Chapter 1

Shadows of Slavery: White Hegemony and Black Suffering

The presence of blacks in America is inextricably linked with the violence inherent in slavery. The scars inflicted by slavery constitute the most traumatic yet inalienable experience of blacks in the United States of America. There is practically no black writer who does not touch upon this woeful period of bondage in the life of his or her ancestors.

The whites’ brutal treatment of the blacks justifies Fromm’s idea of the stranger or outsider who does not belong to the group being treated as not even human. Black slaves have been considered by their masters as less than human and more like animals. The desire to have power over others also drives many to inflict violence on others (121). As Theodore D. Weld observes, slavery imparts an intoxicating effect of arbitrary power without restraint in human beings over others which is so absolute, and their desire to exercise the same so intense, that it makes them cling on to it with obstinate tenacity (673-74). Dworkin mentions physical strength used against others less strong as an important facet of male power. But the strength of the slave who does not possess the sanction to use it against others, cannot be considered as power (14). Black females are seen to be the most powerless group within this dispossessed set of people.
Toni Morrison portrays the horrors of slavery, beginning with the Middle Passage, in her most celebrated novel *Beloved*, giving particular attention to the experiences of the black female that had been largely glossed over or camouflaged till then. Alice Walker’s *Meridian* depicts the slave past of the eponymous heroine’s maternal ancestors. Gloria Naylor also dwells on this grievous legacy in her novels. All the novels of the three authors treated in this study have some ties to the heritage of slavery, especially as it affects black women and female children, resting as it does on the twin foundations of violence and sex. They certainly delineate the lingering effects of the slave past on a people emancipated in theory but marginalized in practice.

Kari J. Winter considers slavery as an atypical form that depended on a peculiar mixture of Western colonialist ideology, racism, and economic demands. However, long after African Americans were declared free in law, they remained enslaved in social practice (5-6). Winter draws on Orlando Patterson’s work *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (1982). Patterson considers slavery as means of organizing power and defines it as “the permanent, violent domination of nattally alienated and generally dishonored persons” (13).

Accordingly, slavery can be studied as a relation of domination that has three constitutive elements. First, although all human relationships are structured and defined by the relative power of the interacting persons,
slavery is unusual in the extremity of power involved and in the qualities of coercion that brought the relation into being and sustained it. Slave ideology attempted to eradicate the autonomous existence of the slave who had no existence without the master. The slaves’ powerlessness always originated as a substitute for death, and their physical life depended on social death. Second, slavery is marked by the slave’s natal alienation, a sign of social death that “denied all claims on, and obligations to, his parents and living blood relations” but also on “his more remote ancestors and on his descendants. He was truly a genealogical isolate” (5). Third, slavery is always characterized by the master’s sense of honour, which depends on his view of slaves as dishonoured (10).

Patterson identifies two ways of slaves’ alienation—intrusive and extrusive modes of representing social death. The intrusive mode represents slaves as intruders from a strange, hostile culture, who are disconnected from their ancestral myth. The extrusive conception denotes an insider who has ceased to belong (41). The alienation of slaves in America thus belongs to the intrusive mode.

The slave narrative is a genre that records the searing experiences of slaves, exposing the brutal contradictions in American history that denied the slaves all the rights that the republic championed. These narratives render the experiences of those who have been captured from Africa and stowed away under hatches of ships over a voyage of four thousand miles.
They also depict later generations born and brought up in the American soil, or rather, in Henry Bibb’s words, “flogged up; for where I should have received moral, mental, and religious instruction, I received stripes without number” (441). All of them share the common fate of being degraded to utter servility and bestial state.

Slave drivers leading blacks chained together was a regular sight. Black slaves, most of whom were poorly fed and scantily clothed, were subjected to the most inhuman punishments at the slightest pretext even after extracting from them unceasing toil from dawn to dusk. Flogging may perhaps be the mildest of punishments given to them though they were given thirty-nine lashes or more, and had their lacerated flesh washed with brine. If a black happened to strike a white by any provocation, the punishment was death by Lynch law. But conversely, if a white murdered a black, the former escaped with impunity. Frederick Douglass remarks on this: “It was common saying, even among little white boys, that it was worth a half-cent to kill a ‘nigger,’ and a half-cent to bury one” (298). The bolder ones attempted running away from their masters but at terrible hazards to their lives. They were likely to be intercepted at every turn by watchmen, guards, sentinels, and patrollers, often accompanied by ferocious bloodhounds. Their disappearance was advertised in newspapers with promises of reward and agents were sent after them. The recaptured slave could be whipped, cropped, branded, or put in prison. Many of the
slaveholders who professed to be religious missed the essence of Christianity in their treatment of slaves.

However, early narratives of slavery cannot be considered quite authentic as most slaves were illiterate or lacked the expertise, and had their work censored. There were prohibitions against educating slaves or giving them religious instruction, for example, an act was passed by the State of Georgia in 1770 to that effect. Linda Brent had to choose an alter ego in Harriet Ann Jacobs when she wrote *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Just as Sojourner Truth in her narrative (1850) omitted many details out of a sense of delicacy, *Incidents* leaves blanks in the narrative without telling the whole story, though the editor apologizes for withdrawing the veil from some delicate subjects (747-48). Jacobs also admits having concealed the names of places and given fictitious names to persons. She notes: “Slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings, and mortifications peculiarly their own” (823). This certainly carries the crux of the whole violent situation.

Unlike the early slave narratives, Morrison has deconstructed the white literary tradition in *Beloved* (1987) by bringing home to the reader the real horrors experienced by focusing on every phase of a slave woman’s life, from infancy to old age, without the moralizing usual of such narratives. She has said, “The book was not about the institution—Slavery
with a capital S. It was about these anonymous people called slaves” (Angelo 120). Set in the period of transition between the Civil War and the Reconstruction Era, *Beloved* treats the devastating effects of slavery through recollection of its characters. Morrison tells the stories of those who were completely destroyed or severely crippled by it, unearthing the peculiar experience of the black woman. Trauma is at the heart of the novel and the damage done is not merely physical but economic, sexual, psychological, emotional, intellectual, and linguistic as well.

Delving into black history, Morrison affords us more than glimpses of the Middle Passage, the most traumatic of the horrors undergone by a first generation slave. Significantly enough, *Beloved* is dedicated to “Sixty Million and more,” that is, those who perished in the Middle Passage, “victims of the effectively genocidal campaign that was slavery” (Rigney, *Voices* 70). The odious aspects of slavery are portrayed through the experiences of first generation slaves like the central character Sethe’s mother who is left nameless in the novel, her companion Nan, Sethe’s mother-in-law Baby Suggs, and the racial memories of Beloved, the ghost of the child murdered by Sethe.

The story, however, unfolds through the memory of Sethe, an escaped slave who is haunted by her past. The deliberate act of remembering is termed “rememory” by Sethe. Memory is used as a trope to foreground things suppressed and repressed. Sethe has only a vague
memory of her mother who was pointed out to her in her childhood as the one among many backs stooping in a watery field. Nevertheless, the memory of the one meeting with her mother is indelibly marked in her mind’s tablet when her mother carried her behind the smoke house, opened her dress front, and lifted her breast to reveal on her rib a circle and a cross, burnt right in the skin. Since she was the only one with the mark left, Sethe would be in a position to identify her in case something happened to her. As feared by her, Sethe’s mother was hanged and strangely enough, Sethe was never able to find out the reason for the hanging. However, by the time her dead body was cut down, nobody could tell whether she had a circle and cross on her body. The mutilated body renders any decoding impossible.

