

UNIVERSITY OF JYVÄSKYLÄ

'Not My People'

CONFRONTATION WITH THE PAST
AND SEARCH FOR IDENTITY:
TONI MORRISON'S
SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED

A Pro Gradu Thesis

by

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Tutkielman tarkoituksena on tarkastella menneisyyden kohtaamista ja identiteetin kehitystä Toni Morrisonin romaaneissa *Song of Solomon* ja *Beloved*. Tutkielmassa vastataan kysymyksiin: 1) Miten kyseisten romaanien henkilöiden menneisyys vaikuttaa heidän nykyiseen elämäänsä ja ihmissuhteisiinsa? 2) Millaisia ristiriitoja menneisyyden kohtaaminen aiheuttaa? 3) Millainen on romaanien henkilöiden läpikäymä prosessi heidän etsiessään uutta identiteettiä ja miten he kehittyvät prosessin aikana?

Tutkielma on luonteeltaan kuvaileva ja romaaneja käsitellään rinnakkain yhteisten teemojen mukaan. Lähtökohtana ovat romaanien henkilöiden elämäkokemukset ja niiden monitahoiset vaikutukset heidän identiteettiinsä ja maailmankuvaansa. Viitekehyksen henkilöhistorioille muodostavat sellaiset mustien historiaan olennaisesti liittyvät ilmiöt kuten orjuus, rasismi ja taistelu tasa-arvon puolesta. Täten materiaali koostuu romaanien ja niitä koskevien artikkelien lisäksi mustien historiaa käsittelevästä kirjallisuudesta.

Molempien romaanien lähtökohtana ovat henkilöiden menneisyys ja siihen liittyvät traumaattiset kokemukset. Menneisyydellä on voimakas vaikutus henkilöiden jokapäiväiseen elämään, koska käsittelemättä jääneet traumaattiset kokemukset ovat vääristäneet heidän minäkuvaansa, viivästyttäneet heidän henkistä kasvuaan ja vahingoittaneet heidän ihmissuhteitaan. Menneisyyden kohtaaminen herättää kysymyksiä omasta identiteetistä ja tehdyistä valinnoista, ja henkilöt joutuvat kyseenalaistamaan ne käsitykset ja arvot, joiden varaan he ovat rakentaneet elämänsä. Uuden identiteetin etsiminen on kokonaisvaltainen prosessi, jossa henkilöiden on hyväksyttävä vastuunsa teoistaan ja tietoisesti pyrittävä kehittämään itseään kohtaamalla syvimmat pelkonsa. Identiteetin kehittymisen myötä henkilöt saavuttavat tasapainon suhteessa menneisyyteensä ja ymmärtävät oman arvonsa paitsi yksilöinä myös yhteisönsä jäseninä.

Asiasanat: Toni Morrison. American history. black history. black literature. *Beloved*. *Song of Solomon*

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INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades Toni Morrison has become a significant figure in American and African American literature in spite of the harsh criticism she has received during her literary career. Today she is considered a spokesperson for the black community in the United States, and her work has received nominations, such as the National Book Award in Fiction in 1975, and been awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award and the Nobel prize for literature in 1993. Up to date Morrison has written seven novels, essays and a book of literary criticism.

Morrison made her breakthrough with the publication of *Song of Solomon* in 1977, which was the first book by a black writer to be included in the selection of Book of the month Club since Richard Wright's *Native Son* in 1940. However, it was the publication of *Beloved* in 1987 which brought Morrison to the forefront of American letters. *Beloved* was nominated for the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Award. It also won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Robert Kennedy Award in 1988. In spite of such wide recognition, *Beloved* also provoked criticism toward Morrison and led to a more extensive debate about what could or should be included in historical accounts of slavery and emancipation. *Beloved* was seen by some critics as "a blackface holocaust novel" and the epitome of black women's literary assault on black men, while others were concerned with what they considered an inadequate moral vision evoking the horrors of slavery to summon up white guilt.

In the early seventies Morrison worked as a senior editor at Random House and helped some important black writers get published. She promoted black writers, black history and black culture and continues to be concerned with the critical approaches to black writing. In an essay from 1984 Morrison comments on the critical approaches of her works:

My general disappointment in some of the criticism that my work has received has nothing to do with approval. It has something to do with the vocabulary used in order to describe these things. I don't like to find my books condemned as bad or praised as good, when that condemnation or that praise is based on criteria from other paradigms. I would much prefer that they were dismissed or embraced based on the success of their

accomplishment within the culture out of which I write. (Toni Morrison, *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*).

