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The Search for the Ancestor in Toni Morrison's Beloved and Song of Solomon

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Abstract:

The paper explores the search for the ancestor in Morrison's two novels: Beloved and Song of Solomon through the analysis of familial ties between Sethe and her daughter Beloved in Beloved and between Macon, Milkman and Pilate in Song of Solomon. While the paper argues that Morrison uses 'magic realism' to speak on behalf of the victimized Afro-American community, it also investigates various issues related to racial discrimination, the search for identity, cultural displacement and causes of violence and tension in the black community. Moreover, the paper looks at the indispensable role of memory in connecting the individual to his culture and heritage and it investigates the serious repercussions of slavery on the Afro-American community. The paper shows how Morrison has been able through her use of appropriate language carefully chosen for the slave narrative to speak for a much wider experience than the merely personal one. Not only does the encounter between Sethe and Beloved bring to life their buried past but also it evokes the entire history of slavery that binds the Afro-American community by one collective experience. The paper also looks at Morrison's novels as political texts written in response to the atrocities of slavery and in opposition to the dominant cultural hegemonies in a country ruled by white people. While Morrison pays attention to the violence and tension that characterize the lifestyle of the Afro-American community, she shows that this

violence comes as a counter-reaction to the oppression of the white people and their victimization of their black counterparts. However, she does not condone violence nor does she see it as the solution to racial problems. What she suggests instead is the search for the ancestor and the return to 'homeplace' to discover one's identity, get moral guidance and regain a sense of belonging and connection to a tradition that one should be proud of particularly that which equips the black community with the right weapon to confront its cultural displacement and possibly put an end to the violence and tension that pervade their lives. The paper therefore concludes that the search for the ancestor is bound to assist the Afro-American community in its struggle for justice and equality in the United States rather than its reliance on violence to achieve the same objective.

البحث عن السلف
في روايتي توني موريسون " المحبوبة " و" اغنية سليمان"

د. عمر عبد الله باقبص

أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي المشارك بقسم اللغات الأوربية وآدابها

كلية الآداب والإنسانيات - جامعة الملك عبد العزيز

يسلط البحث الضوء على البحث عن السلف في روايتي توني موريسون *"المحبوبة"* و*أغنية سليمان"* وذلك عن طريق تحليل العلاقات الأسرية بين سيث وابنتها بيلفيد في رواية *"المحبوبة"* وبين ميكون وبايليت وميلكمان في الرواية الثانية. كما يدرس البحث استخدام موريسون للواقعية السحرية كوسيلة لتمثيل المجتمع الأفرو-أمريكي الواقع تحت استغلال الغالبية البيضاء في أمريكا ويستقصي معالجتها لمواضيع ذات صلة بالتفرقة العنصرية والبحث عن الهوية والشعور بالعزلة الثقافية وأسباب العنف والتوتر في المجتمع الأسود. وينظر البحث إلى دور الذاكرة المهم في ربط الفرد الأسود بثقافته وتراثه، كما يدرس الآثار الخطيرة التي خلفتها الفترة التي ساد فيها الاسترقاق على المجتمع الأفرو-أمريكي. ويبين البحث كيف أن موريسون عن طريق استخدامها للغة المناسبة والتي اختارتها بعناية في سردها لمآسي السود استطاعت أن تعبر عن تجربة وطنية تجاوزت حدود الشخصية حيث أن المواجهة التي تمت بين سيث وابنتها لم تعد الماضي المدفون إلى الحياة فحسب بل إنها استدعت تاريخ الاسترقاق بأكمله لتربط أفراد المجتمع الأفرو-أمريكي ببعضهم عن طريق تجربة مشتركة. كما ينظر البحث إلى روايتي موريسون باعتبارهما نصين سياسيين كتبا كرد فعل لشناعة ما حدث أثناء فترة الاسترقاق ولمعارضة الهيمنة الثقافية الغالبة في مجتمع يحكمه البيض. وفي الوقت الذي تعير موريسون العنف والتوتر اللذين يميزان

أسلوب الحياة في المجتمع الأفرو-أمريكي اهتمامها، فإنها تبين أن العنف الذي يسود المجتمع الأسود إنما هو في حقيقته ردة فعل لما تعرض له من ظلم واضطهاد واستغلال من قبل البيض. غير أن هذا لا يعني تغاضيها عن العنف كوسيلة لحل المشاكل العرقية. وبدلاً من ذلك ترى أن البحث عن الجذور والعودة إلى الموطن الأساسي لاكتشاف الهوية ولاستمداد التوجيه المعنوي ولاكتساب الشعور بالانتماء إلى تقليد على نحو يدعو الفرد الأسود إلى الفخر به يزود المجتمع الأسود بأسره بالسلاح المطلوب للتصدي للعزلة الثقافية ولوضع حد لدائرة العنف والتوتر اللذين يخيمان بظلالهما عليه. ويخلص البحث إلى أن العودة إلى الجذور بالبحث عن السلف سيساعد المجتمع الأفرو-أمريكي في نضاله نحو تحقيق العدالة والمساواة بدلاً من اعتماده على العنف للوصول إلى نفس الهدف.

The Search for the Ancestor in Toni Morrison's Beloved *and* Song of Solomon

This paper explores the search for an ancestral figure in two of Morrison's novels that depict the lives of Afro-Americans in the United States and shed light on their ongoing struggle for equality and justice, namely Beloved (1987) and Song of Solomon (1977) through the analysis of familial ties between Sethe and Beloved in Beloved and Macon-Pilate-Milkman in Song of Solomon. The paper argues that Morrison uses 'magic realism' to represent a marginalized group of society that has been beaten down and oppressed by racism and also explores the most polarizing issues affiliated with race and ethnic differences. This discussion cannot be divorced from Morrison's treatment of major themes in her novels such as cultural displacement, poverty, isolation, frustration and the search for racial identity in a world characterized by violence and tension. Moreover, the paper explores Morrison's search for the kind of narrative that expresses the inner world and secret thoughts of the slave characters and allows her to relate painful past memories that she gains access to through her memory to produce *Beloved* in particular. The role of memory in linking the individual to his/her past and in eliciting emotions that provide a sense of connection with culture and heritage is also discussed.

While Morrison investigates the serious repercussions of slavery on the Afro-American community in both novels, she finds the appropriate language that speaks for a much wider experience than the merely personal one in Beloved. This implies that Beloved does not merely evoke the ancestral generations lost in the Diaspora nor does she represent Sethe's buried past but also the entire history of slavery that binds the whole Afro-American community together. Not only does the paper probe into the impact of slavery on the Afro-American

community as envisaged in Morrison's two novels, but also it looks at the ways the dominant Euro-American culture attempts to distort the images rooted in Afro-American folk culture. The paper therefore looks at the selected novels as political texts written in response to the atrocities of slavery and also in opposition to the dominant cultural and political hegemonies in the United States, which insist on viewing the world as perceived by the white man. However, Morrison directs her critique at the 'selective tradition' that has been racist and exclusionary. While she demands that the dominant political hegemonies be more inclusive, she attaches great importance to the Afro-American past and suggests through Pilate's lifestyle and Milkman's search for the ancestral past the way the individual is reconciled with his/her roots in order to discover the meaning of connection and love among his/her own people. The paper concludes that Morrison proposes the return to 'homeplace' to provide the individual with a strong sense of connection to ancestors and give him/her the sense of belonging and assurance in life as one possible response to the violence of the white oppressors instead of retaliating in the same manner and triggering off more violence and creating more tension between whites and blacks.

Perhaps it is appropriate at this junction to mention that Morrison is part of a literary tradition of women writers that underscores black female identity through a revival of stories about slavery. This canon includes writers such as Gloria Naylor, Paule Marshall, Octavia Butter, to mention only some, who have engaged in the practice of 're-vision'. Moreover, it is relevant to our discussion to place Morrison within the tradition of 'magic realism' as it is equally significant to throw light on her own motives behind writing the kind of literature that she does as explained in her article "Memory, Creation, and Writing" where she says:

> *In the Third World cosmology as I perceive it, reality is not already constituted by any literary predecessors in Western culture. If my work is to confront a reality unlike that received*

> *reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West -- discredited not because it is not true or useful or even of some acial value, but because it is information held by the discredited people, information dismissed as "lore"or "gossip" or "magic" or sentiment" (Morrison Thought 388).*

However, Morrison does not dismiss such information because Craig Werner asserts "what Euro-American culture dismisses as superstition reflects a sense of myth necessary to the mental health of Morrison's characters" (Werner 89). In other words, Morrison creates a world in her novels where magic becomes a necessity and a reality. Moreover, magic allows Morrison's characters to maintain control in their lives and connect them with their roots. The supernatural for Morrison is therefore a different way of looking at the world and perceiving reality in a way, which is oppositional to the traditional Euro-centric worldview. In fact, Morrison explains that she appropriates the so-called 'magic realism' in her novels because she wants to "use black folklore, the magic and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. ... It's part of our heritage. That's why flying is the central metaphor in Song of Solomon" (qtd. in Wilentz 63). It expresses the strong yearning of enslaved Africans to escape slavery through a flight back to Africa and it also explores the quest for cultural identity.

Besides her use of African folklore and superstitions in her novels, Morrison uses West African, Caribbean and Afro-American oral traditions in response to Anglo-American and Anglo-European traditions that privilege the written word over the spoken one as Wilentz argues in "Civilizations Underneath: African Heritage as Cultural Discourse in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon.*" Moreover, she makes use of the term 'magic realism' first coined by Franz Roh in his essay on expressionist art since it "has become a catch-phrase which obscures the many varieties of fiction that have appeared in the last decades " (Franco 308). According to Durix, the term became fashionable in literary criticism (in the 1960s) to designate different

types of fiction which actually had little in common: "magic realism", or "marvelous realism" a variation of the former, was applied indifferently to the writings of J. L. Borges and Garcia Marquez. To make matters even more confusing, the Cuban Alejo Carpentier introduced the term *lo real maravilloso* to refer to his literary experience of Latin America as opposed to the European tradition" (Durix 102).

