CHAPTER-V
CONCLUSION

The foregoing study shows that Morrison's fiction is historically determined and her art draws its imperatives from personal and collective histories of her black characters. For her, "the reclamation of the history of black people in this country [America] is paramount in its importance" because she feels that there is "a great deal of obfuscation and distortion and erasure, so that the presence and the heartbeat of black people has been systematically annihilated in many… ways and the job of recovery is ours" as she explains in an interview with Christina Davis (224-225). Her novels are a kind of running commentary on the social, economic and political history of African Americans ranging from Slavery, Reconstruction and the founding of all Black Communities to the First World War and the Great Migration, through a Jazz Age Harlem, the Depression era, the Second World War and the Civil Rights movement to Contemporary times. Through deeply evocative rendition of individual experiences of her black male characters, Morrison explores the history of oppression and the strategies of resistance that bring about some change in the conditions under which African Americans lived, suggesting the ways in which blacks have made meaning from practices that seek to disenfranchise and oppress them.

Though female characters occupy a central place in Morrison's fiction, but a careful reading of her fictional writings shows that male characters, more specifically black male characters, play a significant role in her novels. Morrison herself asserts the importance of black male characters in her novels when, in an interview with Alice Childress, she argues that "Black men… frequently are reacting to a lot more external pressures than Black women are" because "they have an enormous responsibility to be men" (7). Morrison's portrayal of male characters shows that she draws her male characters in all their varieties and complexities. She delves deeper into their hidden emotions and feelings and probes the factors that shape their mind and personality. Her male characters are neither completely good, nor completely bad but are a mixture of good and bad as she states in an interview with Nellie McKay: "Some are good and some are bad, but most of them are bits of both" (145).

The range of Morrison's black male characters is wide and divergent. Her male characters, belonging to different classes and generations, include slaves, ex-slaves, migrants, soldiers, militants, capitalists, landlords, salesmen, poor labourers, farmers and modern educated youths. Morrison recreates the multivalent experiences of these African American males as marginalized individuals in American society in her novels. The pernicious and vicious system of slavery with its resultant psychological, economic and physical onslaughts, the systematic denial of equal opportunities to the blacks, the programmed emasculation of the black male and the racism in its most convoluted forms have tried to enervate the role of the black men and reduce them to nebulous entities. Morrison's work shows that, despite the laws and practices that have rendered black people less than human or designated them as second-class citizens, her black male characters continue to function in the face of dehumanizing conditions out of a deep conviction that they are not only human but are deserving of human rights and equality of opportunities. Morrison's fiction documents these characters' attempts to put their lives back together again, to claim a sense of self that they have lost or that they never had to begin with. Through them, Morrison suggests the ways as "how to survive whole in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, victims of something" (Bakerman 40).

In her most poignant novel, *Beloved,* Morrison has invoked the effect of unbearable trauma of slavery and its aftermath on African Americans. Through the black male slaves of the novel, Morrison highlights the diversity of experiences and responses to slavery. At the same time, she dramatizes the brutalities and the evil practices of the institution of slavery like inhuman treatment of the black male slaves, disruption of families during slave auctions, denial of humanity to slaves, sexual exploitation of the slave women and the emasculation of black male slaves through barbaric methods and severe punishments. She also throws light on the system of runaway slaves, slave revolts, life of fugitive slaves and fugitive slave laws, and experiences of the Negroes during Civil War and after Emancipation. Morrison's portrayal of black male slaves in the novel shows that slaves were not stupid, lazy and lacked human feelings as is generally projected by the dominant culture. While Halle is gentle, intelligent and hard-working, Sixo is defiant, overtly resistant and has

retained his 'Africanness'. Paul D and Stamp Paid possess great fortitude, endurance power and a resilient spirit. Despite the fact that the slaves are denied basic humanity, these black male slaves give proofs of their humanity through acts of self-control and their helping and caring attitude towards other slaves in the novel.

Throughout her fictional world, Morrison is at pains to show that family bonds are essential to an individual's sense of well-being and identity and in the absence of family bonds the individual suffers from isolation, madness and loss of identity. Though slavery separated and destroyed families, Morrison's text reveals that slaves still formed some kind of kinship bonds to survive the horrors of slavery. Sixo and other black male slaves in the novel create alternative family bonds to fill the need. Another important fact that emerges out of Morrison's depiction of the behavior and response of these black male slaves is that slaves were not lifeless tools in the hands of white slave masters. All the slaves at Sweet Home Plantation try to find ways to oppose and resist the system. Halle Suggs demonstrates his discontent by working on his free Sundays. Sixo routinely breaks the rules of Sweet Home and does not fit in the Sweet Home mold so easily. Through him, Morrison pays homage to leaders of slave rebellions like Net Turner who led active slave revolts to destroy the system of slavery. Sixo shows the path of escape to his mates at Sweet Home, confronts his enemies openly and is silenced but he paves the path of freedom for other slaves. Through Halle and Stamp Paid, Morrison presents the powerlessness and helplessness of slave husbands in the face of sexual exploitation of their wives by the slave master. But while Halle's grief and despair at his inability to protect the honour and dignity of his wife leads to his mental derangement, Stamp Paid is able to transcend his humiliating experience and give a new direction to his life, helping runaway slaves and dedicating himself to the service of his people. Besides Stamp Paid, Paul D is the only other black slave in the novel who physically survives the horrors of slavery because of his undiminished survival instinct and immense endurance power. But he is constantly haunted by the painful memories of his horrible past. He is able to recover from the traumas of his slave past only by reliving and confronting it, suggesting thereby that in order to heal themselves of the paralyzing effect of their slave past, the blacks must confront the past, not suppress it and unite with their