Whatever knowledge Sethe has of her mother later is gained through her mother’s friend Nan who had one good arm and half of another, the cause of which may be attributed to the atrocities of slavery. Nan tells her about life in the slave ship when Nan and Sethe’s mother were taken up many times by the white crew. Rape was used as a weapon that broke the slave women’s will to resist and demoralized their men. As Brownmiller observes, more than a chance tool of violence, it was an institutional crime that was part of the white man’s subjugation of a people for economic and psychological gain (153). It marks the convergence of sex and violence for black women in slavery.
The mulatto is the ubiquitous sign of the master’s sexual relation with his black slave woman. Slave narratives record how the white master is indifferent to his own children born of black women, and treats them as callously as the other slaves. The law decrees that the child naturally follows the condition of the mother; it can never be free. In some cases, however, the jealousy of the white mistress makes life all the more painful for the black woman and her offspring. Sethe’s mother gave birth to many babies from whites but she threw them all away, unnamed. She kept Sethe because she loved her father who was a black man.

Another survivor of the Middle Passage is Baby Suggs, whose broken hip is the physical legacy of sixty years of bondage. Notwithstanding her generous nature, Baby Suggs comes to the conclusion: “There is no bad luck in the world but white folks” (89). Sethe had replaced Baby Suggs when Mr. Garner, owner of the plantation called Sweet Home, agreed to grant the old woman her freedom in exchange for her son Halle’s renting himself on other farms during his free time. Sweet Home seems like a real home for Sethe till Garner dies. The death of Garner and his wife’s terminal illness cause the place to be taken over by his brother-in-law whom the slaves call schoolteacher, a man of rational thinking, who considers the slaves little better than animals. Like wild animals, recalcitrant slaves are “broken” by a combination of physical aggression and psychological harassment. The breaking of slaves whom
Garner took pride in calling “men” into “boys” at the hands of schoolteacher, prompts them all to escape to the free North. But only Sethe’s three children whom she sends ahead and Sethe herself, with heavy casualties, manage to escape. Halle, her husband and the other male slaves fail to make it.

Before Sethe gets away, however, she is subjected to an obscene rape in the sixth month of her pregnancy by two nephews of schoolteacher, one sucking on her breast and the other holding her down, treating her like a cow. The grown men make a mockery of her motherhood, depriving her of the little dignity she had. Moreover, Sethe gets beaten for reporting this atrocity to Mrs. Garner. She bites off a piece of her tongue when they open her back and use cowhide on it. But her grim determination to reach her children at any cost makes her brave all difficulties. While on the run, she goes into premature labour and gives birth to her daughter Denver in a canoe across River Ohio. Denver is named after Amy Denver, a white fugitive girl who assists Sethe in delivering her.

Sethe finally reaches Baby Suggs along with her newborn baby and joins her children at 124 Bluestone Road, Cincinnati. But her brief spell of happiness is interrupted after twenty-eight days by the arrival of schoolteacher, one of the nephews, a slave catcher, and a sheriff. The thought of a return to slavery with her children is so intolerable for Sethe that she resorts to the violent act of killing her children. She kills her crawling baby
but is prevented from killing the others. Even eighteen years later, she does not regret it as she very well knows the unenviable position in which black women are placed: “That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore” (251).

There are many other instances of sexual abuse of black women by whites. Ella was locked in a room for more than a year and shared by a white father and son whom she named “the lowest yet” and who “gave her a distaste for sex and against whom she measured all atrocities” (256). Stamp Paid, a black man who devotes his life to help other blacks, had his wife Vashti taken from him and handed over to his master’s young son. The white man’s wife is a silent accomplice to this atrocity.

Physical violence marks the female body as a site of oppression. “Marking” is the product of abuse and is linked to societal inscriptions on the body of the “other” (Davies 138). Mark Ledbetter examines the body image in *Beloved* and identifies three types of body violence—body-disfigured, body-violated and body-dismembered—as ways of understanding the apocalyptic moment of race and gender. To the first type belongs the mark under Sethe’s mother’s breast, which is one of ownership, the cross representing the slave owners’ use of Christianity to oppress their slaves, and the circle the eternal nature of the relationship between mother and child. It would also serve as a mark of identification.
The child Sethe requests to be marked as well in an attempt to identify with her mother. Her turn for marking that connects her to her mother arrives when she is whipped until her skin buckles like a washboard and the disfigurement grows into a chokecherry tree.

The violation of Sethe’s body by the two nephews of schoolteacher, which she terms stealing of her milk, is the second type of violence. Sethe also allows her body to be sexually violated by the engraver in order to have the name “Beloved” chiselled on the headstone of the child she had murdered. Sethe is driven to dismember her child, the third and extreme type of violence as the only choice to prevent her children from growing up slaves (79-88).

In addition to slavery’s disciplinary tactics on masculinity, and specific ways of degrading females, there are other effects of slavery that are not gender specific. One is to study slaves as if they were animals. Another method devised by the whites to enforce subjugation is the insertion of the bit in the mouth of the slave, “the barbaric symbol of silence and oppression” (Mobley 362). It ensures complete control of the master, rendering the slave mute and defenceless. Paul D thinks of “the wildness that shot up into the eye the moment the lips were yanked back. Days after it was taken out, goose fat was rubbed on the corners of the mouth but nothing to soothe the tongue or take the wildness out of the eye” (71). Sethe’s mother had to wear the bit frequently that she seemed to be
always smiling. So Sethe says, “When she wasn’t smiling, she smiled, and I never saw her own smile” (203).

Stamp Paid has a heart-rending experience when he comes across a red ribbon knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp in the Licking River. Later, standing outside the home of Baby Suggs, he thinks he hears the voices of the people of the broken necks and fire-cooked blood. Atrocities of the Ku Klux Klan made life all the more unsafe in postbellum America. “Desperately thirsty for black blood, without which it could not live, the dragon swam Ohio at will” (66). Baby Suggs knows there is no point in moving out of their house on account of the baby’s ghost: “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief” (5). There is also mention of a witless colored woman jailed and hanged for stealing ducks she believed were her babies. This single sentence speaks volumes about the depth of a mother’s sorrow as well as the harshness of the law towards blacks. Black women who carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back were utterly powerless in the presence of whites and could be lashed even by a ten-year-old white boy. Slaves are treated more like beasts of burden than human beings.

The physical pain endured by the black woman is invariably accompanied by excruciating mental agony. The psychological effects triggered off by slavery remains long after it ceases to be operational.
Separating families is the norm and an intact black family is an exception. Jennifer Fitzgerald notes that the discourse of slavery privileges humanity, autonomy, and participation in a family by denying these values to slaves (670). Baby Suggs is a character that has lost so much to the institution of slavery. She had eight children fathered by six men but has not even one of them with her in her old age. She recollects how her two girls were sold before they had adult teeth. She was forced to couple with a straw boss for four months, hoping to keep her third child but the treacherous man traded him for lumber in the spring. To her dismay, Baby Suggs found herself pregnant again. It demonstrates that the promises given by whites have no validity. Halle, the son she could keep longest, till he was twenty, buys her freedom but she never sees him again. The lingering effect of such devastation is very great. “What she called the nastiness of life was the shock she received that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23).