Craig Werner also observes that 'magic realism' is displayed in the "contemporary Latin American novels of Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel Marquez, Miguel Angel Asurias, and Guillermo Cabrera Infante" (Werner 89). These Latin American writers realized that knowledge and understanding of the world began with the individual's perception of it. While Ormerod argues that magical realism is "a literary technique that introduces unrealistic elements or incredible events, in a matter-of-fact way, into an apparently realistic narrative" (216), Zamora and Faris define it as a catalyst "for the development of new national and regional literatures" (2). Jean-Pierre Durix elaborates this idea further as he argues that through magical realism, the margins are allowed to rediscover their historical and mythical past. In other words, in their search for their roots and rediscovery of those myths, writers "transcend this marginal position" (148). Durix also shows that the term became common in the 1960s at a time when "intellectuals and literary critics were often involved in Third-Worldism, civil rights and anti-imperialistic protests" against a dominant Western culture (116). Not only does magical realism threaten or challenge the center that stands for a dominant culture, but also it treats major issues related to marginality. Moreover, writers who use 'magical realism' represent or speak on behalf of the marginalized and un-privileged group of society such as the Afro-American community in the United States. According to D'haen, magical realism offers them the chance to speak on its behalf because it "is the means for writers coming from the privileged centers of literature to dissociate themselves from their own discourses of power, and to speak on behalf of the ex-centric and un-privileged" (195). D'hean goes on to say that Magic realism thus

reveals itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse(s). It is a way of access to the main body of "Western" literature for authors not sharing in, or not writing from the perspective of, the privileged centers of this literature for reasons of language, class, race, or gender (195).

In the light of this new definition of magical realism offered by Durix and D'hean, Boccia sees it as "an international literature that oversteps national boundaries and languages, with roots deep in many literary traditions" (21). Edward A. Shannon calls American magic realism "an aggressive literature [that] explores the most polarizing issues of our age: race, gender, ethnic and religious difference" (3).

Such issues are not given full attention by the 'selective Western tradition' that Raymond Williams defines as follows:

[It is] that which, within the terms of an effective dominant culture, is always passed off as 'the tradition', 'the significant past'. But always the selectivity is the point: the way in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis, certain other meanings and practices are reinterpreted, diluted, or put in to forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture (Williams 383).

However, Morrison's novels address the very issues that the dominant political hegemonies seek to overlook, if not evade. Moreover, she exposes the afore-mentioned selective tradition to be historically racist and exclusionary rather than being impartial and inclusive as she delves into the African American past in her attempt to locate Afro-Americans within a larger tradition. In fact, postmodern narratives return to past traditions and places of origin to find a basis for belief and a haven to escape cultural displacement. According to Edward S. Casey, the practices of modernism have rendered people feeling "homeless" or displaced in a moral and physical sense. The

return to places of origin in the face of the imminent threat of displacement therefore offers one possibility for hope in a world that seems to be getting out of control as it fails to give assurance to unprivileged groups of society who have lost the sense of belonging that connects them to an increasingly alien and hostile environment. Casey stresses the significance of returning to a place of origin because lacking a primal place is to be "homeless" indeed, not only in the literal sense of having no permanently sheltering structure but also as being without any effective means of orientation in a complex and confusing world (Casey xv).

Casey goes on to attribute "homelessness" to modernity:

> *By late modern times, this world has become increasingly placeless, a matter of mere sites instead of living places, of sudden displacements rather than of perduring implacements(xv).*

He therefore argues that the return to places of origin is considered as one way to address the excesses affiliated with modernity. Moreover, the formation of place serves as an act of resistance against the dominant racist culture that favors Diaspora to cultural stability and it also directs a blow at the teleology that underlines imperialism and deprives indigenous communities of their right to a homeland. However, the homeland remains as a pivotal center for postcolonial communities because it provides a strong connection to ancestors and it is also regarded as the storehouse and source of memory that links these communities to their roots and ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In fact, this strong desire of the Afro-American community in particular to find what Bell Hooks calls "homeplace" to which it turns for ethical guidance and from which it derives a sense of re-assurance and belonging is evident in Morrison's works where returning to places of origin becomes an act of defiance against the dominant hegemonies that attempt to reduce black people to mere objects. But

in opposition to strategies that demolish the "homeplace", Bell Hooks argues that constructing this edifice is the necessary precondition to building "a meaningful community of resistance" (Hooks 47). In other words, "making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, [and] where (they) could restore to (themselves) the dignity denied (them)" [Hooks 24] defeat the political and cultural hegemonies whose interests are at stake once un-privileged communities search for a haven in their historical roots. However, locating the ancestor cannot be accomplished without the discovery of this essential figure among the ruins of the past in order to situate in or relate it to the present. Without the discovery of the ancestor, the black community is faced with the threat of utter loss and fragmentation. This notion is explicitly stated by Morrison who voices her concern that "if we (i.e., black people) don't keep in touch with the ancestor ... we are, in fact, lost... When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself". Morrison goes on to assert that happiness depends upon the presence of the ancestor in daily life because "the absence of an ancestor" is "frightening" and "threatening" ("Rootedness" 343-4). In fact, Morrison holds the view that in black fiction, the figure of the benevolent, advising wise and protective ancestor presides over and heals the city, the country or the village in which she lives. Moreover, she maintains that protagonists who do not have access to the ancestor are alienated ("City Limits, Village Values" 38-39).

In the light of Morrison's views of the ancestor, locating him/her saves the existing black community from extinction or destruction. Moreover, the ancestor figure provides access to the landscape of the past that has been longed for, so that it gains a dynamic and continuous presence. Morrison shows that memory plays a crucial role in linking the individual to his past and heritage since it is so intertwined with the national experience. Of major concern to her is also the way the individual reacts when he is confronted with painful past memories. In fact, Morrison illustrates that the recovery of the past is not without its heavy price since it can never be divorced from

memories of suffering and anguish. The present for her is perceived in terms of its connection to places of memory where its significance is derived from the restoration and revival of past incidents that cannot be wiped out no matter how long ago they happened to occur because individual memory brings them to life. Thus Morrison defines memory or (the deliberate act of remembering) [as] a form of willed creation. It is not an effort to find out the way it appeared and why it appeared in that particular way (385).

What is essential for Morrison is "the galaxy of emotion that accompanies" a particular situation which implies that the individual is incessantly involved in the act of remembering that negotiates the past and the present. By stressing the importance of a powerful and sustained emotional or sensational response that goes hand in hand with the recovery of past incidents, the individual is reconnected to his heritage and culture. This idea is well argued by Jacob J. Climo who observes that the emotions elicited by such memories provide a sense of connection to a particular point in the past. Thus he says:

> *Such memories evoke powerful feelings in individuals, which link them to important group events they did not experience directly in their individual lives - but which impact greatly on their identities and connect them profoundly to their heritage and culture (Climo 173).*

The above remark aptly describes how the memories of past events related to ancestors evoke powerful emotions in the individual who undergoes the process of remembering similar to the same sensations felt by someone else who has been through a personal experience. In other words, one does not have to experience the horrors of slavery personally because the mere recollection of its atrocities is enough to arouse disgust. This implies that through racial memory Afro-Americans can never forget the devastating repercussions of slavery on their lives and their communities. Morrison's novels, in fact, delineate how painful family memories are often tied to national

experiences such as Beloved's memory of the Middle Passage in the hull of a slave ship traveling all the way from West Africa to the southern coast of the United States. The same is true of Sethe's sorrowful memories of slavery. Hence the experience of being taken away from one's native land and sold into slavery upon arrival in the United States is the defining memory for the entire Afro-American community in Beloved, though not all Afro-Americans have experienced the harsh reality personally. Though Beloved is an individual narrative about Sethe's experience as a slave, freewoman, family and community member, it is also a national narrative that treats the effects of slavery on individuals, families and communities at large. Reading about Sethe's slavery cannot exclude its impact on other characters such as Baby Suggs, Halle Suggs, Sixo, the Garners, Schoolteacher and his nephews. Moreover, it constructs a cultural, economic and political hegemony that rests on the binary opposition between the racial superiority of the white oppressor and the racial inferiority of the black slave.

While the history of slavery is intertwined with violent acts committed against fugitives and documented by numerous black writers ever since Frederick Douglass's Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845), the enduring trauma of this painful experience that binds Afro-Americans literally and metaphorically haunts their collective imagination. What is therefore significant about Beloved's story related to Denver is that her recollections of past events fill her with bitterness and rage. Describing this unforgettable experience to Denver reveals to the latter the misery and pain that Beloved has endured during her long trek back to the present. Beloved's experience therefore represents the entire Afro-American experience characterized by grievous displacement and her narrative is a metaphor for the United States' bitter involvement in slavery and the dehumanizing slave trade. In fact, the slaves' inability to move freely during the journey that transported them to America foreshadowed, if not symbolized, the physical repression and oppression that they were

destined to endure upon their arrival to the southern coast of the United States. Moreover, Beloved's fragmented soliloquy that describes the deplorable conditions that the slaves have been through is a murky race memory of the black Diaspora that can never be forgotten. She is greatly troubled by "a hot thing" that may refer to the suffocation and the sense of tightness that the slaves endured along the journey across the Atlantic. The implications of her reference to heat are best understood when she relates to Denver early on in the novel in chapter 8 as Denver sits on the bed and watches Beloved dance at first that it was "Hot. Nothing to breathe down there (i.e., in the Middle Passage or way station) and no room to move (because) a lot of people is down there. Some is dead" (75). In her soliloquy, Beloved repeats the same thing to show that the deplorable conditions that the slaves endured can never be put to oblivion. Hence she gives full description of the tragic scene that she observes all around her in the following manner:

> *I am always crouching the man on my face is dead his face is not mine his mouth smells sweet but his eyes are locked some who eat nasty themselves I do not eat the men without skin bring us their morning water to drink we have none .... we are all trying to leave our bodies behind the man on my face has done it ... (210).*

Beloved makes a reference to her African cultural belief that enslaved Africans could escape slavery through their flight to their country of origin. But Beloved's soliloquy does not merely dwell on her painful recollections associated with the journey from Africa to America. In its second part, attention shifts to her object of desire, namely her mother Sethe. Still impelled by the affectionate bond of motherly love, Beloved insists, "I cannot lose her again" (211). Thus she expresses her wish not to part from her mother's side or be forced to a physical separation from her. In fact, Beloved's insistence on very close attachment to her mother is quite evident ever since her initial

appearance. Her obsession with Sethe is quite obvious in the following extract:

> *Rainwater held on to pine needles for dear life and Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe. Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindlin, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. Like a familiar, she hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in unless required and told to. She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting in the kitchen when Sethe came down to make fast bread before she left for work. In lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black swords (57).*

The above lines clearly show how frightening it can be when a stubborn ghost haunts a house so relentlessly. So forceful is Beloved's intrusion into Sethe's life that she quits her job, stops going out in public, and never dares leave her behind in a desperate attempt to mitigate her unprecedented fury. Moreover, she seeks to atone for her atrocious act by obsessively fulfilling every whimsical desire of her child's ghost. Consequently, Beloved literally consumed her: "Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250). So strong is the attachment between mother and daughter ever since Beloved's return that it paves the way for her identification with her mother in her soliloquy where she transfers her own feelings onto Sethe to such an extent that the child's spirit loses itself in love. The soliloquy concludes by giving some details related to Sethe's arrival in the North and Beloved tells us how she followed her and saw her face "which is mine ...she knows I want to join" (213). However, what prevents their union is Beloved's un-acceptance of Sethe's motives behind killing her own offspring. Moreover, Beloved 's rage and Sethe's guilt act as impediments that hinder the accomplishment of their objective.