Today Morrison is widely respected among black intellectuals for raising issues affecting black women and advancing black women's resistance and activism. A substantial body of critical studies on her works has been published over the past two decades concerning for example her revisions of the African American and American traditions. In her novels Morrison describes the black experience in America, revealing aspects of black communal history and culture through the personal accounts of her characters. The perspective of Morrison's work is predominantly black and female, on which she commented in an interview in 1985:

When I view the world, perceive it and write about it, it's the world of black people. It's not that I won't write about white people. I just know that when I'm trying to develop the various themes I write about, the people who best manifest those various themes for me are the black people whom I invent. It's not deliberate or calculated or self-consciously black, because I recognize and despise the artificial black writing some writers do. I feel them slumming among black people.

Relationships between women were always written about as though they were subordinate to some other roles they're playing ... So when I was making up people in *Sula*, it was inevitable I would focus on black women, not out of ignorance of any other kind of people, but because they are of compelling interest to me. (Claudia Tate (ed.), *Black Women Writers at Work*).

Morrison's novels typically include many levels and ambiguities which make them open to different interpretations. As the story unfolds, the fragments of the events and the characters' personalities come together forming a rather complex whole. Due to this complexity, which is typical of Morrison, the final analysis of the novels is left to the individual reader.

What makes Morrison a remarkable writer is her extraordinary characters and the skillful way in which she portrays them. The characters struggle to understand good and evil, love, friendship, beauty, ugliness and death. Her main characters are black and mostly female, and although most of them are mature women with families and children, she does show interest in

depicting characters in adolescence and young adulthood, too. Regardless of the extent of her characters' life experience, there is a common denominator to Morrison's characters: love. Love or its absence is manifested in the relationship of parent and child, man and woman and the individual and the community. In spite of their hurtful and sometimes violent actions, Morrison's characters always act in the name of love or rather their perception of it. Whether their goal is to connect with a single person or a community, there is always the underlying need to be accepted and to belong. This can be seen in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* as well. In spite of the differences between the novels, their main characters have all been damaged in one way or another. In her novels Morrison concentrates on describing the different modes of survival the characters use in their everyday lives. Although her novels do offer an insight to the black psyche and the realities of race, her characters and their emotions are universal in nature. Morrison's goal is therefore to look beyond the color of her characters' skin and see them simply as humans and individuals.

Morrison's works stem from the double heritage of African American storytelling tradition and American novel. While Western values provide the characters with financial wealth, Morrison identifies the African American culture as a source of power which creates unity within and between individuals. In her novels the process of healing, or what she calls "rememory", is an important factor in finding one's identity and forming satisfactory relationships. She also emphasizes the role of the community in the life of an individual, whereby the disintegration of the community leads to the disintegration of the individual. Therefore it is vital for an individual to maintain a connection not only to the community, but to the ancestors and the African American cultural heritage.

The events in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are set against certain periods and issues in the American history, which are relevant not only to the characters in these particular novels, but to blacks as a whole. Therefore I will begin by looking into the history of the black people in the United States including the development of slavery, the integration of blacks into society after the abolition of slavery and the fight for racial equality in the 1960s. Then I will consider the characteristics of black literature and their occurrence in

Song of Solomon and *Beloved*. Furthermore, the novels are analysed in detail through their common themes.

1 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of the black people in the United States can not be dealt without considering slavery, which developed during colonialization. According to Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 13-15), the desire for cheap labor and economic gain were for centuries dominating factors in the development of American society. Changes in British government policies during the colonial era created a need for cheap labor. Initially there was no need for large numbers of slaves, since the colony had not yet grown sufficiently, and white Englishmen were still coming to the British colonies of North America. However, the practice of slavery evolved as the decades passed. The combination of the Navigation Acts, low tobacco prices, and difficulties in obtaining additional indentured servants from England resulted in the importation of African slaves on a grand scale. More importantly, the costs of slaves were very small in relation to the economic gain. Therefore the colonists, especially the owners of large Southern plantations, were in favor of the importation of slaves. A new policy of bringing in blacks to help lower production costs of staple crops was initiated in 1662, and moral concerns were usually cast aside for economic profit. Having slaves simply made sense: they would increase and multiply and therefore guarantee a permanent work force for their masters.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 15-19) point out the tight system of control which was placed over slaves. The slave codes determined the status of blacks and their children, and they could not hold property or testify in court. Moreover, there was a growing racism among whites against blacks who were regarded with contempt, suspicion and fear. The attitude toward blacks was mirrored in their treatment, and although such brutalities as chopping off of limbs or castration became less common in the eighteenth century, punishments for rebellious behaviour were harsh. In addition to physical labor, there was an attempt to impose English culture on slaves. However, they managed to resist destruction of their culture and instead blended aspects of white Christianity with African religions.