When she becomes free, Baby Suggs seeks news of her lost children but to avail. She had received the news of the death of two of her children, Nancy and Famous in a ship off the Virginia coast but she did not even know where the other children were buried or what they looked like if alive. Blacks like her thus feared to trust or love anything because it could be taken away at any time. So freedom seems meaningless to her. When Garner reminds her of how good he has been to his slaves, she agrees with
him but she thinks: “But you got my boy and I’m all broke down. You be
renting him out to pay for me way after I’m gone to Glory” (146). Even
after being free, Baby Suggs realizes that her past had been like her
present, intolerable.

The psychological damage attendant upon realizing that one was
separated from blood relatives and kinspeople, essentially alone in the
world, worked to the benefit of the slaveholder and was designed to teach
dependency in the slave (T. Harris, “Escaping Slavery” 330). When Garner
dies, Mrs. Garner is forced to sell Paul D’s half brother, though reluctantly.
Even in the hands of a benevolent master they are just property that can be
disposed of according to his will and pleasure. Paul D, who never
remembers his mother or has seen his father, has only three half brothers
having different fathers who are also lost to him. So when he drifts as a
loner, he watches with awe and envy the families who had all been together
for a hundred years and happen to know all their relatives.

When Baby Suggs dies, her body is taken to the Clearing, where she
used to address the free blacks, to be buried but some law passed by the
whites prevents it. So she is buried next to the baby murdered by Sethe,
which means that the whites decide even “where the dead should rest”
(171). Morrison has told Naylor that she has felt a responsibility for all
those who were “unburied, or at least unceremoniously buried, people
made literate in art” (209).
Sethe wishes very much to have a memorial for the child she had killed in order to protect. The white engraver agrees to carve the word “Beloved” in exchange for sex in the graveyard itself. So the bereaved mother purchases the seven letters borrowed from the priest’s funeral sermon with ten minutes of stand-up sex in the presence of the engraver’s son, which is another violation. Sethe becomes a token of economic exchange where the white man will “grant the cherished script provided he first be granted the right of sexual inscription” (Lawrence 192). Nevertheless, Sethe does not regret her action but thinks that with another ten minutes given to the man, she could have prefixed “Dearly” to “Beloved.” Atwood finds this act a “keynote for the whole book in the world of slavery and poverty, where human beings are merchandise, everything has its price, and price is tyrannical” (32-33).

The arrival of a young woman who calls herself Beloved is accepted by Sethe as the return of the child she had murdered at the age of two. Beloved has no experience of slavery and so her accounts of it can be treated as racial memory. Gina Wisker calls Beloved manifest history, the guilt and pain of slavery as it enters personal lives (86). Through a series of cinematic clips Morrison presents the horrors of abduction from the native Africa and transportation in a slave ship. There is hardly any room in the hold of the ship and hunger and thirst lead to consumption of human excrement. Rape and death take place every day and there is a little hill of
dead people and “the men without skin push them through with poles” (211) into the ocean.

Sethe comes to learn from Paul D that Halle had watched her humiliation by the white boys from the loft. It had caused him to lose his mind and prevented him from meeting her as appointed. This revelation creates fresh agony for Sethe. Even after eighteen years of freedom Sethe cannot come to terms with what the whites had done to them. “Drain her mother’s milk, they had already done. Divide her back into plant life—that too. Driven her fat-bellied into the woods” and “buttered Halle’s face; gave Paul D iron to eat: crisped Sixo; hanged her own mother” (188). Many of the horrors of slavery are described by negative implication in Baby Suggs’s memory of Garner’s special kind of slavery: “And he didn’t stud his boys. Never brought them to her cabin with directions to ‘lay down with her,’ like they did in Carolina, or rented their sex out on other farms” (140).

Apart from the physical and psychological damage inflicted by slavery, blacks are also subjected to intellectual abuse that denies them their humanity. Schoolteacher, feeling that Garner has been too lax with his slaves, begins to put the place aright but he has no intention to make them literate, as his name would imply. Instead, he brings home the lesson that “definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (190), destroying even their precarious sense of identity. Dworkin’s observation is very pertinent here: “The essence of oppression is that one is defined from the
outside by those who define themselves as superior by criteria of their own choice” (149). Thus slavery legitimates suppression of the will. Since slaves are robbed of their wills, for a black woman to be a loving mother or a faithful wife depends on the will of the master.

In order to maintain the economic security of whites, it would be very convenient to assume the slaves to be less than human, just as in war it is easier to kill the human beings of the other side by indoctrinating the feeling that those who are to be slaughtered are nonpersons (Fromm 122). Weld notes that the slave master who held slaves as his property could never think of them as persons. They are considered as working animals, or merchandise and this fact is established through the whole vocabulary of slaveholders – the blacks are called “stock,” their children are termed “increase,” slave mothers are known as “breeders,” and those who compel their labours are “drivers” who herd them in “droves” like cattle. They are bought and sold, and separated like cattle, after being examined by prospective buyers. But they are treated worse than animals if they exhibit any will of their own, for the slave master cannot brook any opposition to his will. He uses violence to break down the resistance of the slave through disciplinary measures that will also serve as an example to others. The runaway slave is tied and flogged most brutally. Slaves are driven to market, fastened together with handcuffs, galled by iron collars and chains, branded with their owner’s initials, and forced to travel hundreds of miles
on foot (666-70). Jacobs makes a note of the customary advertisement about the “public sale of negroes, horses, &c.” (757). Bibb speaks of the rigorous examination of the slaves by the buyers in order to find their mental capacity. Intelligence in a slave is a most objectionable quality (496). “Men and women, old and young, married and single, were ranked with horses, sheep, and swine” and subjected to the same indelicate inspection (Douglass 312). Slaves are also status symbols of the master’s wealth and position.

A physiognomist and phrenologist, schoolteacher starts recording his findings about the slaves in a scientific and dispassionate manner. He is deliberately left without a name in the novel; not even the definite article or a capital letter is given to him. He believes in the logocentric assumption of the written word as the basis of knowledge and truth. He wraps the measuring string all over Sethe’s head, across her behind, numbers her teeth and asks his nephews to list her human and animal characteristics. To him, Sethe is a piece of property, a hybrid of characteristics, some of which belong to a human and others define a work animal.

Sethe gathers the full significance of this classification after she seeks clarification from Mrs. Garner. She experiences “double consciousness” when she becomes aware of an outside look that is very different from the way she perceives herself (Marks 31). Even while his nephews molest Sethe, schoolteacher coolly watches the whole scene and
records it in his notebook. It hurts Sethe more to think that he was writing in ink that she herself has made. Book learning and ink, which are tools of enlightenment, have become instruments of oppression for blacks.

Since slavery aimed at silencing the victims, the blacks lost not only their language but also their heritage voiced through it. Sethe vaguely remembers the language spoken by her mother and Nan. However, she recollects that Nan used different words that Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. In her essay “Friday on the Potomac,” Morrison explains how, in order to survive, the island savage whom Robinson Crusoe named Friday was compelled to learn his master’s language, but in the process lost his native tongue and with it his identity (Fussell 283).