The disconnected structure of the soliloquy reinforces Beloved's fragmentation and increased sense of alienation. In her analysis of Beloved's soliloquy, Rebecca Ferguson suggests that Beloved brings the whole traumatic experience of slavery with her, she not only

knows more than she could otherwise have known in her previous life, but she also contains the effects that slavery has, its profound fragmentation of the self and of the connections the self might have with others (Ferguson 114).

Through Beloved, Morrison is able to weave the threads that tie the past with the present allowing both to exist side by side in one character. In fact, the past returns to Sethe in the figure of her murdered daughter Beloved early on in the novel to prove that the present is a ghostly repetition of the past. Though Sethe does not want to remember how she has murdered her own child during slavery, the ghost of her dead baby girl haunts her house with such vehemence that she and Denver have to succumb to its persistent intrusion into their daily lives and eventually they "decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, "Come on... "" (4). This incident clearly illustrates that the sadomasochistic relationship between mother and daughter begins with storytelling, the oral, rather than the written, tradition that forms the core of black literature and history. Moreover, the incident exhibits Beloved's forceful determination to thrash household members for eighteen years in search for a convincing and assuring answer from Sethe justifying her abandonment. While Sethe has to counter Beloved's accusations of neglect in subsequent chapters, she realizes at the beginning of the novel that a conversation with the past can save her. Storytelling therefore becomes the vehicle through which her communication with Beloved may be started. For this reason, Sethe explains to Denver that once the ghost of her dead girl gains admission, she "could make clear to her" (4) the story that led to her murder; and by doing so, she could appease her uncontrollable rage. In other words, Sethe's suppression of the past is given vent through her act of narration that becomes the only vehicle through which she can come to terms with it. In fact, storytelling is a feminist narrative

strategy that leads to a circular rather than linear narrative technique. Through storytelling, which is significant in feminist theory, Sethe finds the right audience who will listen to her particularly after suffering alienation from the local people who "whipped (their) horse(s) into the gallop felt necessary when they passed 124 [Bluestone Road]" (4). This symbolic act reinforces their disgust at Sethe's atrocity and accounts for her ostracism that has denied her the chance to relate her story to them. But Sethe becomes the figure that represents Morrison's own search for the kind of narrative that speaks for the inner thoughts and deep feelings of the slave characters.

As Mae Henderson correctly observes: "Like Morrison, Sethe must learn to represent the unspeakable and unspoken in language -- and more precisely, as narrative" (Henderson 67). In other words, Sethe's attempt at finding a way of remembering and revealing the past runs parallel to Morrison's own project of remembering and relating the past that she gains access to through her memory and imagination; and then she produces this truth about slavery in her fiction. Morrison explains her task in her essay "The Site of Memory" where she authenticates the means by which she gains access to the truth through the act of remembering that plays its crucial role in producing her novel. However, her authenticating strategies involve blurring the boundaries between memory and imagination, and between fact and fiction; and by so doing, she validates as truth the fiction that she has produced in Beloved. What therefore sets Morrison's authenticating document apart from other fictional slave narratives written by 20th century black writers such as Alex Haley, Ralph Ellison and Ernest Gaines is Morrison's strong emphasis upon the necessity of fiction to reveal the unspoken truth and to unleash memory. This means that her authenticating document validates fiction as a means to tell an authentic and valid story that represents black history. Moreover, she uses her own recollections of past incidents as well as relies on her imagination to reconstruct the past when she describes her task as follows:

> *It's a kind of literary archeology: on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and reconstruct the world that these remains imply. What makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act: my reliance on the image -- on the remains -- in addition to recollection, to yield up a kind of truth ("The Site of Memory" 111-112).*

Beloved is definitely a fictional slave narrative that communicates a 'kind of truth' about its subjects. Perhaps distinction should be made here between a slave narrative and a fictional slave narrative. By the former, we mean "the written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings" (Davis & Gates xiii). However, what distinguishes a slave narrative from a fictional slave narrative is that while the former is a true historical narrative told by an ex-slave such as Frederick Douglass as an example and is autobiographical in nature, the latter like Beloved is based on a real story but it is also fictional since it has the elements of a novel. As Morrison explains, "what makes it fiction is the nature of the imaginative act ... to yield up a kind of truth". However, her search for truth and her desire to expose it requires her to adopt a certain approach elaborated in the following excerpt:

> *So if I'm looking to find and expose truth (about the slaves) ... then the approach that's most productive and most trustworthy for me is the recollection that moves from image to the text. Not from the text to the image ("Site of Memory" 113).*

While images are located within the body of memory and imagination, writing the truth, as Morrison perceives it, involves producing a language based on the images located in the memory. Thus Morrison authenticates the means through which she gains access to the truth through imagination and memory to produce Beloved.

While Morrison's Beloved is based on the story of the slave Margaret Garner, Morrison reconstructs through literary archeology Margaret Garner / Sethe's life. In other words, the truth about Margaret Garner on whose story Morrison's Beloved is based since Margaret has preferred killing her own child to raising it for a life of slavery can still be communicated in Beloved in spite of the fact that Morrison has based much of the novel upon her own imagination. In fact, in interviews with Marsha Darling and Gloria Naylor, Morrison describes how she obtained information about Margaret Garner and in the Darling interview; her comments on the way she has combined fact and fiction are consistent with the process that she describes in "The Site of Memory" (Taylor-Guthrie 249). However, the representation of what happened in the past passes on from Margaret to Morrison and from Morrison to Sethe and eventually from Sethe to Beloved. But the transition from one to the other particularly the last transition from mother to daughter allows the former to find the most perfect audience who embodies her past that she must confront to relate the truth about it to her. Relating this truth is an act of making Beloved into memory. In other words, what was primarily Sethe's personal horrific memory is recast in such a way that her private suffering stands for a larger communal sorrow brought about by the institution of slavery. Sally Keenan says that Beloved is not just one story but many, involving the personal histories of the protagonists, which, in telling become representative of the history and culture of the tribe, stories that bind the group together but which also have a violent potential to destroy those bonds" (Keenan 61-62).

What is significant in Keenan's commentary is that Beloved has provided a shared memorial experience that binds the entire Afro-American community together through its powerful allusion to one common experience; i.e., to slavery. In other words, Morrison does not merely explore "what it was to be a slave, but also what it meant to live with the psychological continuation of the experience of

slavery" (Keenan 61). Morrison therefore explores the serious repercussions of slavery on the whole Afro-American community. Moreover, she points her finger at the white people who are largely responsible for the heinous crimes committed against the black race. Though Morrison does not like being labeled a black writer because she says to Jean Strouse in a 1981 interview that "we have to acknowledge that the thing we call 'literature' is pluralistic now, just as society ought to be able to accept in equal terms everybody from the Hasidim to Walter Lippmann, from the Fastafarians to Ralph Bunch" (*Newsweek Magazine* 54), she writes against the devastating consequences of racism in a multi-cultured society and she attributes the life of poverty, despondency and violence that characterize the black community to colonialism that deepened the sense of injustice and oppression that black folk suffered from during considerably long periods of time. Hence Morrison writes that the "one thing that I wanted to write about ... was the true devastation of racism on the most vulnerable, the most helpless unit in the society --a black female and a child. I wanted to write about what it was like to be the subject of racism" (Dreifus 74).

Morrison therefore makes it clear that she wants to represent a marginalized and un-privileged group of society that has been mistreated and victimized by a purely white dominant culture. If her intention is to reveal the devastation of racism on black people, this entails that she will expose their oppressors to be vicious, cruel and inhuman. In her novels in general, and in Beloved in particular, Morrison explores the intrusion of the white world into the lives of black people. Such intrusion disrupts the lives of the latter group and leads to confrontation with white power in its bloodiest forms. Moreover, Morrison's novels become a playground of violence meted out not against the oppressor of the black people, but surprisingly against the black people themselves. In all of her six novels, Morrison writes of the "unspeakable things unspoken", a phrase that appears in

her essay "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature" bearing witness to the atrocities that are the legacy of slavery. What she accomplishes in her novels is that she moves the unspeakable and unspoken of the written black language of the slave narrative to a different level of representation. As the unspoken thoughts of her characters are given full expression, Morrison succeeds in her mission to create a form of written black language that speaks for the hidden thoughts of the slave characters.

While several major studies of 'Black vernacular' by Henry Louis Gates, Houston Baker, Barbara Johnson, Mae Henderson and Karla Holloway have drawn attention to the impact of folk tradition and music upon the style of language used by blacks, it should be made clear that Black English - a term that relates to a variety of English which emerged in America with the introduction of slavery, and which is spoken by approximately 80 % of the Afro-American community - is first and foremost a language that resides mainly in the realm of the oral. Aware of this very basic fact, Morrison creates a literary representation of what has been spoken orally within the Afro-American culture. In her works, she has allowed the written language to sound black, or more precisely, to suggest through its arrangement the way she hears it orally. What therefore makes her literary works important in terms of narrative structure is her focus on and inclusion of oral traditions. In fact, Morrison's The Bluest Eye addresses the question of how to tell its story in Black English using writing to suggest the presence of a dialect used most often orally. As Morrison succinctly puts it, she wants to produce in her novels the kind of language "(speakerly, aural, colloquial)" that relies "for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture ... to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Afro-American culture into a language worthy of the culture", i.e., the type of language that represents the black community and speaks for the psychological core of the slave ("Unspeakable Things Unspoken" 23). Thus Morrison's representation of the black race involves her in a meticulous observation of racial

differences in modes of expression and more precisely in language usage allowing her arrangement of its grammatical and syntactical features to sound more oral and confirming Morrison's use of West African and Afro-American oral tradition rather than a written tradition in her work in response to an Anglo-American tradition that privileges the written word over the spoken one.