community to loosen its fearsome hold. Paul D ultimately succeeds in reclaiming his lost self and achieving an authentic existence after he confronts his slave past, rejects his false sense of manhood conferred by the white slave master and forms stable family bonds with Sethe based on love, nurturance and mutual empathy. Through Paul D and Stamp Paid, Morrison asserts the healing and wholeness that these characters possess inspite of their extreme victimization and exploitation. Morrison also offers insights into the system of plantocracy by presenting two different kinds of slave systems- one mild system, run by the kind slave master, Mr. Garner and the other severe, run by the cruel slave master, schoolteacher. Mr. Garner has perfected the art of creating the perfect environment for producing pacified slaves by clever manipulation and his lenient ways towards the slaves. Schoolteacher, on the other hand, installs a cruel and harsh regime that forces the slaves to run away from slavery. Morrison indicts schoolteacher's scientific methods that put slaves in the category of animals. Though Garner's benevolent form of slavery differs only in degree from schoolteacher's scientific racism but through Garner, Morrison throws light on some positive aspects of slavery that allowed some measure of freedom and humanity to the slaves.

Zechariah Morgan (*Paradise)* and Macon Dead-I (*Song of Solomon)* represent the predicament of the black man after emancipation. Both Zechariah Morgan and Macon Dead-I, gifted with the virtues of self reliance and a sense of self-worth, try to assert their newly gained freedom by acquiring high position and property respectively. But they are soon deprived of their high position and property by the diabolic designs of the white power structure which shows that it is very difficult for the blacks to achieve success and a status of respectability in a white dominated society that is bent on destroying the Negro's progress at all costs. Zechariah Morgan, in order to escape white racism, follows the philosophy of black 'separatism' as propagated by Marcus Garvey and establishes an all-black town in an alien land. But through the failure of his dream town, Morrison undermines the romantic views of communities of African Americans which are completely free of white oppression and governance as these all- black communities are quite conservative and practice the policy of exclusion. Macon Dead-I (Jake) attempts to create a new self by

embracing the American Dream of success. The problem with his dream for blacks lies in how to create a new self when interactions with the larger white community provide limited self-definition. For all of his heroic deeds and hard work, Macon Sr., dies trying to hold on to what he has built. The white symbolic order refuses to acknowledge him as subject. Jake's 'confrontationist' outlook and rigid attitude are also responsible for his doom.

In *Jazz*, Morrison traces the history of the Great Migration of 1920s and the lives of African Americans in Jazz Age Harlem. Through the story of Joe Trace, the novelist shows how migration of the blacks from the South to the North resulted in the profound class shifts as a generation moved from hard, outdoor physical labour to waiting tables, hairdressing and selling cosmetics. Joe Trace, uprooted from his family and cultural roots, feel alienated and displaced in his new surroundings in the city and succumbs to the temptations of city life. But his pre-migration experiences continue to boil under the surface, leading him to destructive act of murder. Joe is, however, able to survive his woeful experiences and pull himself out of his gloomy pessimism due to his spirit of adaptability and by reestablishing his broken family bonds. He has transformed himself into a new person seven times and finally he is ready to face the challenges of his life with a positive outlook. Through Joe's life and response to his predicament, Morrison illustrates her faith in the resilience and surviving power of African Americans: "… you were constantly being redeemed and reborn, and you couldn't fall too far… there was something you could do to testify or change your way of life and it would be fine" (Ruas 117).