Language and learning become additional control mechanisms in white hands. By teaching a slave to read and write, a white man, besides going against the law, was supposed to put himself in much danger. Some of the states exacted fines and imprisonment for such an offence. Schoolteacher asserts his authority by controlling the language of the enslaved in various ways. Unlike Garner, who gets ragged by his friends for his leniency to his slaves, he does not permit them to speak out their views or to learn to read and write. In extreme cases, he literally silences them with the iron bit. So Sweet Home men like Sixo have rejected reading as it means to them naming done by a white man. Paul D is unable to read
the newspaper cutting about Sethe’s crime but he knows intuitively that it will not be good news when a black face appears in a newspaper. Initially, as an escaped slave he has been unable to comprehend the use of money. When someone gives him a coin, he walks around with it for hours, not knowing what he could buy with it.

The thoughts of schoolteacher about the slaves employ animal imagery. He plans to sell Paul D and capture “the breeding one [Sethe] and her three pickaninnies, and whatever the foal might be” (149). He chastises his nephew for his mishandling of Sethe because slaves are just like horses or dogs that become wild if they are beaten beyond the point of education. Blackness represents for whites animal savagery and moral depravity: “whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood” (198).

Amy Denver asks Sethe when she goes into labour if she plans to “just lay there and foal?” (33) Amy, though poor and indentured, is still white. So it is not easy for her to forget the racial divide.

Slaves are valuable mainly for their reproductive capacities. Considered lower on the evolutionary ladder, blacks have been taken to be sexually more active than whites. After the African slave trade was banned in 1807, the fecundity of the female slave became all the more crucial to plantation life for providing a steady supply of labour. Thus black sexuality
is used to the economic advantage of their white masters. Jacobs records how the overseer in his patrol rounds enters every cabin to see that men and their wives have gone to bed together, lest the men should fall asleep through over-fatigue in the chimney corner (795). Women are valued for the capacity to increase the owner’s stock. Sethe’s price is quite high because she is property that reproduces itself without cost. When schoolteacher and his nephews thrash the pregnant Sethe, they take care to place her stomach in a hole in order to save the future slave.

When Sethe expresses her desire to be married to Halle, the otherwise humane Mrs. Garner impulsively asks her if she is already expecting, betraying the masters’ hidden agenda that the most important function of the slave woman is childbearing. Even a kind master in Alex Haley’s *Roots*, feeling happy about the proximity of his slaves, remarks: “I’m convinced that slaves and land, in that order, are a man’s best investments today” (424). As Baby Suggs cryptically remarks, slaves are not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own but to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. So Sethe is said to have the amazing luck of six whole years of marriage to Halle who had fathered every one of her children. This is because the female slave was often forced to be a breeder irrespective of her preference for a partner.

Since the cohesion of the black family is denied, the slave master confers whatever identity the slaves have. Dworkin notes that the power of
naming enables men to define experience and articulate boundaries and values (17). Even the slaves’ names are those of their masters, indicative of their unlimited power over their human chattel. The master could change the name of the slave at will. Baby Suggs’s sales ticket calls her Jenny Whitlow, taking her surname from her former owner in Carolina. Her children also bear the same name. The half-brothers are capriciously named in a series as Paul A, Paul D, and Paul F Garner. The benevolent version of slavery at Sweet Home makes the slaves’ lives capriciously conditional as it depends entirely on the kind but enigmatic Mr. Garner permitting them manhood but denying the expression of it. Thus he heightens the confusion of his slaves. He resembles schoolteacher in that he experiments on his slaves and infantilizes them, though in a much milder version. Frederick Douglass also narrates how the white man employs infantilizing of the black male as a means of check.

Since blacks are not recognized as persons in a legal or moral sense, they do not get the protection of the law. There is a double standard by which whites and blacks are judged. The “judge, the jury, the court are legally bound to ignore anything a Negro has to say” (Song 160). Legally, the question of raping a slave did not exist, as one cannot rape one’s property. Sexual rights and bodily integrity were not granted to the female slave who was denied the power of consent. Sethe expects some ceremony for her wedding but Mrs. Garner seems completely oblivious of the matter.
Sethe manages to make a wedding gown on the sly in order to render some distinction to the day. Obviously, white masters do not attach any sanctity to the marriage of their slaves.

There are also examples of discrimination against blacks in the free North. When Denver seeks help from the benevolent Bodwins, she is directed to the back entrance. She also notices a device for holding coins in the figure of a kneeling black boy with his head thrown back and mouth wide open. Underneath were the words, “At Yo Service” (255), conveying the deep-rooted prejudice that the black race is born to serve the white. This is another image reserved for blacks, namely, that of a retarded child or “Sambo.” It suggests commercial exchange, servitude, and the grotesquely twisted neck of a lynching victim that offer a critique of the commercial, racist and potentially violent nature of the dominant social order (Peréz-Torres 695). The ideology of Anglo-Saxon supremacy creates a fundamental inability to appreciate racial and cultural difference that characterizes the thinking of even the most progressive abolitionists. This inability links the diverse perspectives of the Bodwins, the Garners, and schoolteacher (Sale 48). So Morrison corrects some myths about slavery that slave life for some was good.

The history of slavery reclaimed from the point of view of the black female slave “simultaneously overturn[s] the white myth of the compliant, child-like black slave—the ‘Uncle Tom’ figure who was complicit in his
own slavery” (Peach 21). Thus Morrison’s approach to slavery is markedly different from previous representations that are one-dimensional.

The imagery also reflects the violence of black experience. An example is the comment: “trappers picked them off like buzzards or netted them like rabbits” (135), or “when trouble rode bareback among them” (249). Baby Suggs’s life is described as “sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone” (177).

Before the Civil War roughly half of the agrarian labour force was enslaved, and after Emancipation up to the early 1900s much of the agrarian population continued to be bound by the system of debt peonage known as sharecropping. Sharecropping and the labour camp are labour strategies of the Southern economy that has been conditioned by the history of slavery. There was a large-scale migration North in the hope of better prospects.

Jazz (1992), Morrison’s novel that immediately succeeds Beloved may be taken as a sequel to it, mainly through the character Wild who is considered to be Beloved sent out of Sethe’s house as the novel ends. Jazz deals with the period of the Great Migration just after World War I when black people moved from the rural South to the industrial North. Though not as traumatic as the earlier move of their forbears in slave ships, this was no less profound because freedom without economic opportunity had turned out to be a sick joke and conditions that persisted were analogous to
slavery. Continuous discrimination, combined with psychological factors, led to the so-called ghetto syndrome which isolated the black minority from the rest of American society. Though Harlem was the beacon of light for Africans all over the United States, for many, the legacy of oppression continued creating confusion and uncertainty. Inhabitants of Morrison’s Harlem internalize the violence of the system that leads to destruction rather than a drive for survival. *Jazz* explores the devastating effect of racism on blacks, particularly women who share the common experience of dispossession brought about by whites, directly or indirectly.

The novel refers to the riot at East St. Louis, which is one of the worst in American history. Among the two hundred killed were Dorcas’s parents—her father was pulled off a street car and stomped to death and her mother “had gone back home to try and forget the color of his entrails, when her home was torched and she burned crispy in its flame.” So the eight-year-old Dorcas “went to two funerals in five days and never said a word” (57). Dorcas escapes her parents’ fate but the memory remains. Dorcas’s aunt, Alice Manfred, who is incapable of taking on the role of the mother and knows her limitations, views her as a “mishandled child who saw her parents burn up” (113). Dorcas’s involvement with the elderly married man Joe Trace, and later with the young man Acton, is her means of escape from the strict vigilance of Alice. Alice is scared of white men who lean out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their
palms. So she tutors her niece to hide her womanliness and to do anything to avoid a white boy over the age of eleven.