In fact, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. reviews in *Figures in Black* the way African and Afro-American literature in the 18th, 19th and early 20th was constructed as a response to Anglo-European and Anglo-American philosophers who argued that Africans and Afro-Americans were incapable of writing literature because they were subhuman and were naturally considered inferior to whites. However, Afro-American writers from the slave narratives to the literature of the Reconstruction period to the Harlem Renaissance and up to the Modernism of Ralph Ellison to the Black Arts Movement have responded to the idea of blackness as a sign of inferiority, exclusion and absence. Morrison's role in that regard cannot be overlooked since her inclusion and privileging of those oral traditions that were seen as evidence of black cultural and intellectual backwardness challenge erroneous conceptions and baseless assumptions related to the inferiority and inarticulateness of the language of the slave in contrast to the superiority of the master's tongue and the articulateness of his language. A minister like Alexander Crummel who devoted two decades to missionary work in Liberia and who found black imitation of white civilization to hold the seeds of pan-African racial renaissance espoused such stereotypical conceptions as he dismissed African languages as inarticulate, inferior and primitive in both sound and sense. In fact, Henry Louis Gates Jr. sheds light on Crummel's low opinion of black people and his baseless dismissal of African languages as a sign of White power and authority over the silenced other who is excluded and marginalized (Gates "Authority, (White) Power, and the (Black) Critic" 72-101). However, Morrison resists the exclusion of the black race on grounds of the inferiority of its

language and its inability to write distinctly and coherently. She shows that blacks stand on equal footing with whites since they can write their slave narratives themselves. While the law forbade them to write in the past and they were rarely educated or considered educable or even fit for the writing vocation, Morrison allows them through the slave narratives to make their voice heard. In fact, Henry Louis Gates shows how racist the proponents of slavery were since they could use any pretext, even flawed grammar, to ascertain the inferiority of blacks and argue that they were incapable of reasoning, learning and writing. By lacking these essential skills that belong to the white race, they should therefore remain in their subordinate position as slaves (Gates; ed. *"Race," Writing, And Difference*).

Moreover, Gates discusses race as part of the discourse of the Other and draws attention to the way Beloved is marginalized as the Other on grounds of her gender, race and status. In fact, Beloved's experience during the Middle Passage when she is referred to by the White ship's crew as the black Other confirms that her blackness is a sign of absence, negation and exclusion within the Anglo-American culture as opposed to whiteness which is a sign of presence and inclusion within the same culture that exploits her. When Beloved is raped under the darkness of the ship's hull, her humanity is doubly negated just as her sexuality is doubly exploited. In fact, the darkness allows her rapists to call her 'beloved', a term of endearment that they would not address to her in broad daylight. Thus the word 'beloved' comes to mean different things to different people. While some people view Beloved as a ghost, others believe her to be the human personification of the dead baby ghost as an adult. Though she is initially an invisible force that can move chairs, rattle cabinets and frighten dogs and children, she eventually manifests herself as a ghostly apparition and then as a full-blooded human being. Finally, she grows to obese proportions until she explodes under the collective gaze of an indignant gathering of children.

In the light of the afore-mentioned discussion, Beloved can never be fully conceptualized because she is continually in a state of change, and at each stage of development, people view her differently. However, her ability to mean different things and to cause extreme reactions in so many people is the source of her strength. Though the name Beloved means 'dear to the heart' and 'dearly loved' to Sethe, the name comes to signify something quite different for Denver, Paul D and the small Afro-American community on whom she exhibits influence. For the members of her family and the black community, she embodies contradictory meanings. While she means sisterhood and friendship on the one hand, she too means fear and disruption, danger and destruction, and defeat and dismay. Hence she cannot be narrowed down to one specific thing, because according to Bakhtin no living word relates to its object in a *singular* way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic environment of the other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that it is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with the same environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape (*The Dialogic Imagination* 276).

Bakhtin goes on to explore the multiplicity and complexity of layers of meaning of any given word, defining *heteroglossia* as. The base condition governing the operation of meaning in any utterance. It is that which insures the primacy of context over text. At any given time, in any given place, there will be a set of conditions - social, historical, meteorological, physiological - that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different that it would have under any other conditions; all utterances are heteroglot in that they are functions of a matrix of forces practically impossible to recoup, and therefore impossible to resolve (428).

In fact, Bakhtin's most significant contribution to the study of language that he holds to be universally dialogic is that dialogized language gravitates toward reciprocity and communion. Hence any

individual utterance is suffused with other voices, gestures and social histories. Moreover, he asserts that the word, like the idea or thought is a "*live event*" and it "is similar to the *word*, with which it is dialogically united. Like the word, the idea wants to be heard, understood, and "answered" by other voices from other positions. Like the word, the idea is by nature dialogic" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 88). For the word or the idea to be "heard, understood and "answered"", it has to have an audience who interacts with it. In other words, listening and understanding are dependent upon casting one's story for another person just as Beloved as a fictional slave narrative seeks a wider audience to respond to it. For this reason, the process of anticipating the listener's response structures the meaning of the story as it is composed. Without the anticipation of this response, the story exists in a vacuum and hence it has no meaning. Bakhtin therefore makes the essential link between the audience and the anticipation of its response that gives meaning and shape to the story itself. Thus he sees response as "the activating principle" that creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other... The speaker strives to get a reading on his own word, and on his own conceptual system that determines this word, within the alien conceptual system of the understanding receiver (*The Dialogic Imagination* 282).

As Bakhtin acknowledges this essential interaction between the speaker who "constructs his own utterance on alien territory" and the listener's "apperceptive background" (282), it becomes obvious that the former's utterance is only meaningful in the presence of an introspective self-conscious audience. Hence Bakhtin asserts that the word or the idea comes into being at the "borderline of dialogically intersecting consciousness" (*Dostoevsky's Poetics* 91). In fact, this view of the inter-subjective experience of language leads Bakhtin to conceive of every utterance as territory shared since it involves the

relation between the self and other person or the audience outside the self. Accordingly, language is oriented toward the other or else it lacks purpose, which is primarily to be heard, understood and responded to. However, as has already been mentioned, Bakhtin makes it clear that the meaning of any utterance cannot be divorced from "a set of conditions ... that will insure that a word uttered in that place and at that time will have a meaning different than it would have under any other conditions" (*The Dialogic Imagination* 428).

In the light of Bakhtin's analysis of discourse in the novel and the ability of language, composed of words, to have different meanings in different situations, one can see the different implications of Beloved, seen by the White ship's crew as the black Other, i.e., the stereotypical vision of the black woman as a whore, and not as a human being, and who is therefore allowed to exist through the prism of racial signification determined by the White hegemony that victimizes her when the same name means differently to her family and the black community. But apart from the different significations of the word Beloved, what should be stressed here is that her journey across the Atlantic Ocean offers the chance for the exercise and display of White power over the weak Other as it also remains the space where Western political, economic and racial discourses continue to be articulated.

However, by recording this incident related to Beloved's victimization, Morrison directs a critique at the dominant political and cultural hegemony. In fact, her privileging of the African and Afro-American culture allows her to direct a critique too at Eurocentric views of the world. Moreover, it gives her the chance to take racial pride in the African oral tradition and also Black English that has retained much of the native grammar and syntax that has been imposed upon the vocabulary of the English language. A linguist like Sylvia Wallace Holten traces the roots of Black English back to Africa, rather than to geographical regions of the United States. Moreover, she asserts that, "current Black English was a direct

descendant of African ancestors" and she adds that, "American blacks would have a linguistic basis for their sense of racial pride" (Holten 30). What ties Holten's commentary on distinctive features that characterize the language of black people to Morrison's production of a language worthy of her culture and also representative of the inner thoughts of her slave characters is that both linguist and novelist perceive the crucial role played by the ancestor in the preservation of cultural identity and in opposition to what Morrison believes to be the "frightening" and "threatening" consequences of the "absence of ancestor" that leads to an inevitable fragmentation and huge destruction of the black race itself ("Rootedness" 343). While one could trace countless American words employed in slave narratives to African origins such as "Jazz", "rap", "juke", "gumbo" and "banjo" (though this investigation remains beyond the scope of this paper), Robert Hendrickson maintains that numerous words used in colloquial speech such as "tote", "goober" and "massa" can be traced to African origin. In fact, Hendrickson says that the word "massa" is a mispronunciation of the English word "master" or "chief" (Hendrickson, *American Talk* 134)). Going through Morrison's Beloved, one could cite numerous examples where double-negatives are used as in these sentences: "Ain't no nigger men" (p. 10); "I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife" (p.11); "I ain't nothing but in a hurry, miss" (p. 83); "But I couldn't get here no quicker" (p. 91); "but don't never tell me what to do. Don't never do that" (p. 76); "That don't hurt nobody" (p. 179); "Ain't no lice in my head, ma'am (p. 195); "I don't want to know nothing" (p. 234) and "I didn't want to be nowhere around her" (p. 234). While the above sentences are grammatically incorrect in standard English, Holten maintains that they are grammatically acceptable in African languages (88). Holten further argues that "Black English" cannot be studied in the absence of the essential socio-historical experience responsible for its emergence (48). This implies that the language of black people adjusted itself to reflect the Afro-American culture.

While the black dialect was once considered a quaint or humorous extra detail in certain novels written by white authors who have little understanding for the cultural pride of the black race as in Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (1940) and Thomas Dixon's The Clansman (1905), Holten argues that "the cultural attitude towards blacks changed" over the years and consequently "the literary production of black speech also changed" (59). The representation of black speech has evolved from being a mode of expression that confirms the inferiority of blacks who lack proper education or means of articulation of their thoughts as in Mitchell's Gone with the Wind and Dixon's The Clansman that represents blacks as animals, rather than human beings to become the vehicle through which cultural pride in African roots and identity are evident in Morrison's novels. In other words, one may compare how Mitchell or Dixon uses "Black English" to emphasize the linguistic idiosyncrasies of a black character's speech for humorous or dehumanizing effects to Morrison's same speech that delineates cultural and racial pride. Comparing their opposing methods of representation of "Black English" reveals their different perspectives toward the black race. Mitchell employs the black dialect to reinforce racist stereotypes about black folk as stupid and lazy so evident in her characterization of Prissy as an example. Dixon on the other hand goes further than Mitchell since he reveals his bias against millions of Africans who "inhabit this planet (though) they made no contribution to "human progress" whatsoever "during the past four thousand years" (Brown, Davis, Lee, *The Negro Caravan* 885). His hatred of the black race is obvious in attributing various animal characteristics in his description of their physical appearance. While Morrison's novels explore confrontation with white power in its bloodies forms where black people are victims of rape, burning and lynching, the opposite picture is filtered back to us in Dixon's novel. In his description of a rape scene, he draws a picture of four black "growling brutes" who attack two innocent white women as they find them alone in their homes. The assault is portrayed as a brutal act that confirms the degradation of black people to a level that puts them on

equal footing with the denizens of the jungle. The leader of the gang named Gus goes after his prey with "a single leap, black claws (that) clutch the soft, white throat" (Brown 323).