Although slavery was founded on economic factors, it inevitably changed the social structure of the American society and affected the general attitude toward black people. According to Collins (1985: 52-53), the intellectual justification of slavery in part strengthened white feelings toward blacks. Many slaveowners saw slavery as a historical legacy to which they had to adapt themselves. Blacks could not be allowed to be free within the United States because of their innate inferiority, bestiality and the danger they imposed on the white population. Since the freed blacks were not interested in being removed from the United States, slavery seemed an inescapable social necessity in the light of the whites' racial beliefs. In addition, slavery was justified by the conviction that, since labor is a duty given from God, it is ultimately to the benefit of both slaveowners themselves and their slaves. In the early nineteenth century there was a strengthening belief that Africans had already been degraded to slavery in their homeland. This in turn enforced the view that slavery was actually an improvement, introducing God and a sense of earthly purpose to the Africans. Large numbers of freed blacks would therefore regress to barbarians and impose a threat without the control of the slaveowners. Such stimulation of white fears contributed to the acceptance of slavery and the existence of racism.

Collins (1985: 54-66) states that, although slavery was criticized, experiments with manumission and dreams of emancipation did not last. The chances for a slave to be granted his or her freedom were scarce, and the majority of free blacks lived under severe pressures. In addition to harsh work contracts and hard manual labor, their dwellings could be invaded by white patrols looking for runaway slaves or their residency in a state could be scrutinized and terminated. Moreover, for a period of time free blacks who committed serious crimes were whipped and sent back to slavery in order to relieve the overcrowding in prisons. Therefore the freedom of blacks was conditioned by the approval and legislative force of the white population. Attacks upon slavery by outsiders were regarded as assaults against the Southern way of life, and all ranks of white Southerners supported it loyally. The defence of slavery was not consistent, but it filled the political, religious and intellectual needs of the slaveowners. Even the poorer whites did not challenge slavery. In spite of their resentment of the slaveowners, there was no organized political movement against slavery because it was still

considered as the best way of controlling blacks. In addition, many of the non-slaveowners had prospects of becoming slaveowners, and therefore practical and self-serving interests together with racial attitudes were justifications for enslavement.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 44-47) support the view that the failure of antislavery was largely due to economic factors. Many planters held slavery to be morally wrong, but few concrete proposals were made to end the institution. Some regions, such as Virginia and North Carolina, passed laws to make manumission easier and a few planters did free their slaves. However, as the prospects to expand cotton-growing areas improved, many white Southerners affirmed their beliefs that maintaining slaves was necessary. At the same time the presence of free blacks created discomfort among the whites. The removal of free blacks from the United States by colonization had its supporters, but the movement was not successful. Since blacks could not be removed, laws were enacted to exclude them. Free blacks were barred from entering several states, and others required them to post bonds as a guarantee of good behaviour. Moreover, acts of violence toward blacks sometimes intensified as the Civil War approached.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 98-103) state that the Civil War was the most serious crisis since the American Revolution. There was a national concern to terminate the institution of slavery. While Southerners wanted to extend slavery and transport slaves westward to new territories, many Northerners refused to concur with their view. Politically the country was in chaos and there was a need for new leaders. The Republican party which was founded in 1854 aimed at preventing the expansion of slavery. Abraham Lincoln, whose views on race issues were conservative, was elected president in 1860. As a result some states seceded from the Union, and the war that had started to preserve the Union ended with the abolition of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slave under rebel control, and as the Union armies pushed South, slavery was disintegrated. Before the country could be united after such an upheaval there were efforts to help the former slaves to integrate into the new society. The Congress failed in establishing a Freedman's Bureau, and although amendments outlawing slavery, protecting civil rights and preventing black men from being denied the vote were adopted to the Constitution, they did not ease the transition into the free world. Insufficient