Dorcas retains an element of the wild in her due to the psychic wound that festers silently in her. The main reason for Joe’s attraction for Dorcas is that she reminds him of Wild, his unacknowledged mother who had disappeared into the forest soon after he was born. According to Harding and Martin, Wild can be viewed as the memory of the original homeland, the lost African mother and the despoilment of a whole people under slavery, as well as a witness to the exploitation and violations to which a young black woman was subject in the Post-Civil War South of the 1880s (54). While Wild, the naked berry-black woman avoids human habitation, Dorcas, by contrast, seeks pleasure from company to find some meaning in life. But her life comes to a sudden end at the age of eighteen when Joe murders her in jealous rage. After she is shot, the ambulance does not arrive before morning because she is black. Though their lives seem entirely divergent, Wild and Dorcas in their different ways represent all the violence and loss suffered by the black race. In fact, Wild’s story is connected to all the other stories of deprivation.

Joe’s wife, Violet also suffers acutely from lack of mothering resulting from white oppression. As Violet’s father is mostly an absent figure, the home is put together by her mother Rose Dear. But Rose Dear becomes a complete loser when bill-collecting men dispossess her of
everything including the chair she sits on. In fact, she is tipped out of the chair “like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don’t want to touch it or pick it up in your arms” (98). Deprived of house and land, the mother and children live secretly in an abandoned shack, eating what the neighbours provide, till True Belle, Rose Dear’s mother, arrives to take charge. These harrowing experiences cause Rose Dear to exist in a mentally deranged state for four years. Finally, tired of waiting for her husband’s return, she takes her life by jumping into the well. Violet, prompted by her desire to escape from the painful memories, leaves her native village for the city.

Long before whites fragmented her life, Rose Dear had suffered a major deprivation when her mother decided to devote her life to a white girl called Vera Louise Gray. True Belle represents the loyal black mammy to the white family in the antebellum South who remains faithful even after Emancipation. She had to leave behind her husband and two daughters aged eight and ten to the care of an old aunt to look after Vera and her mulatto son, Golden Gray, hoping that Vera might help her buy all of them out of slavery. But she had to wait till 1888 to be free. Finally Vera consented to give her ten dollars as the wages for twenty-two years of service when convinced that the old woman was dying. Only then she was able to answer the pleas of her daughter Rose Dear.
True Belle fed her grandchildren with exaggerated stories of the impeccability of Golden Gray whom the old woman worshipped. Growing up hearing these stories, Violet learns to shift her affection to the nearly white boy with golden hair who becomes her lover in her fantasy and comes to represent for her “miscegenation as the avenue to assimilation and acceptance” (Heinze 33). Though Violet is considered quite good-looking, she yearns for a paler skin and attributes Joe’s infatuation for Dorcas to the girl’s light skin and long hair. Her violent feelings prompt her to mutilate the girl’s corpse even after Joe murders her. Thus white standards interfere in the lives of black people, preventing them from establishing proper relationships. However, Angela Burton argues that Dorcas’s “sugar-flawed skin,” distinguished from Violet’s “boot-black skin,” signifies on the illicit sexual economy of sugar-plantation culture. In this sense it signifies white slaveholders’ sexual violation of black female slaves whose purity became “flawed” (177). Ophelia’s light skin in Naylor’s Mama Day that earns her the name Cocoa is also the result of racial mingling. However, pigmentation as a sign of black racial purity is taken to an extreme in Morrison’s Paradise (1997).

Violet and Joe are also victims of physical violence from whites. After falling in love with Joe, Violet meets him in the night and is often late for work in the morning. She is punished with welts given by a two-tone peckerwood. Though they run away from want and violence after
marriage, Joe and Violet still encounter the horrors of oppression and discrimination as they go on exchanging one place for another. In 1901 Joe became bold enough to buy a piece of land but the whites ran them off. When they boarded the Southern Sky to go to Rome they had to move five times in four different cars to abide by the Jim Crow Law. In the riot of 1917 he escaped with a head injury. Joe heard that the riots started when some whites sent invitations “to come see a colored man burn alive” (128). In Jazz the focus is not on slavery but its legacy to a generation removed in time but not place from its grasp.

One peculiar method of oppression faced by black women from whites is highlighted in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which is the story of a thirteen-year-old black girl called Pecola who yearns for blue eyes. When Pauline Breedlove is admitted in the charity ward of the hospital for delivering the child Pecola, the white doctors engage in nice friendly talk with the white women but they treat Pauline roughly. Pauline experiences the pangs of childbirth, something she is unable to communicate to the white male doctors. But she is more deeply hurt by the insensitive remark of the senior doctor to his assistants: “now these here women you don’t have any trouble with. They deliver right away and with no pain. Just like horses” (124-25).

Wade-Gayles notes the significance of this scene: “As a poor woman, Pauline lies defenseless, her nakedness exposed to a group of
interns who callously treat the nameless patients in the charity ward. And as a black woman, she is humiliated and debased by the racist assumptions these doctors make about her” (75). By using the imagery of horses foaling, Pauline is linked to animal, as in Beloved and Hurston’s image of black woman as “mule uh de world” (29). Pauline registers her protest by moaning more than she needs to, trying to convey the message that the colour of one’s skin does not determine one’s pain.

Eye portrays to a greater extent than Jazz the disastrous consequences suffered by blacks imbibing the dominant images of white middle class society regarding beauty and self-worth, while having lost sight of their own positive self-image. The preponderance of white cultural and racial images creates what may be termed a “zero image” in blacks. Images from the Bible as well as the Morality plays associate whiteness with beauty and virtue, and blackness with ugliness and evil. Black becomes synonymous with rejection, defeat, and impossibility (Rosenblatt 9). Morrison explains that the Breedloves look ugly because they are convinced of their ugliness. “It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question” and “threw as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it” (39). As Grewal points out, Morrison shockingly dramatizes Du Bois’ concept of “double consciousness” (30).
Another device that Morrison employs to suggest the debilitating effect of white standards on black Americans is the Dick-and-Jane primer that presents the ideal white family with father, mother, a son and a daughter, and a dog and a cat as pets. Sections from the primer are placed at the beginning of each of the following chapters as an ironic comment on the far from ideal family that cannot conform to the homogenizing ideology. As Butler-Evans observes, the contrast offered by the ideal world of the primer and the real world inhabited by the Breedloves is structured around several sets of binary oppositions: “White/Black, affluence/poverty, desirability/undesirability, order/chaos, valued/devalued” (68). The increasing disorder in the second and third versions of the primer suggests the breakdown of the black family. The violation of grammar and syntax breaks the conventional semiotics which defamiliarizes traditional sign systems in order to create an alternate linguistic space for reinscribing and reinterpreting African American presence (Mori 74).

Emulation of white femininity leads only to alienation and despair. Shirley Temple on cups, Mary Jane on candy wrappers, and Jean Harlow on the screen popularize white male ideals of femininity. So whiteness acts as an instrument of oppression for black females. Pauline, who tries to imitate white film stars and finds satisfaction as maid in a white family, manages to pass on a sense of inferiority to Pecola who comes to believe that all her problems will be solved if she possesses a pair of blue eyes.
Pecola’s desire is more than result of her personal story. Constantly bombarded by white images of beauty exemplified in blue eyes, blond hair, and white skin, black girls grow up with an enfeebled psyche.