While Dixon does not include African words or syntactical structures to prove his seriousness in representing the black dialect, his primary intention is to expose blacks as lecherous, bestial and uncivilized; a judgment that the reader arrives at from a statement such as the following spoken by Gus during the rape scene: "You ties up de ole one (woman) while I 's grabs the pretty one" (Brown 323). Moreover, Dixon employs the black dialect to show that blacks are not qualified for any position of leadership on account of their ignorance and in-competency. This is quite evident in his characterization of Aleck, the new black sheriff who cannot read though he is in charge of running the town elections. When a Northern official asks him whether or not he is the sheriff of the county, he responds in the following manner: "Na-sah! Dat's er joke! I ain't nuttin' but er plain nigger" (Brown 349). By admitting that he is a 'plain nigger', he passes the judgment on himself that he is not fit for the position of the sheriff. His dialect therefore serves to degrade his social status and rob him of the dignity that becomes a man who fills a post of authority such as the sheriff. Thus Dixon exploits the black dialect to show that blacks accept their subservient position in the social strata. Ironically, they have decided for themselves that they are socially inferior to whites. Such conception of the self in derogatory terms entail that blacks can never be fit for anything but a position of servitude and meekness. Unlike Mitchell who employs the black dialect for humorous effects, Dixon manipulates it to promote his racist stereotypical views that blacks are lower forms of life and also reveal his disdain and utter contempt for the African race through his use of images that suggest their bestiality and savagery.

Comparing the rape scene in Dixon's novel with a scene in Mitchell's novel where the Yankee are advancing to show their

different usage of "Black English", it becomes evident that Mitchell uses it to depict Prissy as hysterical, cowardly and naive in contrast with white folk who are serene and brave. This antithetical response to the approach of the Yankee is obvious in the following extract:

> *"Dey's fightin' at Jonesboro, Miss Scarlett! Dey say our Gempmums is gittin' beat. Oh, Gawd, Miss Scarlett! Whut'll happen ter Maw an' Poke? Oh, Gawd, Miss Scarlett! Whut'll happen ter us effen de Yankees gits hyah? Oh, Gawd" - Scarlett clapped a hand over the blubbery mouth, "For God's sake, hush" (Mitchell 351).*

While one may look at the above excerpt as one example that draws a binary opposition between two different cultural discourses that reinforce the superiority, dominance and ascendancy of the white people whose speech is symbolic of their powerful articulation of words and their sense of cultural pride that drives them to silence the weak 'other' on the one side and the inferiority, subjugation and utter weakness of the black people whose speech is symbolic of their helpless and lack of resolution on the other, Mitchell depicts blacks as scared of the very Yankee soldiers who are struggling for their freedom. Instead of showing that they welcome them as harbingers of the lantern of liberty that paves the path for them to follow suit, Mitchell deliberately chooses not to portray them in this positive light. Thus Prissy voices her concern over the advent of the Yankees: "Ah, skeered! De Yankees is comin'! Oh, Miss Scarlett, dey'all kill us all! De'll run dey baynits in our stummicks!" (365). While Mitchell depicts blacks as humorous objects and their speech as inarticulate and amusing, the picture that she draws of black people in the above extract is that they are contented with their slavery, as they adored the southern plantations in which they labored like machines. Moreover, they loathed the very force that might wrench them from their enslaved conditions; and by so doing she distorts facts and draws the curtain over Morrison's "unspeakable thoughts unspoken" (199 in Beloved). However, the fictional slave narrative in Beloved is the

vehicle through which Morrison creates a voice which is never heard, the voice that records the oppression of slavery and the resistance of blacks to their condition. The volumes spoken and written by slaves related to their deplorable conditions therefore contribute to the creation of a new American literature that confirms the heinous crimes committed during the era of slavery in the United States and reveals the profound suffering of blacks during that period of time. Morrison therefore exposes the viciousness, inhumanity and cruelty of the white oppressor as she supplies enough evidence to his discredit throughout her fictional slave narrative.

One of these evidences is repeatedly given by Sethe particularly at the moment her slave-catcher comes to reclaim her and return her to slavery. As she divulges the catastrophic events that have caused her to run to Paul D early on in the novel, she tells him that two white boys have assaulted her. After bringing her down on her knees, one "took her milk" (i.e., sucked her breast, and then both boys "used cowhide on (her)" and they beat her though she was "pregnant" (16-17). Not only does the act confirm the violence of the white people against the oppressed 'other' across history, but also it directs a vehement attack on the dominant culture, which is largely responsible for the deteriorating and appalling social conditions of the black community. Hence Morrison does not merely reveal the extent of the emotional fallout of this unforgivable atrocity on Sethe who is powerless to break away psychologically from slavery, but also her long list of atrocities committed by slaveholders against slaves is staggering. The following excerpt shows the utter desolation and complete devastation left behind such unspeakable crimes committed by white people against humanity at large in the year 1874 when they (i.e., whitefolks) were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken (180).

As Stamp Paid ponders over the heinous catalogue of crimes of the above nature, he picks up a 'red ribbon' that he comes across the Ohio River "knotted around a curl of wet wooly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp. He untied the ribbon and put it in his pocket, dropped the curl in the weeds" (180). Though the ribbon belongs to one dead girl, it binds the entire Afro-American community literally and metaphorically together. Soon afterwards, Stamp overhears the cries coming from "the people of the broken necks" and envisages "fire-cooked blood and black girls who had lost their ribbons" (181). Stamp's reflection on the heart-breaking scene cannot be divorced from the collective experience of other black characters in the novel of the unforgettable horrors of slavery. Early on in the novel, Paul D, as an example, witnessed savage treatment when "they (i.e., slaveholders) fastened the iron around his ankles and clamped the wrists as well" and then he was pushed into a "cage (that) opened into three walls and a roof of scrap lumber and red dirt" (106). However, he was not alone in his arduous trip to the brutal prison for "trying to kill Brandywine, the man schoolteacher sold him to". (106). He and other forty-six convicts were chained in one long line on their way from Kentucky through Virginia and onto Georgia: "On their own, they traveled. Nothing could stop them or get their attention. They would not hold his penis to urinate or a spoon to scoop lumps of lima beans into his mouth" (107). Not only were the convicts starved to death, but also they were destined for the worst kind of torture yet to come upon arrival to an underground cell that housed them like beasts though Paul D found solace in mourning his captivity in song.

What therefore ties the scene in which we get a glimpse of Paul D's suffering under the yoke of bondage to Stamp Paid's recollection of the shocking atrocities committed against the black people is that both scenes deepen the feeling of injustice that the history of slavery engenders in the Afro-American community that can never forget how much it has been oppressed, exploited and mistreated by the white

people. Meditating on the above ribbon scene, Stamp cannot ward off the disastrous consequences of the appalling experience that millions of slaves have been through as he sits down "by a fence" only to express his utter shock at the horrific crimes perpetrated by the white people who have lost their basic humanity since their hearts have been ossified. Thus he asks in amazement: "What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?" (180). Perhaps the answer is given by Baby Suggs whose grim thoughts at her rattle-hour confirm how black people view their oppressors. Unlike Mitchell's Prissy who is naive and coward enough to loathe the very idea of freedom, Baby Suggs attributes all the evil in the world to white people who have victimized slaves and robbed them of their essential humanity. In fact, she squeezes her entire experience acquired through "her sixty years (as) a slave and ten years (as a) free" woman in the following succinct words: "that there was no bad luck in the world but white-people. "They don't know when to stop"" (104). Baby Suggs's attitude toward white people is echoed by Guitar in *Song of Solomon* when he says to Milkman, "White people are unnatural. As a race they are unnatural ... They know they are unnatural. Their writers and artists have been saying it for years. Telling them they are unnatural, telling them they are depraved... The disease they have is in their blood, in the structure of their chromosomes... They killed us first and then tried to get some scientific proof about why we should die" (156-57 in *Song*).

Baby Suggs's concise words, like Guitar's, are replete with meaning since they sum up the attitude of the whole Afro-American community toward their oppressors. In other words, Baby Suggs's experience, similar to Beloved's in the Middle Passage is representative of a much larger experience of the entire Afro-American community. Like the ribbon that Stamp comes across in the Ohio River and which reminds him of the loss and death of thousands of young black girls when one would normally think of a ribbon as a token of love, affection and care for them, Baby Suggs's condensed words bring an entire nation that has suffered tremendously on

account of slavery into unity. Like Beloved's experience that speaks for the hardship that the slaves endured during their journey from Africa to America, Baby Suggs's farewell speech epitomizes what the slaves think of the years of pain and anguish they have been subjected to in the south. Her words are therefore a constant reminder to other characters like Sethe who comes "to believe every one of Baby Suggs's last words" (188) as well as to subsequent generations of the horrors of slavery and its inevitable impact on the national psyche just as Beloved's return from the dead is a constant reminder to Sethe of her guilt and remorse over the recollection of the past.

While Beloved presses Sethe for a convincing answer to her murder, the entire Afro-American community ostracizes Sethe on account of her inexplicable crime. However, Beloved's return allows her the chance to tell a story of universal significance. According to Fredric Jameson, allegory in the novel depicts personal stories to convey the struggle of nation building ("Third-World Literature" 66-70). Applying Jameson's discussion of the two levels of allegory: the personal and the national to Morrison's Beloved, we may say through Sethe's encounter with the past embodied in Beloved, Morrison finds the appropriate language that conveys the slave narrative and speaks for a much wider experience than the merely personal one. While killing one's own children is regarded as an act of violence that one strongly disapproves of, Sethe attempts to justify it as an act of resistance or opposition to the intrusion of the white people into the lives of blacks. When the slaveholders come to take her and her children back into slavery, she decides to take "and put (her) babies where they'd be safe" since "it's (her) job to know what is and to keep them away from what (she) know(s) is terrible" (164-5). Killing her daughter is therefore her way of saving her from the exploitation, degradation and sexual victimization Beloved would have endured had her life been spared. As Keenan argues, at that moment, Sethe was unable to separate the "personal and the political" (62). Moreover, she explains to her dead daughter's ghost that she had no choice but

kill her because "if I hadn't killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her". So "she had to be safe and I put her where she would be" (200). By finding a way to relate these memories to Beloved and through Denver who reaches out to the community to tell them Sethe's story and bring them to terms with past memories about slavery, the women of the community unite to pray for Sethe. Together, they raise the specter of the Clearing as they exorcise the demon of Sethe's memory. The exorcism of Beloved frees the present from the burden of the past and establishes a shared experience the binds the community together and heals the divisions within it. As each woman who comes to rescue Sethe recognizes her own ghost in Beloved, the first thing that "all thirty (women who) arrived at 124 saw "was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves" (258). In other words, their shared emotions elicit a shared memory of the day on which Sethe killed Beloved.

