, the phrase suggests that the *Beloved* tale should not be repeated and should not happen again. On the other hand, it also suggests that the story is one not to pass up. By repeating the warning at the end of the novel, Morrison implies that while this story should not be repeated, it should be remembered. Beloved, the “ghost” of Sethe’s baby is the physical manifestation of Sethe’s memory.

B) Slavery in *Beloved*

The story of *Beloved* is derived from the true story of a slave woman called Margaret Garner who killed her daughter in order to save her from slavery. The novel is Toni Morrison’s attempt at exploring the nature of slavery not from an intellectual or slave narrative perspective, but from within the day-to-day lived experience of a slave woman. It is often considered that a child born to a woman is hers and none can take it away from her. However, in the antebellum America, the slave woman had no such rights. A child born to her became her master’s property and had to become a slave like herself. Especially after the United States outlawed the importation of new slaves in 1808, slave women were not only required to work but also to bear children and thus propagate the slave population. The physical and psychological trauma, the sexual abuse and the destruction of the natural concept of family had many negative consequences on the slave women. In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison looks at the consequence of slavery on black motherhood. The constant anxiety of not knowing how long one would be able to hold on to one’s children resulted in even a mother’s natural love seeming dangerous. This is reflected in the murder that Sethe commits in an attempt to safeguard her children’s freedom. This

is also poignantly reflected in Baby Suggs' memory about her first born – “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that's all I remember”. *Beloved* also explores the devastating effects that continue to haunt even ex-slaves in their freedom. A significant negative impact on former slaves is on their sense of selves which is a result of constant humiliation in all forms. Much of *Beloved* is about the restless and tortured internal lives of the characters, who were all former slaves. Slavery took away from Baby Suggs almost all her eight children and one grandchild, thus making her spiritually tired. Sethe is tormented by the ghost of her dead daughter, a memory she would rather “disremember”. Paul D, for instance, is so alienated from himself that at one point he cannot tell whether the screaming he hears is his own or someone else's. Slavery has made him doubt whether he is a real man. He is so devastated by his own history of slavery that he cannot bring himself up to think about settling down with Sethe and daring to have what looks like a perfect family. It is significant that *Beloved* arrives and later drives Paul D away from 124 just when he and Sethe were beginning to hope for a future together. For, *Beloved* is symbolic of the horrible impact of slavery on people like Paul D and Sethe. Both of them have to deal with *Beloved* in their own ways before beginning a future.

C) Narrative Structure in *Beloved*

Beloved, by telling the story of Sethe and her escape from slavery takes on the form of a slave narrative. However, Toni Morrison revises the traditional slave narrative structure by exploring the ex-slave's life after her escape. While traditional slave narratives explore the slave's physical escape and journey to freedom, Morrison depicts the ex-slave's escape not only from physical, but also psychological trauma. What we have in *Beloved* is not a linear tale, told from beginning to end. It is a story encompassing levels of past, from the slave ship to Sweet home, as well as the present. Sometimes the past is told in flashbacks, sometimes in stories, and sometimes it is plainly told, as if it were happening in the present. The narrative structure in *Beloved* has often been described as complex. This is due to the multiple and fragmented plot lines and shifting points of view. While for some, this kind of a narrative structure may create difficulty in a better reading of the text, some others may enjoy it, as the fragments and various plot lines help the readers to fill up the gaps, put the pieces together and have a coherent story. As she weaves specific literary techniques such as stream of consciousness and magic realism with African American folk tradition, Morrison brings a beautiful complexity to the novel. For example, one notices the use of parallel structure and repetition almost immediately; the first sentence of each of the three parts of the novel are "124 was spiteful," "124 was loud," and "124 was quiet." The character of Baby Suggs exemplifies the oral traditions of African

Americans. In her freedom, "she became an unchurched preacher...uncalled, unrobed, unanointed" bringing peace to her neighbours by her practice of traditional African American Christianity. When Sethe deeply longs for Baby Suggs' motherly support, she hears the latter's voice saying, "Lay 'em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield." This kind of repetition of words which is almost musical and soothing not only to the ears of the characters in the novel, but also to the readers is typical of literature by many African American women writers. The very second line of the novel tells us that this is no ordinary slave narrative we are about to read. The opening statements: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" opens the realm of the supernatural to the readers. As we read on, we however realise that, this is no common ghost story, but Morrison's depiction of one cultural truth of the African American community. That the African American community trust in supernatural occurrences is reflected in the matter-of-fact manner in which Sethe and Denver accept the presence of the ghost in the house. Just as Sethe and Denver do not react in an extraordinary way in the presence of the baby ghost, similarly Morrison sees no need for a special introduction the ghost. She has embedded the supernatural from the very first sentence and makes it a common, if complicated, part of the characters' lives. By doing so, Morrison clearly shows the influence of the Latin American technique of magic realism in the novel.

Another literary technique that Morrison appoints apart from magic realism is the stream of consciousness technique. There are a number of examples of it throughout the text. For instance, when Stamp Paid visits 124, he is confronted and held back by several voices emanating from the house. These voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken. The voice of the omniscient narrator is silenced as the "unspoken" and "unspeakable" thoughts of the inhabitants of 124 grow louder and louder. The interior monologues near the end of *Beloved*, in which Denver, Sethe, and Beloved each speaks her own story, show how multiple first-person stories become intertwined into a complex harmony of voices, so that the narration offers a dialogue rather than a monologue, and meaning is communally constructed from the perspectives of many individuals.