Cynthia A. Davis finds many of Morrison’s characters who try to define themselves through the eyes of others in Bad Faith as they do not own responsibility to define themselves (29). From an existential point of view, the white man is for the black man the one who looks at, the one whose eyes give shape to and determine his existence, the being for whom he is an object. Since the dominant group dictates the social norms that the subordinate group must abide by, the latter becomes the object of gaze. The black family is perceived as “different” and negative connotations are ascribed to this difference.

The novel discloses the white cultural construction of blackness as absence and a sign of invisibility, though it is a mark of racial identity. Yacobowski, the white immigrant storekeeper does not see Pecola because for him there is nothing to see and she notices the vacuum in his eyes, the total absence of human recognition. Further, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes that much of black literature makes use of the trope that is not “the presence of the voice at all, but its absence” (Signifying 167). So the storekeeper chides Pecola, “Christ. Kantcha talk?” (49). Morrison examines the subtle manifestations of white supremacy that promotes the cultural glorification of white aesthetic.
Morrison’s second novel, *Sula* (1974), has as its background “a nigger joke” (4), a deceit practiced by the whites on the blacks of Medallion by making them accept hilly land as payment for their labour and promise of freedom, after naming it Bottom. It is the power of “naming by decree that is power over and against those who are forbidden to name their own experience” (Dworkin 17).

Discrimination continues to haunt blacks all through their life. However, Nel Wright, Sula’s inseparable companion, comes to understand its real meaning during a trip South with her mother, Helene, to visit Helene’s dying grandmother. The white conductor humiliates Helene for entering the coach for whites by mistake, “What you think you doin’, gal?” (20). Nel is surprised by her elegant and normally poised mother’s eagerness to please the white conductor, using an apologetic tone and a rather foolish smile. Another humiliation during the last leg of their journey is being obliged to relieve themselves, squatting down in the grass, as there are no longer any toilets for the coloured.

As she grows older, Nel has direct experiences of victimization from whites. Four white boys, the sons of some newly arrived Irish settlers, entertain themselves in the afternoon by harassing black children. Once they catch her and push her from hand to hand until they grow tired of the frightened helpless face. As Fromm says, the power over others is achieved by many in experiencing their fear (236). In order to avoid these bullies,
Nel takes a more elaborate route home from school. She and Sula duck them for weeks till finally Sula takes a decision to face them. Spotting their prey, the boys advance and stand blocking their path. They are intimidated only when Sula lops off the top of her finger with a knife.

The whites, threatened by the new economic prosperity of the newly freed blacks, often resort to violence to take away their property or drive them out of business. *The Song of Solomon* (1977), the story of the ill-fated descendents of Macon Dead I, an ex-slave, reveals the white man’s economic aim to liquidate his black competitor. Butlers, the white family, cheat the original Macon Dead of his property by making the illiterate man sign some papers, and shoot him off the fence while guarding his land. This preposterous murder renders Macon Dead II and his sister Pilate homeless and rootless. Even the name “Dead” is a misnomer and yet another “nigger joke.” The drunken agent at the freedman’s bureau had committed a grave error by writing his place Macon as his first name and his father’s status (dead) as his surname, causing them to lose the past and heritage.

Guitar Bains, the friend of Macon Dead III or Milkman, is unable to eat sweets because they are associated in his mind with the accidental death of his father when he got sliced at the sawmill. The callous white boss offered the children some candy, saying that his wife had made it especially for them. It equally disturbs Guitar to remember how his mother ingratiated herself before the white boss on receiving forty dollars as
compensation. She bought each of the children a big peppermint stick on the day of the funeral. The imagery evokes the violence of feelings engendered in Guitar who later joins Seven Days, an organization to avenge whites: “Guitar’s two sisters and baby brother sucked away at the bone-white and blood–red stick, but Guitar couldn’t” (225). When the burdens are too heavy, the mother runs off leaving the children.

In her younger days Pilate learned that blacks were not allowed to board passenger trains because they “Ain’t supposed to go nowhere” (145). Reba, Pilate’s daughter is singularly lucky in raffles but when she wins a diamond ring in a contest, she is denied the publicity for the winner. Though thy give her the prize, the authorities publish the picture of the white man who won the second prize because Reba happens to be black. To start with, Mercy Hospital denies admission to black patients and disallows black physicians to practise there. So the black residents name it No Mercy Hospital. The street where Dr. Foster, the first coloured physician lived, comes to be known as Doctor Street but since the authorities refuse to acknowledge it, they call it Not Doctor Street. In Paradise, the name of the town Ruby itself is the product of discrimination as it is named after the girl who dies on a trip because no hospitals or doctors are willing to treat blacks.

The harmful effects of accepting another value system are seen in Hagar, Pilate’s granddaughter. She feels that Milkman rejects her because
she does not possess silky hair, lemon-coloured skin, and gray-blue eyes. She tries to discover in the mirror a false image that she hopes will retrieve her boyfriend. The shopping spree that she undertakes before her death reveals her bondage to consumerist culture that expects women to be uniformly beautiful. Hagar uses money, a power usually appropriated by men, to adorn herself in order to be attractive for her man.

Set in the latter half of the twentieth century, Morrison’s latest novel, Love (2003), is the story of Bill Cosey, a successful black man who owned Cosey’s Hotel and Resort that brought pride to blacks even if they were excluded from it. The resort’s motto was, “The best good time,” and it meant: “The best good time this side of the law” (33). The frequent bacchanals in Cosey’s boats gave an illusion of equality between whites and blacks, men and women, but only while they last. Julia, Cosey’s first wife, belonged to a family of farmers always being done out of acres by white landowners. Heed, his second wife remembers Boss Silk making her pass from damp sweat to chill. “Wondering if he wanted sex or just her humiliation; or maybe the money he’d come for plus a quick feel” (187). The beauty of Up Beach is destroyed when the authorities install too many lights thinking that dark people would then do fewer dark things.

The harsh confrontation between blacks and whites is seen even in Morrison’s Tar Baby (1981), where the blacks have gone a long way from the shackles of slavery. Through assimilation of the dominant white culture
Jadine, the female protagonist, denies her black roots by resisting everything black. The covert violence and exploitation underneath self-indulgent, privileged lives (Melissa Walker 195-96) is seen in Valerian the white candy king living in the Caribbean Isle de Chevaliers. Though he allows Jadine to dine with him, he is still the master. Franz Fanon says: “The white man is a master who has allowed his slaves to eat at his table” (219).

Alice Walker’s novels reflect her historical consciousness. Her second novel, *Meridian* (1976), tells the story of Meridian Hill who finds for herself a place in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Herself a Civil Rights activist, Walker tries to show how her heroine’s life is transformed by the Movement. The story begins at a point of time in the 1970s and is then taken backward to the 1960s, thus tracing the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement, its violent aftermath, and eventual decline.

The novel also contains the stories of Meridian’s mother, grandmother, great-grand mother, and even her great-great-great-grandmother that serve to establish the systematic victimization of black women by whites as an on-going process. Meridian’s mother Mrs. Hill’s great-great-grandmother was a slave who had her two children sold away, while they were only toddlers. She made it a practice to steal them back by following the man who bought them. The third time she was caught and whipped till the muscles on her back began to show. Finally, she was allowed to keep the children on condition that they were to eat only what
the mother could provide. They had a precarious existence till the mother
died due to slow starvation over the years. The children were sold on the
day of the mother’s funeral. However, Mrs. Hill’s great-grandmother was
able to buy her freedom as well as that of her husband and children with
the money she earned for her master by painting decorations on barns.