Though Beloved eventually disappears as a bodily presence, merging into the landscape behind 124 Bluestone Road: "Down the stream in back of 124 her footprints come and go, come and go. They are so familiar.... By and by all trace is gone" (275), what remains behind is the collective strength of the black community to confront the worst of memories produced by slavery. Evoking Beloved is therefore the necessary means for the members of the community to remember the past from which they have fled since Beloved is the living embodiment of slavery's untold past. Hence the black community has to confront the unspeakable and unspoken images associated with the era of slavery and this is exactly what Morrison accomplishes in her novel where the "unburied" is brought back to "living life" (Angelo 120). While the novel begins with Beloved's forceful intrusion into the lives of Sethe and Denver, it ends with Beloved's departure, but not before her mother is integrated into the black community that shunned her right at the start and also not before the entire community, and not just her mother, comes to terms with Sethe's memories of the past through her confrontation with it in the

figure of Beloved. Moreover, the house at 124 Bluestone Road begins as a "spiteful" thing (3) when it is under a "powerful spell" (4) and progresses to the loud spot that Stamp Paid hears from the road, and subdues into the quiet home at the end once the demon of Sethe's memory is exorcised. While Beloved most clearly connects with Sethe's infanticide, she represents Sethe's buried past or more generally the entire history of slavery. Her uncontrollable rage and longing for re-union stand for the rage and desire of thousands and thousands of children who were oppressed in an alien culture and who suffered the consequences of their separations from their mothers. As Susan Comfort argues, the name Beloved does not only evoke "the dead child, (and) not only those who died in the Middle Passage, but also the living-American community" (Comfort 122). Beloved therefore does not merely evoke the ancestral generations lost in the Diaspora, but as Barbara Christian maintains, she "represents the sustenance of both the past and the present, and it becomes the future, not only for an individual family but also for the group as a whole" (Christian 369).

While Morrison writes Beloved "in direct response to the atrocities of slavery and its aftermath" (Faris, "Scheherazade's Children" 180), her Song of Solomon explores the quest for cultural identity and dramatizes the clash between white and black people in a world characterized by violence and swept by hatred and revenge. Though Morrison in Beloved brings back to life the unspeakable and unspoken images associated with the history of slavery through Sethe's confrontation with Beloved, she sheds light on parts of the history of the United States, particularly the history of the Afro-American community, its experience and struggle for justice and recognition through the Dead family narratives. Generally speaking, the history of Afro-Americans living in the United States and their encounter with white people is tinged with tension and clash that dates back to the years of their enslavement in the southern plantations. With the abolition of slavery after the Civil War (1861-1865), the United States

witnessed the gradual transformation from being an agricultural into an industrial nation. As the country grew richer due to the discovery of oil and other natural resources and minerals, chances for success were more favorable in the Northern States while the Afro-American community remained at an economic disadvantage in the Southern States due to the fact that race played its vital role in excluding a certain category of society from the right to equal opportunities to live a better life. This brief historical background is essential for understanding the cultural, economic and political milieu to Morrison's Song of Solomon. Moreover, it helps us understand how Morrison has created characters who are the product of Western capitalism since they fervently believe in the American dream and consequently, they view success in financial terms. The impact of white mainstream culture and ideology reflects in a character like Macon Dead who adopts the Western value system, embodies patriarchal ideals and attempts to maintain tight control over other characters through violence and materialism. Rather than directing his frustration and fury at the white men who left his own father's corpse "twitching in the dirt ... for five nights on a split-rail fence cradling a shotgun" (51), Macon Dead turns toward his family and his own people to vent his anger and wreck his vengeance. Though he marries the wealthiest black woman in town, his marriage to Ruth is more like a financial investment that moves him one step further up the ladder of success rather than a sacred bond that unites two hearts together. Early in the novel, Ruth provides her version of events as she depicts her strained marital relationship with Macon in the following extract: We had a terrible quarrel. He threatened to kill me. I threatened to go to the police about what he had done to my father. We did neither. I guess my father's money was more important to him than the satisfaction of killing me. And I would have happily died except for my babies. But he did move into another room and that's the way things stayed until I couldn't stand it anymore. Until I thought I'd really die if I had to live that way. With nobody touching me, or even

looking as though they'd like to touch me... I was twenty years old when (Macon) stopped sleeping in the bed with me (125).

When the situation became unbearable, Ruth sought Pilate's (i.e., Macon's sister) assistance who "gave (her) funny things to do. And some greenish-gray grass-looking stuff to put in his food" so that Macon "came to (her) for four days. He even came home from his office in the middle of the day to be with (her)" (125). However, when Macon discovered that she was pregnant, "he immediately suspected Pilate and he told (Ruth) to get rid of the baby" (125). It is ironic that Macon was thinking of killing his would be future heir who owes his aunt a great debt for his survival. Later on, Ruth reminds her son Milkman that Pilate "saved (her) life). And yours, Macon. She saved yours too. She watched you like you were her own. Until your father threw her out" (126).

It is therefore obvious that Macon has never loved his wife. In fact, he reveals to his son, Milkman, that "I married your mother in 1917. She was sixteen, living alone with her father. I can't tell you I was in love with her. People didn't require that as much as they do" (70). As the years go by, love between them is reduced to intense sensuality and mere physical pleasure when "all of his (i.e., Macon's) foreplay was untying, unclasping, unbuckling the snaps and strings of what must have been the most beautiful, the most delicate, the whitest and softest underwear on earth" (16). What Morrison therefore shows in her novel is that the wealth that Macon Dead accumulates all his life long and the prominent social position that he is after do not fulfill the aspirations of man nor do they fill the void within. That void can only be filled up with genuine emotions, care and affection for one's family, neighbors, tenants and humanity at large. But his desire for wealth and power ultimately leads to alienation, loneliness and frustration. Moreover, it makes him more dependent on violent and vicious means in protecting the distance that exists between him and Ruth and also in asserting a degree of power over the black

community that he has to interact with. In the words of Valerie's Smith, The avid materialism and rugged individualism that made Macon financially successful have extracted their price from him in other ways, however. Macon has come to believe that money, property and keys are what is real in the word; his financial success has thus cost him his capacity for communication and emotion (Smith 726).

In the course of the novel, Macon emerges as a terrifying figure who controls Ruth and prevents her and his daughters from doing anything without his prior approval under the illusion that he can create a happy family and a healthy atmosphere when he acts in such a domineering manner. His domination over women results from his obsession with power. Thus the omniscient narrator informs us that Macon had kept each member of his family awkward with fear. His hatred of his wife glittered and sparked in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash, dulling their buttery complexions and choking the lilt out of what should have been girlish voices... The way he mangled their grace, wit, and self-esteem was the single excitement of their days.... and his wife, Ruth, began her days stunned into stillness by her husband's contempt and ended them wholly animated by it (10-11).

Not only does Macon resort to verbal abuse and brute strength to control Ruth and instill fear in her, but also he acts in this brutal and unnatural way toward his tenants as well. His rude and violent treatment of others stems out of his conviction that he can own them just as he can own property. After all, his soundest advice to his son Milkman after he warns him against his sister Pilate whom he compares to a snake is that there is "one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (55).

Macon therefore looks at other people as mere objects that add to the collection of wealth that he values above any other consideration. Not only does he reveal a materialistic vision of the world, but also he justifies his obsession to own things on grounds that his father was once owned as a 'slave' back in '1869' (53). Moreover, he shows no compassion whatsoever in treating his tenants. What really matters to him is the rent money that must be paid in time or else penniless tenants like Guitar Bain's grandmother will suffer eviction. While he thinks that owning houses and possessing wealth give him the security and assurance he needs, he realizes as he looks at his own houses from a distance that they do not belong to him. In fact, the houses that he passes by at night remind him of his own emptiness and loneliness though he is confident of their ownership that he verifies as he goes through account books during the day. Commenting on the utter meaningless of his material life, the omniscient narrator says:

> *Scattered here and there, his houses stretched up eyond him like squat ghosts with hooded eyes. He didn't like to look at them in this light. During the day they were reassuring to see; now they did not seem to belong to him at all -- in fact he felt as though the houses were in league with one another to make him feel like an outsider, the property-less, landless wanderer (27).*

The feeling of estrangement that Macon experiences confirms his exclusion from the rich world that he strives to join and be part of in his blind pursuit of affluence at the expense of neglecting familial ties and brotherly connections. No matter how hard he labors to be at the center of the materialistic world that measures the value of everything in terms of financial profit and loss, he will always remain an outsider by virtue of his race and his late arrival at the economic arena that has been controlled for long by the white man. Commenting on Macon's complex psychology and his role in the novel, Anne Adams says:

> *Having achieved a considerable amount of material success, holding an outwardly comfortable middle-class position, Macon*

> *maintains and increases his status by exploiting the poorer blacks who depend upon him. This shows him to be a classic example of the oppressed adopting the means of the oppressor. The prevalent atmosphere in the house is one of hatred, criticism, and bullying, nipping in the bud any sign of real life (Adams 195).*

While Adams attributes Macon's exploitation of the un-privileged category of society to the adoption of "the white middle-class model and value system" and its obvious impact on the Dead family, she goes on to say that "black people's behavior is "aberrant" because they are responding to oppression by the white world (195).

In order to understand how Macon's "aberrant" behavior is a counter-response to the oppression of the white world, we should look more closely at the implications of one of the most singular moments in Macon's entire life that has had tremendous bearing on changing his perception and altering his vision and value system, and that is the moment his father was assassinated. While one would expect such tragic incident to stir emotions and cause a turmoil deep within to the extent that Macon would instinctively be drawn to his ancestral heritage that he is obliged to search for to derive moral strength from it rather than be allured by the corrupt Western monetary system, the narrator writes:

> *The numbness that had settled on him when he saw the man he loved and admired fall off the fence; something wild ran through him when he watched the body twitching in the dirt. His father had sat for five nights on a split-rail fence cradling a shotgun and in the end died protecting his property (50-51).*

What is significant in the excerpt above is that Macon's father was killed in protection of his property; i.e., his farm known as *Lincoln's Heaven*, named after Abraham Lincoln, the first president of the United States. Choosing his name in particular is not without its significance since he stands for the ideals that the American

constitution advocates. However, the act of murder committed by the white people against Macon's father is a heinous crime that violates, if not demolishes, the very foundations upon which the ideals of equality, justice, freedom and democracy embodied in the American Declaration of Independence rests. In other words, it goes against the very spirit that America preaches and it portends that violence and bloodshed are more than likely going to strain the apparent harmonious relationship between different ethnic groups living in the 'melting pot' of the United States. Through the Dead family narrative, Morrison therefore brings to the surface the hostility, tension and conflict that have always brewed beneath a deceptively calm surface between the black and white people reflected in the above scene where Macon's father was ruthlessly murdered. Moreover, Macon's father's *Lincoln Heaven* is a name indicative of its edenic nature where one enjoys the serenity and tranquility of the natural world teemed with animals that roam freely in the wilderness, rivers that overflow with fish and singing birds that fill up the blue sky.