The Bluest Eye and *Sula* cover African American experiences during the First World War and the Depression era. Though the black male characters of these novels are farther away from the traumas of slavery and reconstruction, but they are still emasculated and infantilized by the demeaning practices and values of the dominant culture that not only constrict and marginalize them but also warp their psyches. Through Shadrack and Plum, who are drafted to serve in World War-I, Morrison presents the impact of racial discrimination and segregation on the Negro soldiers during and after the war. Both Shadrack and Plum suffer from deep psychological injuries because of their degrading and humiliating experiences in white man's

army. While wounded psyche breeds insanity in Shadrack, it leads Plum to self-destructiveness. Cholly Breedlove and the Jude Greene are victims of the racist employment practices of the white power structure. Powerless to fight the white men, they vent their anger and frustration against society and their own plight with the violence they perpetrate on their families. Cholly's misguided attempts to compensate for his perceived shortcomings as provider result in raping his daughter. Through him, Morrison reveals how the imposition of white standards of beauty, order and family can be detrimental to the blacks inducing emotional barrenness and intense feelings of failure and worthlessness in them. Because Cholly believes himself to be ugly, his life descends into existential ugliness. Morrison also shows that racial hatred complicates interpersonal relationships and breaks family bonds. Jude Green internalizes the humiliation at his inability to do a whiteman's job and abandons his family. Ajax, whose dreams are thwarted in a racist American society that circumscribes the life of a black man, develops a casual attitude towards marital bonds and is unable to form stable family relationship with a woman. By investigating the reason behind abnormal behavior of these black male characters, Morrison wants us to understand the forces that cause certain individuals to engage in irresponsible or heinous acts. Though Morrison is aware of the tremendous burdens and limiting possibilities for African Americans engendered by white society, but at the same time, she also reminds us that African Americans must assume some responsibility for their own self hatred and irresponsible behavior. Through black male characters like Mr. MacTeer, Morrison suggests possibilities for countering racism and repairing African Americans' bruised psyches. Mr. MacTeer emerges unscathed from the onslaught of oppressive forces of racism and indoctrination of white value system through hard work, an 'accommodationist' attitude and by defining himself according to his own cultural values instead of the values of the dominant culture. He testifies to Morrison's conviction that blacks can retain their selfhoods and save themselves from psychological annihilation if they are equipped with strong family and community ties and avoid self-hatred.

Song of Solomon and *Paradise* mainly deal with African American experiences during civil rights era of sixties. The black male characters of these

novels are shown to be asserting their manhood and identity based on a model characterized by economic advancement, dominance and violence. Although these black men resist white male dominance, they consistently seek to dominate black women and subvert white power through violence. Guitar Bains (S*ong of Solomon)*represents those poor African Americans who are involved in the civil rights struggles and are alienated both from the mainstream of American life and from the black middle class. Guitar's individual frustration experienced as a black man living in an oppressive, white-dominated culture incites him to join a militant organization, the 'Seven Days', that kills whites randomly for the murders of African Americans. Through Guitar, Morrison explores the explosive effects of rage—a direct result of racism and the violence to which it often leads. Steward and Deacon Morgan in *Paradise* are symbols of unrestrained black male power. As the powerful leaders of all-black community, Ruby, they are presented as hardcore race conservatives who exert an enormous amount of control and insulate themselves from outsiders. Their patriarchal attitude and repressive policies lead to tensions between the older and the younger generations of Ruby that eventually erupt in a violent outburst at the women's house on the outskirts of the town. Unlike Steward, Deacon begins to understand that the isolated and unchanging new haven they had attempted to create and tried to uphold through patriarchal control and violence is impossible. Morrison once again exposes the problems of such 'utopias', the self-governing, all- black communities which are doomed to fail because people are capable of sin and violence. Macon Dead-II (*Song of Solomon)* and Bill Cosey (*Love*), members of black middle-class, are symbols of black capitalism. They have accepted the debunked values of the dominant white culture in their haste to assimilate themselves into the white middle-class ,but in the process, they have lost the spiritual and moral values of their own culture. Excessive materialism leads Macon Dead-II to self-alienation and isolation. He has strained relations with his family and removes himself completely from the African American community. The passion for assimilation leads him to heartless acts. Bill Cosey, a rich black hotelier, exercises the power that money gives him over women in his life and exploits them. Through these black male characters, Morrison emphasizes individual's requirement of remaining connected to the African

American community and its values as community shapes individual character and a person must be a part of it if he is to be whole. Since these characters reject community, they experience a feeling of isolation and incompleteness, which eventually cause them to behave cruelly or violently. Another fact that shines through Morrison's portrayal of these black males is that she refuses to relegate black suffering to external racism alone. She shows that the insensitive behavior of those African Americans emulating and repeating the wrongs of the past is also responsible for the suffering of the blacks. Her moral landscape also entails black racism and she is critical of the racist philosophies of the 'Days' (*Song of Solomon*) and the patriarchs of Ruby (*Paradise).*