Mrs. Hill herself has very bitter experiences from white men and
even boys. In her teens, like Alice in Jazz, she “learned to scurry out of the
way of white men- because she was good-looking, defenseless and black”
(123). Later, Mrs. Hill used to work for white families around Christmas
for some extra money. She is shocked by the behaviour of the young sons
of the family who are young enough to be her sons but do not hesitate to
call her by her first name or even make indecent advances. She can only
reprimand them, reminding them of her age. However, she knows that they
would not be interested in her human dignity as she is black and a female.
“Not lady, not even woman, since both these words conjured up something
larger than sex; they spoke of a somebody as opposed to something” (107).
While some of them liked black women for sex, for others it was a matter
of gaining experience or initiation into the adult world. Either way, the
black woman is only a commodity for use.

Apart from the stories of Meridian’s maternal ancestors, the history
of slavery is vividly traced in the story of Louvinie, a black slave brought
from West Africa to the Saxon plantation. The children loved to hear the
stories of blood-curdling horror that she told. When one such story led to the death of the youngest of the Saxon children, a boy of seven suffering from a flimsy heart, Louvinie’s tongue was viciously clipped out at the root and ground under the heel of Master Saxon. She mutely pleaded for her tongue because, according to her native tradition, the singer in one’s soul was lost forever unless one had one’s tongue in one’s mouth or in a special spot of one’s choice. Finally, the tongue was kicked towards her and she buried it under a magnolia tree, which later outgrew all the other trees in the plantation and came to be known as Sojourner, a name reverberating with significance in the tradition of black women’s awareness of their rights. Louvinie embodies the fate of those who dare to raise their tongue against racial patriarchy. Such a tongue is promptly uprooted and silenced.

In course of time, the Saxon plantation was handed over for the founding of Saxon College, which Meridian joins as a student much later after giving up her child for adoption. Though it means an escape from her mundane existence, gradually, Meridian realizes that she and her fellow students have two enemies. One is Saxon that wants them to become ladies. Walker too was forced to leave Spelman College where she could not be herself due to the rigorous stand of the authorities. The other is the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society. The pressure caused by the two forces at times makes the students break down.
One of Meridian’s classmates is dragged out of a picket line by four thugs who forcibly make her drink a pint of ammonia. Though she recovers physically, she is far from recovered mentally. When she is severely chastised for standing about with her boyfriend after calling hours, her nerves are wrecked and she is forced to withdraw from school for the rest of the term. She thus becomes a victim of the two forces combined.

The story of Wild Child, given as an anecdote in the novel, is linked to the stories of other women through images of childbearing, murder and suicide. She is a thirteen-year-old waif lured into the campus by some of the girls when she is observed to be pregnant. “Unkempt, unpredictable, loud and independent, the Wild Child embodies the opposite of every Saxon ideal and demonstrates the falseness of Saxon’s social codes” (Pifer 81). Like Wild in Jazz, Wild Child is elusive of refined society. Finding herself the marginalized outsider, she bolts from the Saxon campus to be run over by a speeding vehicle. The girls’ wish to have her funeral inside the Saxon chapel is thwarted by the authorities. Wild Child’s poor neighbours who come to attend the funeral instinctively feel the disapproval and ostracism at Saxon and vanish from the scene.

After witnessing the extreme violence against black dissidents by the federal government and the police, a group of students gets converted to a belief in violence and tries to coerce Meridian into declaring her willingness to die for the Revolution, and to kill for the Revolution, which
is still more difficult for her. But finally Meridian joins the Civil Rights Movement, prompted by the bombing of a house in her neighbourhood during the night in which three small children die, several grown-ups are injured and one adult is missing.

She is arrested one night along with Truman Held, a young black student activist, for demonstrating outside the local jail. Since the jail is full, the earlier demonstrators are released to make room for the new arrivals. Those hurried out of prison have their faces misshapen from swellings and discolored from bruises. Then the troopers turn to Meridian and others with their bludgeons. One blow knocks Meridian to the ground where people trample her. Within minutes they are beaten inside the jail where the sheriff grabs her by the hair and someone punches and kicks her in the back. Soon Meridian begins to suffer the psychological effects of such brutal treatment. The first of these is being in a state of constant tears. Later, she begins to develop other symptoms like the shaking of her hands, the twitch in her left eye, or feeling the impact of a bullet on her back.

Another incident that testifies to the brutality of the authorities takes place when Meridian on an impulse invites a girl called Anne to join the demonstration. While they sit down at a luncheon counter in Woolworth’s, the white owners of the store douse them with catsup, smear them with mustard, and sprinkle them with salt and pepper. Then they are arrested. In the middle of the night, screams are heard from another cell, which
Meridian feels sure, are those of Anne. She never sees Anne again. As for herself, Meridian does not dread confrontation with the police but welcomes the clubs slashing down on her from above. Meridian witnesses atrocities like small black children chased by grown white men brandishing axe handles, or old women dragged out of stores and beaten in the sidewalk. She finds racism endemic in the whole system and comes to believe that “violence is as American as the cherry pie!” (18?).

Meridian endures victimization when she goes to hospital to abort her unwanted pregnancy from Truman. The doctor lectures her on her morals while he performs the abortion without anaesthetic and the pain makes her see stars. He further reveals a lack of empathy as he sarcastically agrees to tie her tubes if she would let him in on “some of all this extracurricular activity” (115).

Even after the heyday of the Civil Rights Movement, discrimination still continues. Meridian joins the midnight march in protest against the town’s segregated hospital facilities. The blacks in Chicokema are allowed to see the dried up body of the white woman Marilene O’Shay exhibited as one of the wonders of the world only on Thursdays. But Meridian challenges this segregation by leading a group of black children to see the mummy woman on any day by daring the muzzle of the tank bought by the whites in 1960s to protect themselves from blacks demanding equal rights.
“As she drew nearer the tank, it seems to grow larger and whiter than ever and she seemed smaller and blacker than ever” (21).

Walker’s first novel The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970) deals with the vicious system of sharecropping which emasculates black men and subjects black women to sexual exploitation by white men. It covers a period of time from 1920 to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and tells the story of three generations of Copelands. The daughter of a Georgian sharecropper, Walker would very well be aware of the privations of such a life. Grange Copeland’s first life is marred by the oppressive and dehumanizing system that prompts him to desert his family. The second phase spent in the North brings him scorching experiences of discrimination. His third life is one of regeneration and expiation. Circumstances force his docile wife Margaret to offer herself to Shipley the white man. Later on, she takes many lovers and has a baby. Faced with the ignominity of the proof of her deviance as well his own collusion in it, Grange leaves Margaret who kills herself as well as the baby. Brownfield, who follows in his father’s footsteps, oppresses his gentle wife Mem and finally murders her. His youngest daughter, Ruth lives under the care of Grange but once out of prison, Brownfield demands his daughter, conniving with a corrupt white judge, who epitomizes the racist disorder in the South, a “man who was allowed to play God” (245).
Ruth does not have to endure the sort of oppression suffered by her ancestors. But she realizes the force of intellectual violence committed on her race when the official version of history with its racial hierarchy is thrust upon them. Ruth studies in an all-black school that cannot afford to have its own textbooks. In the history class she examines the used history textbook sent out from the whites’ school. Inside the cover of the book, is drawn a diagram entitled “The Tree of the Family of Man” representing the different races of the world. At the top of the diagram are white people. Below that the yellow races are represented. Next come American Indians. Ruth is shocked to find at the bottom of the tree “not actually joined to it but emanating from a kind of rootless branch” a man “in black, with fuzzy hair, fat grinning lips, and a bone sticking through his nose” (186). What pains Ruth more is the note written by the white girl, which reads: A Nigger.