Such a description that fits *Lincoln's Heaven* bears a striking resemblance to Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, a landscape that offers man the chance to live close to nature and appreciate the beauty of the wilderness once he disentangles himself from worldly preoccupations and worries and retreats to the pastoral world that gives him peace of mind and brings him closer to understanding the essence of life and the meaning of his existence through meditation and reflection. In that farm that symbolizes America as an edenic paradise which has offered the new Adam, i.e., the early settlers and subsequent immigrants to the United States with new opportunities, an open landscape and a spacious wilderness through which they traversed to explore its unfathomable riches and hidden treasures, Macon used to work along with his father ever since his prime, and more specifically "from the time (he) was four or five" (51). In fact, such was the African custom that handed down shared responsibilities among family members particularly father and son to remind them of

their mutual obligations and keep the significance of tradition and roots alive in the memory of future generations. Thus Macon relates to his son Milkman what life was like then when he and his father enjoyed moments of happiness living like a close family strongly linked to its roots and proudly tied to its property; 'the homeplace' of Bell Hooks referred to early in the paper that the black people turn to for moral and ethical guidance so that they derive the sense of security and assurance that they have a stable center that shelters them in the face of the imminent cultural displacement that haunts them and threatens their very existence. Thus Macon says to Milkman:

> *It was a little bit a place. But it looked big to me then. I know now it must a been a little bit a place, maybe a hundred and fifty acres. We tilled fifty. About eighty of it was wood. Must of been a fortune in oak and pine; maybe that's what they wanted- the lumber, the oak and the pine. We had a pond that was four acres. And a stream, full of fish... Prettiest mountain you ever saw, Montour Ridge... We had a four-stall hog pen. The big barn was forty feet by a hundred and forty--hip-roofed too. And all around in the mountains was deer and wild turkey. You ain't tasted nothing till you taste wild turkey the way Papa cooked it. ... And we had fruit trees. Apple, cherry (51).*

From Macon's recollection of such pleasant memories when his father was alive, one can see that the Dead family enjoyed a comfortable and luxurious lifestyle where they lived in seclusion from the rest of the world feeling self-sufficient. Moreover, they blended harmoniously with their natural surrounding. What therefore united them was the cozy atmosphere created by Macon's affectionate and loving father who cared for them so much that he cooked the most delicious turkey for them; a chore that one would assign to women who remain by the hearth and care for children in the light of the Afro-American male hegemony that advocates the idea of the division of labor based on different gender roles. But by playing the role of the dexterous cook in the house, Macon's father turns upside down the very ideology embraced by Afro-American middle class that imitates

and accepts the cultural, social and ethical values of the white middle class. In fact, by doing so (i.e., by playing the role of the cook in the house), he connects himself to an Afro-American tradition that Milkman will get to know about during the course of his search for the gold, i.e., Pilate's inheritance, that his father encourages him to go out and look for it "for both of us. Please get it, son. Get the gold" (172). However, eventually his search for the gold becomes his own search for his identity and roots. His search therefore allows him the chance to know more about his ancestors, particularly about his grandfather who had a special skill in plowing the field. Though Milkman's father drew a positive image of his father as an energetic, compassionate and hard-working man who did not mind attending to household chores, Milkman discovers what his grandfather is like from the oral reports that he hears from the people who know him and also know other family members. By relying on the oral, rather than written, tradition which according to Gay Wilentz is "evident both in language and the structure of her novel", Morrison formulates a discourse with an "afrocentric worldview" (62) rather than a discourse that adopts the views of the "selective tradition" that Raymond Williams talks about in conjunction with the dominant political hegemonies that Morrison opposes. What Milkman eventually finds out from the oral reports which relate the Dead family history is that Macon Dead (i.e., his grandfather) was the farmer they wanted to be, the clever irrigator, the peach-tree grower, the hog slaughterer, the wild-turkey roaster, the man who could plow forty in no time flat and sing like an angel while he did it (235).

The picture that the men who knew his grandfather draw of him bears a striking resemblance to the early picture that Macon draws of his father for his son Milkman with the significant difference that Macon did not grasp the full meaning behind his father's murder. But this meaning was clear for Milkman who discovered his heritage and himself when he realized that Macon Dead's death (i.e., his grandfather's death) "it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own

dying, even though they were boys at the time" (235). Milkman therefore learns the meaning of his grandfather's death that his father fails to learn early on in the novel. Morrison emphatically expresses this idea when she says, "When you kill the ancestor you kill yourself" ("Rootedness" 344). It is therefore ironic that Macon is oblivious to the implications of this succinct and yet meaningful statement though he tells Milkman early in the novel that it "took (his father) sixteen years to get that farm to where it was paying" (53). But because he could not read, the white men "tricked him. He signed something. I don't know what, and they told him they owned the property" (53). His father was therefore excessively cheated and mercilessly victimized by the white oppressor who invented ingenious methods to rob the old man of his wealth. While one would expect Macon to turn in revenge against his real oppressor, he turns against his own people once he succumbs to Western values.

Unfortunately, as Macon is allured by the Western lifestyle where money becomes the measuring yardstick of happiness and success, he turns his back to the serene lifestyle that gave him though momentarily some peace of mind over its recollections to his son Milkman above. Moreover, the above excerpt describes a gluttonous capitalist society so thirsty after wealth and prosperity to the extent that it devastates the beauty of the natural world and poses a threat to the survival of nature itself. Though Macon does not explicitly tell us who 'they' are, the reference is clearly to capitalist expansions that ruined the beauty of the countryside and turned it into a lumber trade market. Now that the value of *Lincoln's Heaven* is so conspicuous, the white people can only gain access to it by getting rid of its rightful owner through foul means. The act of killing is therefore the indispensable vehicle through which the property that the Dead family cherished so much falls into their hands to exploit it in a way that brings them wealth. Murdering Macon's father to get his property therefore crystallizes the degree of oppression that the white people have exercised in their dealings with the black community. The act

does not merely get rid of an individual but its impact is felt on the entire family. After all, the Dead family loses the sense of connection and warm familial ties immediately after the old man is shot off his fence. Moreover, shooting him off the fence is a deliberate act that throws him out of his own personal belongings and denies his right to the ownership of his own land somehow. What we therefore see through the rest of the novel is the impact of this initial dispersal of the Dead family brought about by Macon's father's death. In other words, they (i.e., Macon and Pilate) suffer another Diaspora that pushes Macon to assimilate himself into the American mainstream culture while his sister is adamant in her search for family connections and reunion with her heritage.

The sharp contrast between Macon's and Pilate's perspectives initiated by their antithetical responses to their father's murder accounts for their divergent and opposing lifestyles that they pursue from that significant historical moment onwards. While Macon becomes a strong advocate of American capitalism so evident in his thirst for gold and pursuit of power on the one hand, Pilate favors a simple and pastoral life, very much like the one that Macon describes for Milkman when his grandfather owned *Lincoln's Heaven*. What we therefore observe through Macon's and Pilate's opposed lifestyles is the continuous tension between urban life that entangles man in a hot pursuit of materialistic needs and spurs him to fulfill an instinctive desire for the acquisition of wealth on the one hand and rural life in which he lives close to nature and cares for the fulfillment of basic physical desires subordinated to spiritual needs on the other hand. In other words, through their different lifestyles, the capitalist and pastoral ideologies are at war with each other. Perhaps the two following quotes that assess the characters of Macon and Pilate illustrate the stark difference between them. Bonnie Barthold writes:

> *For Macon Dead, time is money, and the answer to temporal dispossession is the dispossession of others: he literally evicts*

> *Guitar Bain's penniless grandmother, and tells Milkman to own things.... he holds a philosophy equivalent to spiritual death: "Owing, building, acquiring -- that was his life, his future, his present, and all the history he knew" (Barthold 304).*

In contrast to Macon, Joyce Ann Joyce describes Pilate as follows:

> *Unsullied by the urban environment in which she settles to raise her granddaughter, Pilate maintains a physical and spiritual identity with her rural and southern past that isolates her from the collective chaos and insensitivity of city life (Joyce 187).*

Pilate is therefore the exact opposite of Macon. While he turns his back to the past and adopts a Western lifestyle, Pilate exemplifies her strong sense of heritage and great respect for the past. This becomes very clear in their different responses to their father's ghost. Unlike Macon who does not accept the reality of his father's ghost and tells Pilate "that the things we was scared of wasn't real" (41), Pilate acknowledges her father's return and she continues to communicate with him to ascertain her connection with the past: "But most important, she paid close attention to her mentor - the father who appeared before her sometimes and told her things" (150). Even during her travels around the country, her father exhorts her to "Sing. Sing" and she acts upon his instructions to relieve "her gloom" (147). And even at her father's request, she returns to collect the bones "what was left of the man she and Macon had murdered" even though she did not strike a blow at him (147). However, her mere presence with Macon holds her accountable for a past deed. Pilate's communication with her ancestors represented by the spirit of her father therefore serves to give her ethical guidance denied to Macon by virtue of his involvement in a different mode of existence that takes him away from his past and tradition.

It is unfortunate that Macon does not learn the lesson that he should have derived from his father's murder. Rather than begin

searching for his past or advise Milkman to go on a quest for cultural identity, he adopts the Western lifestyle and becomes obsessed with the concept of ownership that he wants his son to value highly. From that moment on, he thinks that he can enter the economic arena and be on equal footing with the white people who run the capitalist system. In his pursuit of success and wealth, it is indispensable for him to adopt the values, outlooks, behavior and attitude of the mainstream culture as a way to gain admission and be more acceptable to the white dominant hegemonies in the United States. But it is ironic that Macon is refused admission into the system that he is so eager to participate in on ground of his race. Though Macon was familiar with the inns and outs of business since he had time to think, to plan, to visit the bank men, to read the public notices, auctions, to find out what plots were going for taxes, unclaimed heirs' property, where roads were being built, what supermarkets, schools; and who was trying to sell what to the government for the housing projects that were going to be built. The quickie townlets that were springing up around war plants. He knew as a Negro he wasn't going to get a big slice of the pie. But there were properties nobody wanted yet, or little edges of property somebody didn't want Jews to have, or Catholics to have, or properties nobody knew were of any value yet (63).