Morrison, however, does not paint all black male characters in the dark. Through Milkman Dead (*Song of Solomon),* she offers solution to the dilemma of the blacks living in modern American society, showing that only by rejecting the patriarchal materialistic symbolic structure of the dominant culture and by embracing love, community and their cultural heritage, the African Americans can achieve self-affirmation and an authentic existence. Milkman Dead, a modern black youth, is initially emotionally and culturally stunted and is in the midst of an identity crisis. But after he seeks out his family history and reconnects himself with his roots, he grows and experiences a rebirth of the self. Milkman's journey has made him cognizant of the integral part that his ancestry plays in the construction of his individual identity and makes him realize the importance of naming for the African Americans who are denied their real names by the system of slavery. He also learns the need for African Americans to know and embrace their ancestral roots and become responsible within their own communities. Through him, Morrison upholds the superiority of communal values over materialism and individualism. Morrison insists upon the need for Milkman to correct his former transgressions against women and recognize their importance in his life in order to successfully complete his quest for self. In an interview with Charles Ruas, Morrison emphasizes the need to establish a sort of comradeship with women: "It's really a balance between classical male and female forces that produces… a kind of complete person" (107). At the same time, Morrison reveals the importance of an ancestor figure for a person's

success in navigating life through Milkman's relationship with Pilate, his aunt. It is under Pilate's guidance that Milkman becomes responsible and humane.

Tar Baby and *Love* explore African American experiences in contemporary American society in which stakes are higher and the risks are greater because of the broader opportunities for economic advancement. Through Son and Romen, Morrison suggests the ways that can assist African Americans in recovering their lost or diminished selves in a post-modern American society afflicted with cultural malaise and spiritual emptiness. As some African Americans rise into middle and upper-middle-class, they become integrated into the dominant culture and lose sight of their own cultural values and heritage which cause a feeling of self-alienation and rootlessness in them. In *Tar Baby,* Morrison posits recovery of history and myth as cure for modern spiritual bankruptcy through Son Green, who is defined by his black cultural heritage. Inadvertently, Son falls passionately in love with Jadine, a Sorbonne educated black model, enmeshed in white values. Though they want to make a life together but they are unable to resolve their cultural differences and eventually drift apart. While Son lacks education necessary to achieve material gains in a jet-set age, Jadine lacks knowledge of her cultural heritage that is essential to lead an authentic existence. Morrison, in an interview with Charles Ruas, acknowledges the need for the "knowledge that is more viable, more objective, more scientific," but at the same time, she doesn't want to disregard ancient black culture and mythology. According to her, "Some primitive instincts are terrible and uninformed, some of them are not. The problem is to distinguish between those elements in ourselves as human beings, as individuals and as a culture, that are ancient and pure or primitive—that are there because they're valuable and ought to be there…" (113). Morrison also demonstrates how strained relationships with the ancestors arrest the development of intimate interpersonal relationships through Son and Jadine. Through the white male character, Valerian Street, Morrison makes the readers see the pathology of whites and the dysfunctional nature of their family structure. She is at pains to show that though the whites do not have to battle against life-draining socio-historical forces like the blacks, yet their lives are marred by lovelessness, loneliness and isolation. The prospects of a white and black cultural amalgamation seem to be quite bleak to

Morrison as she illustrates through the tensions between the white master and the black servants in the novel. Through Romen (*Love)*, a black youth of nineties, Morrison shows that the blacks can achieve an authentic and meaningful existence in the chaotic and amoral conditions of a post-modern American society only by remaining connected to their family, community and cultural values.

Thus, a close study of black male characters of Morrison's novels shows that her fictional world contains a variety of male characters, responding in a variety of ways to different socio-historical forces of their times. Her fiction is a testimony to the resilience and adaptability, strengths and weaknesses of the black men in the face of colossal threats and challenges in an alien culture. While some black male characters like Halle, Sixo, Cholly, Jude, Ajax, Macon Dead-I, Guitar, Zechariah Morgan and Bill Cosey are crushed to failure by the oppressive forces of racism of the white power structure, there are others like Paul D, Stamp Paid Joe, Mr. MacTeer, Milkman Dead, Son and Romen, who are not only able to survive in the adverse conditions of the American society, but succeed in asserting their identity and achieving an authentic existence. Her delineation of these black males demonstrates that Morrison, as an artist and writer of the black people, is mainly interested in survival strategies adopted by her characters as she explains in an in interview with Nellie McKay: "I am interested in survival—who survives and who does not, and why and I would like to chart a course that suggests where the dangers are and where the safety may be" (145). She emphasizes the need of strength and stamina, a sense of self-worth, curative power of human bonds, rootedness in their culture and building of a coherent personality for African Americans in order to exist successfully amid hostile and oppressive conditions of a white racist society. She suggests that the journey toward wholeness must be continual and this journey must emerge from one's sense of responsibility to pilot the self toward personal fulfillment. In short, we can say that Toni Morrison, as an artist, has a broad vision and her work is always symbolic of the shared human condition both engaging with and transcending lines of gender, race and class. Her writing, although emerging as it does from a specific political, economic, social and cultural experience, has universal implications and reaches out to the entire world.

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