In Walker’s *The Color Purple* (1982), all of Celie’s sufferings can be traced back to the greedy whites that lynch her father, a successful store owner who falls prey to jealousy. Following this atrocity, Celie’s mother loses her mind and later marries the villainous Alfonso who oppresses her as well as Celie and her sister Nettie. The pregnant Celie is taken out of school to dress wild game for white hunters. Years later, after learning the truth, Celie goes to meet Alfonso. He tells her that her daddy did not know how to get along with whites. To do that “you got to give ’em something.
Either your money, your land, your woman or your ass. So what I did was just right off offer to give ’em money” (188).

Sofia, the strong and bold wife of Harpo, Celie’s stepson, dramatizes the fate of the female in revolt. Once the mayor’s wife stops to admire Sofia’s children and asks her if she would be her maid. Sofia’s cheeky answer leads to a quarrel with the mayor himself. She is brutally assaulted, subdued and arrested, culminating in a twelve-year sentence. The harsh prison life breaks Sofia’s spirit to a great extent. Her family cooks up a plan to alleviate her suffering by sending Mary Agnes, Harpo’s girl friend, to the prison warden. She requests him not to send Sofia to work in the mayor’s house, knowing that she would be sent there immediately. Though the trick works, Mary Agnes becomes a victim as she is raped by the warden.

Sofia works at the mayor’s house like a slave and teaches her mistress how to drive. In a moment of magnanimity, the mayor’s wife promises to drive Sofia to her family that she has not seen in five years. But she is piqued by Sofia’s assumption that she will be sitting in the front just because she had taught her to drive and Sofia goes to the back seat. When they reach Sofia’s sister Odessa’s house, the engine breaks down and Sofia has to fetch the mechanic to repair it. So finally, she gets only fifteen minutes to spend with her children instead of the one day promised to her, thus falling a prey to the white woman’s whim.
Even a famous blues singer like Shug Avery has to put up with racial segregation, driving all night as they find no place to stop. After their trip to Memphis, Celie too writes to Nettie about going off into the bushes to relieve themselves as it happens to Nell and Helene. The Jim Crow train she takes to New York bothers Nettie. However, she is more upset by the remark made by a white man on the platform in South Carolina. When he hears that they are going to Africa, “he looked offended and tickled too. Niggers going to Africa, he said to his wife. Now I have seen everything” (141).

In the novels of Gloria Naylor discussed in this study, violence to black women by whites is not as pronounced as it is in the novels of Morrison and Walker. But it is certainly the backdrop of the action and there are some instances of such victimization. There are also cases of discrimination.

The most prominent instance of the abuse of black women is seen in the story of Ben and his daughter in *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982). Though the novel primarily deals with the lives of the seven women residing in Brewster Place, all of who share the common experience of being used and battered, it also tells the pathetic story of Ben the caretaker. Ben is seldom sober because drinking is his means of escaping painful memories. As a sharecropper in the South, Ben has suffered much abuse from Mr. Clyde, the white man who promises him more land. So he is forced to send his daughter to work at his house but she is unwilling to
work there and complains about the white man’s messing with her. However, Ben’s wife does not believe her and insists on sending her to the white man. She spends the night there and Ben has to bring her home on Saturday morning.

Ben greatly resents this situation but he is powerless to oppose Mr. Clyde or even his own wife. He represents poor black men who feel emasculated by their masters because they find that tokens of manhood like wealth and power are reserved for white men. He has to keep on drinking all night on Friday in order to be able to smile at Mr. Clyde in the morning. But he also notices the beaten look of his daughter. This goes on for some time till the girl decides to leave for Memphis where she can make more money. The guilt for the inability to protect the honour of his daughter continues to haunt him.

Etta Mae Johnson, another character in Women, leaves her home in Rock Vale because of her involvement with a white man called Johnny Bricks. Bricks’s relatives wait in ambush for two days and then return to burn down Etta’s father’s barn. The Sheriff, obviously supporting the whites, tells Etta’s father that he has escaped lightly.

Naylor’s novel Bailey’s Café (1992) is full of instances of discrimination against blacks. Bailey remembers the old days when coloured people had a hard time getting jobs even as servants in fine homes. Sadie gets the work of cleaning gold spittoons in a fancy
whorehouse and Peaches too learns that there are not many shops willing to hire even black girls with fair skin.

Sweet Esther, whose eyes cannot bear light, is a victim of the sadistic treatment she has put up with for twelve years from a man who is termed her husband. As a twelve-year-old, she has been handed over to her brother’s master without any ritual or ceremony. Esther is called into the dark cellar of his house and asked to kneel before the man so that he can satiate his perverted desires with “leather-and-metal things” (97), exemplifying Dworkin’s contention that “male pleasure is inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting; that sexual fun and sexual passion in the male imagination are inseparable from the brutality of male history” (69).

Esther is denied the freedom of speech because he constantly says, “We won’t speak about this, Esther” (95, 96, 97, 98, 99) and she learns that in the dark, words have a different meaning. She remembers her brother’s wife’s complaint about coming up with a big belly every time her husband puts his hands on her. But for her there are no babies and she wonders: “Is there another kind of touch? Should he touch me when I am in bed and not kneeling in the cellar?” (98).

In her essay, “Women’s Lib,” Toni Morrison notes that the different histories and agendas of white and black women are apparent in bathroom signs designating “White Ladies” and “Colored Women” (15). Grewal makes a note of the conflictual power relationship between the
white lady and the coloured woman in Pauline Breedlove and Mrs. Fisher in *Eye*, Corinthians and her poet-mistress Michael Mary Graham in *Song*, Ondine and Margaret in *Tar Baby*, Sethe and Mrs. Garner in *Beloved*, and Vera Louise and True Belle in *Jazz* (3-4). One can extend the list to Walker and to a small extent to Naylor.

The prejudice against the black woman evinced even in governmental policies is brought to light by the Moynihan Report that states the “Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so far out of line with the rest of American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well” (75).

Morrison, Walker, and Naylor reconstruct black history in their fiction, and employ the past to recall a violent era that has spread its tentacles to the present. It is very difficult for blacks to emerge from the nightmarish shadows of their past thraldom. This painful memory is writ deep in their unconscious mind and their present exhibits traces of these shadows that continue to render life intolerable for them. The experiences range from unbridled cruelty entailing loss of life to inhuman practices like the bit in the mouth that equates them with animals. The black female, in addition to non-gender specific violence, suffers from sexual exploitation
by whites. The mulatto is the living proof of such humiliating experiences that fasten the feeling of inferiority on to the racially enslaved.

The black slave woman suffers from multiple oppression from whites in the roles of labourer, cook, nursemaid, mammy, slut, and a breeder of future slaves. What is worse, she has no right to her children after they are born. Even after Emancipation they are haunted by painful memories of the past as well as the discrimination and segregation facing them at every turn. They find little emancipation in practice. Naturally, the home should serve as a refuge from the travails of the white-dominated society. Otherwise, their indignation boils on the hearth and in the home.