What is inferred from the excerpt above is that certain categories of people are denied equal opportunities because of their religion or race no matter how hard they strive to prove their worthiness. Their attempt to go up the social ladder to receive recognition, as Homi Bhabha argues, is motivated by "an interdictory desire" to be like the white man (*Location of Culture* 89). However, the black man's feeling of inadequacy in addition to his psychological imbalance hamper his endeavor to mimic the white man. Moreover, they add to his frustration and eventually confirm his lack of freedom because his desire to break the artificial barriers that make social distinctions among people based on their color and gender have been created by the white man. Consequently, Macon could never fill up a position

that has already been decided to belong to the white man in the free market system because the black race has always existed on the margins. In fact, Macon knows that he is excluded from the competition because "discriminatory identities constructed across traditional cultural norms and classifications" are biased against and unfair to the black man who has no choice but play a 'liminal' role in the white world all around him (Bhabha 90) though he plays the role of a patriarchal figure in the black world that he controls through sheer force and violence.

In fact, the power that he exerts over his family and other fellow blacks is parallel to the power that the whites exercise over blacks to keep them under subjugation. This unending vicious circle of violence between whites and blacks is manifest in acts of reprisal and retaliation committed against innocent white victims just because the oppressors (i.e., other white people) are embroiled in acts of violence against black people. Guitar who is haunted by the image of his father sliced in half by a huge saw at the lumber mill where he worked to chop off the lumber that the white people got from Macon's *Lincoln's Heaven* to add more to their exploitation of the black people, joins the Seven Days, a society determined upon applying the law of equality upon white people who commit acts of violence upon the black people. Thus he explains to Milkman how the Seven Days, "a society ... made up of a few men who are willing to take some risks" (154) reacts in case it discovers a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If a Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder. If they can (154-55).

It therefore becomes evident that the unnatural and aberrant behavior of the black community comes to counter-balance the oppression that many blacks are subject to by the white people.

Morrison's novel therefore delineates the struggles of the black community as it tries to survive in a country run by whites where the resort to violence comes as a natural response to white oppression. But violence does not solve problems or wipes out rancor. On the contrary, it creates more violence that eventually turns against the black community itself. This is quite evident in the final scene where Milkman and Guitar, who are supposed to be friends, engage in a scuffle over a financial treasure that eludes them resulting in killing Milkman's aunt, Pilate. However, before she dies, she asks Milkman to "sing a little somethin for (her)" (335). Though we are not certain whether Milkman will survive or die after his last leap toward Guitar, this piece of information is insignificant because what really matters is that by the end of the novel, Milkman has learnt the lesson that his father has failed to learn, and that is, his respect for the past and his connection to his ancestors represented by his great-grand-father, Solomon, who could fly.

In fact, Pilate's role in bringing Milkman to terms with his past heritage is instrumental. What is striking is that she is shot after her return to her 'homeplace' in the South in the company of Milkman. Just as she has always blended well with the natural environment during the course of her travels, she experiences feelings of oneness with the black community that she has always been part of too. Thus the omniscient narrator tells us what her return with Milkman to Shalimar signifies:

> *Pilate blended into the population like a stick of butter in a churn. They (i.e., Milkman and Pilate) stayed with Omar's family, and on the second and last evening, Milkman and Pilate walked up the road to the path that led to Soloman's Leap. It was the higher of the two outcropings of rock... Pilate laid the bones carefully into the small grave. Milkman heaped dirt over them and packed it down with the back of his shovel (p. 335).*

By experiencing brotherly connection with the people of their hometown, Milkman learns how to value love above social prestige and material wealth. In fact, Pilate's death infuses him with a whole new desire to love his own people and it reintegrates him into the community where he belongs. In other words, what he learns from his aunt Pilate is the exact opposite of what his father has been instilling in his mind to own things and think of family business as the most important thing in life. Though his father has forbidden him to go anywhere near Pilate whom he compares to a snake, his fear of her is motivated by his suspicion that she will influence Milkman in a way that he does not want, and that is, allow him to find a different meaning of life and discover happiness outside the realm that his father thinks it is confined within its limits. Upon his return to Shalimar in the company of Pilate, Milkman discovers happiness that lies in strong bonds with his town people and high regard for his ancestors' heritage. In fact, Milkman's early experience at Pilate's house exposes him to a different environment from his father's. It is inside Pilate's cozy home that he visits once that he discovers the meaning of love and compassion. There he was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of him (47).

It is therefore obvious that Pilate introduces Milkman to a different way of life that stands at a polar opposite to his father's. Moreover, she is instrumental in reconciling him to his ancestral past. The fact that Milkman attends the above sacrament in which Pilate establishes an eternal bond with her father and allows her nephew to pay homage to his grandfather at his native place of origin is evidence of their tremendous reverence for the past and their strong sense of connection with it. Now that Milkman has learnt the meaning of the true search for his inheritance, he, in the words of Valerie Smith discovers his capacity for emotional expansiveness and learns to perceive the passage of time as a cyclical process. When he incorporates both his familial and his personal history into his sense of the present, he

repairs his feelings of fragmentation and comprehends for the first time the coherence of his own life (Smith 727).

Though Milkman begins his journey in search for the gold, he ends up discovering a whole new value in life and learning through oral tradition more about family history, including his grandfather's real name, Jake, who according to the community historian, Susan Byrd, "was one of those flying African children ... one of Solomon's children" (321). At one particular instance during his journey into the woods, Milkman ventures out on a hunt one night with the men of Shalimar with "only a low swinging lamp marking his path" (273). Milkman goes on until he is too exhausted to move any further. Thus he sits by himself Under the moon, on the ground alone, with not even the sound of baying dogs to remind him that he was with other people. ... There was nothing here to help him -- not his money, his car, his father's reputation, his suit, or his shoes. His watch and his two hundred dollars would be of no help here, where all a man had was what he was born with, or had learned to use (277).

This is a turning point in Milkman's journey where his early obsession with the acquisition of gold has given way to newfound revelations, which have far-reaching consequences than mere collection of material wealth. Instead of the gold, he finds something which is more precious in the genuine respect for his people and their past history and in strong affection that ties him to a long-lasting tradition. Moreover, Milkman experiences a major shift in consciousness when he reaches the deepest and darkest aspects of the self so as to gain a better perception of the world and a better understanding of his relationship with his past. It is only through connecting Milkman to his family, community and Afro-American culture and reconciling him with his ancestral past that he can discover a whole new value in life thus liberating himself from the bondage to his father's way of life and his own narrow-minded attitudes that are largely influenced by his father's way of thinking. As

Milkman chooses to connect himself to his roots, he comes to favour Pilate's way of responding to the violence that has been committed by the white oppressors upon her father who was killed most ruthlessly for the precious farm that he owned. However, she does not counter their violence by assimilating herself into the mainstream culture as Milkman's father has done nor does she resort to acts of retaliation that the 'Seven Days' wrecks on innocent white victims as Guitar has done. Only through a peaceful reconciliation with one's past and genuine love and compassion for one's own people can one have a meaningful life, this is exactly the essence of the lesson that Milkman learns from his aunt, Pilate.

To recapitulate, this paper has looked at Morrison's Beloved and Song of Solomon as they depict the life and history of the Afro-American community and its struggle for survival and recognition in a country ruled by white people. We have seen how Morrison has revealed the inner world, the secret thoughts and the most intriguing memories of certain black individuals who have been victimized by the institution of slavery or by the capitalist system. Her novels are therefore political texts written in response to the dominant cultural hegemonies that marginalize the black people and impose a sort of cultural displacement on them. However, Morrison uses 'magic realism' in her novels to speak on behalf of an un-privileged category of society and to explore the most polarizing issues related to race, gender and ethnic and religious differences. In other words, Morrison's novels address the very issues that the dominant cultural hegemonies are reticent over. She also provides her solution to cultural displacement that threatens the existence and survival of the Afro-American community through its return to its 'homeplace' as a way to resist the dominant racist culture and allow the chance for connection with the ancestral past. Though Morrison shows that the recovery of the past cannot be disentangled from certain painful memories related to the history of slavery in Beloved, their recollections are indispensable because only through confrontation with the past can the unspeakable and unspoken images connected

with the atrocities of slavery be presented. Moreover, Sethe's suppression of the past is given vent through her act of narration that brings her to terms with it. We have seen how communication with the past can be started through storytelling and how Morrison authenticates the means through which she gains access to the truth through memory to produce a novel that provides a shared memorial experience that binds the entire Afro-American community through its allusion to one common experience known to all black people.

Through Sethe's encounter with the past embodied in her daughter Beloved, Morrison therefore finds the appropriate language that conveys the slave narrative and speak for a much wider experience than the merely personal one. What Morrison therefore accomplishes in Beloved is bring back to life the past that hurts in order to reconcile the Afro-American community with it and endow it with a collective strength to face the worst of memories produced by slavery. She accomplishes the same thing in Song of Solomon as Pilate reconciles Milkman with his ancestral past and teaches him the significance of connecting himself to his roots. Though Milkman sets out to search for the gold, he ends up finding the real treasure that lies in his newfound revelations, in his altered new value in life and in his discovery of the meaning of connection and love among his own people. What Morrison therefore demonstrates in both novels is that locating the ancestor gives the marginalized groups of society the sense of assurance and belonging they need to keep going and oppose the dominant racist culture not through resort to violence in response to the oppression and violence of the white people committed against blacks but through the discovery of one's cultural identity and the significance of connecting oneself more closely to one's heritage and past. Since we have seen the devastation that ensues from the intrusion of the white world into the lives of the Afro-American community in the two novels and also we have been given a detailed picture of the violence and bloodshed that results from confrontation with white power, one possible alternative left for the black community is to

return to its roots and discover its identity rather than respond in the same way creating more violence and engendering more hatred and clash. Perhaps the following quote from Morrison's "Rootedness" serves as a good ending to this paper where she asserts that happiness and meaning in life depends on the presence of the ancestor in everyday life. Thus she says: " whether the novel took place in the city or in the country, the presence or absence of that figure determined the success or happiness of the character. It was the absence of an ancestor that was frightening, that was threatening, and it caused huge destruction and disarray in the work itself" (343).

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