education, agrarian background, lack of land redistribution and racism hindered the progress of the blacks. During Reconstruction racism at times led to violence against blacks to stop them from voting and exercising their civil rights. The white South together with the help of the Ku Klux Klan overthrew the Reconstruction governments which resulted in political powerlessness and few opportunities for industrial work for the blacks. The South was ruled by the new industrialists, and the civil rights and the right to vote were not effective until after World War II.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 103-104) point out that in spite of the failure to win equality, there was a growth of black institutional life in the South. The black family received the sanction of law and thousands of unions were legalized. On the whole the black family was stabilized in ways which had been impossible under slavery. Moreover, there was a considerable growth of black churches which had a political function within the black community determining policy and providing the blacks with politicians and other leaders. The churches also provided an outlet for African American culture in the form of spirituals and gospels which expressed the black experience and hope for the future.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 144-164) comment on the failure of the Reconstruction Congress to provide blacks with land which resulted in black migration to the North. The process of adjustment was especially slow for urban blacks, most of whom remained working-class and had menial jobs with insufficient wages and no job security. In addition to economic reasons, Southern racism drew blacks to the Northern cities. There was considerable discrimination of blacks by trade unions. Black men, women and children worked long hours for low wages often in hazardous working conditions. Moreover, the living conditions in black ghettos were severely insufficient which lead to serious health problems. The black communities, churches and various organizations had an important role in supporting their members to overcome the harshness of everyday life. Participation in the activities of their ethnic community helped the blacks to adapt and go out into the white society.

The main events in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* are set in the 1960s, which is an important decade in the history of the black people in the United States. Dinnerstein et al (1990: 296-300) state that the effort to achieve racial equality created conflicts which intensified in the 1960s. Efforts had been

made to diminish discrimination and segregation in the turn of the century but they were not successful. Although some improvements were made in housing and health issues, the civil rights of the black Americans were often violated. In spite of the growing awareness of the realities and the contributions of black Americans, a majority of white people did not realize the extent of their problems.

According to Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 300-305), in the 1960s blacks fought in the courts, in politics and ultimately in the streets against discrimination. To achieve their goal they attempted to utilize the federal government since it had a considerable power and influence on American society. Moreover, the federal government had worked in their favor before by destroying slavery and attempting to bring racial equality to the South. By using lobbying and legal action many cases were won. Discriminatory election procedures were outlawed and segregated schools, housing, transportation facilities and recreational areas were banned by the federal courts. An important change on the road to social and economic equality was school desegregation. In addition to legal action, nonviolent demonstrations were held throughout the decade activating large numbers of blacks. There was a strengthening belief for the necessity of federal legislation to protect the protesters during peaceful demonstrations. The national attention caused by the police and popular brutality in the Birmingham demonstration in 1963 resulted in the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. As a result of this new law, there was a gradual integration of Southern public facilities. However, the law did not end racial discrimination. The problems of poor housing, inadequate employment opportunities and lack of political power persisted. Moreover, the effects of the Civil Rights Act in Northern cities were limited.

In spite of the legislation, poverty among blacks could not be eliminated. Bruck and Karrer (1982: 38-41) state that the labor market problems persisted, housing was often substandard and the income gap between the blacks and the whites started once again to widen. The failure of the civil rights legislation to fulfill its promises created unrest and frustration, and many blacks started to lose faith in the legalistic and non-violent approach. As a result the politics of violence gained support and riots erupted in urban areas. A set of violent acts was often triggered by a police action against blacks who in turn resorted to vandalism. In order to control the riots,

violent actions were taken by the police, National Guard or even federal troops. Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 307) point out that, although the civil rights legislation had given blacks the right to vote, the changes in the legal system did not improve the living conditions of the people living in the ghettos who wanted something more immediate and concrete. The previous experiences with white liberals together with the Democratic party's national convention in 1964 convinced many to reject the goal of desegregation. At the convention the black representatives who had been elected in Mississippi were refused their seat, and the group chosen by a "lilywhite" gathering in the state was recognized instead. As a result, many blacks started to insist on equality and preservation of black culture and values under the guidance of black leadership.

Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 307-311) mention the loss of interest in the civil rights movement by many white liberals. The Vietnamese war did in part take attention away from the situation, but those who had been sympathetic to some of the goals of the civil rights movement felt increasingly threatened by the efforts of the blacks to gain absolute equality. During the same time the civil rights movement began to disintegrate. Simultaneously black nationalism gained support among those who wanted more concrete and immediate results. The nationalistic groups did not have a large following, but they signified the weakening of civil rights approaches and the divided opinions within the black community. The ideas of nationalism included cultural emphasis on African history and African American music and arts. Strict moral conduct and the building of an economic foundation within the black community were also emphasized. For some radical groups vandalism and killings became expressions of "Black Power", and as anger and frustration increased in the ghettos, violent resistance and riots became more common. Moreover, different views on tactics and aims to achieve equality widened the split between black radicals and the black middle classes.

According to Reed (1988: 50), the origins of black nationalism can be dated to the 1780s when the Free African Society of Philadelphia was founded. There was an immediate expansion of the organization, and auxiliaries were founded in several other northern cities. These organizations were motivated by the desire to serve the growing community of northern free blacks in many different functions, such as black religious freedom, organizing

black self-help efforts and providing the community with its first organized political defense. Although these versatile activities did play a role in the political awakening of the blacks, they did not constitute modern black nationalism because there was no developed ideology on which a separate political entity could be based. While most early black political activists worked within the American political framework to achieve acceptance and equality, modern black nationalism incorporates attitudes and actions which are directed at controlling, directing and shaping political destiny. Black nationalism has focused on building a political entity and on achieving acceptance for the black Americans as a nation.

The argument of cultural nationalism that the culture, style of life, world view and aesthetic values of black people are distinctly different from white Americans is pointed out by Reed (1988: 50-51). However, black cultural nationalism has taken on two separate positions since the 1950s. First of all, there is the group of militant cultural nationalists who assert the superiority of black cultural nationalist products based on their moral and aesthetic values. The representatives of this position claim black artistic impulses to be pure and free from the guilt of capitalist oppression. Moreover, they assert that the world recognizes jazz as the only legitimate American contribution to world culture. Conservative cultural nationalists, on the other hand, make no value judgements. They maintain the view that there are many subcultures in American society and the African American culture is one of them.

Since this study focuses on two novels by a prominent black writer, it is relevant to look at the features typical for black literature. The appreciation of black literature has increased during the past few decades, which can be seen in the body of critical studies and the transition of black literature into mainstream literary field. Black literature forms its own genre with certain characteristics stemming from a unique historical and cultural standpoint. Therefore it is relevant to consider those characteristics in order to gain a more comprehensive view of black literature as a whole and of Morrison as a representative of black literature.

2 FEATURES OF BLACK LITERATURE

The black literary tradition has a double heritage. Gates Jr (1984: 12) states that the texts by writers of African descent are a combination of a European or American literary tradition, and one of the several related but distinct black traditions. Black vernacular and formal literature are acknowledged as the two basic components of black texts. Dyson (1993: 31-32) mentions that when black people were brought to slavery, reading and writing were prohibited by law. Instead they developed a resourceful oral tradition based on African culture to express and reinforce their social norms, cultural values and religious beliefs. Even with the development of literary tradition, oral tradition still influences the expressions of black culture. Animal tales and fables are among the best-known elements of the black storytelling tradition whereby the different figures represent specific traits of personality and culture. In addition, animal fables entail moral lessons communicating what kind of behaviour is socially acceptable in the community.

One form of the black folklore and oral tradition, which has long been a part of African American storytelling is the trickster tale. Krumholz (1992: 401-402) mentions that in recent African American literary criticism the trickster has been evoked as a deconstructive force in culture and literature. The trickster brings about role reversals in which a weaker character or an animal wins a more powerful one by being smarter. The trickster tale is also used as an outlet to gain psychological release in healing processes. Another function of the trickster is to manifest the irrationality of life. In many occasions the trickster represents the slave, but some trickster figures are best understood as representing the masters exposing the deceit of the powerful. Therefore the trickster expresses the amorality of the world and can not be categorized in terms of absolute good or evil.

The slave narrative and the picaresque novel are examples of the black literary tradition. According to Piccinato (1994: 88-89), both modes of narration are retrospective. The narrator is either a former slave who is looking back at his life from the perspective of freedom, or a picaro assessing the society that formerly rejected him. The episodes and circumstances selected by the narrator form a progressive series in which the hero gradually becomes more aware of the harsh and contradictory reality of the world surrounding him. As a

result of this heightened state of consciousness, the hero initiates his search for an identity and struggle for survival. Consequently, he is forced into trickery and deception in order to gain a better sense of himself and improve his position. The pattern of narration in the slave narrative and the picaresque novel is characterized by an upward movement of fulfillment whereby the slave rises from inhuman conditions to freedom and the picaro integrates into society.

Piccinato (1994: 90-95) points out that slave narratives aim at giving both the personal history of the former slave and describing the reality of the institution of slavery. Where the structure of slave narratives is concerned, there is a rather common narrative pattern which coincides with the different phases of the growth of consciousness and the liberation of the narrator. At first the system of slavery is described through the experiences of the narrator as a child from the standpoint of his or her present life, which is followed by the growth of consciousness and the refusal of slavery. This in turn leads to escape which is both an individual act and a shared communal event. In the case of the picaresque novel a similar scheme can be found whereby each trial leads the picaro into a new awareness who by relying on ingenuity and trickery overcomes all obstacles and becomes a honorable member of the society.

Piccinato (1994: 95-98) sees the act of writing as a response to the necessity of telling one's story of liberation. As the consciousness and the sense of one's freedom grows, the need to write and communicate becomes more urgent. Moreover, the act of writing is a response to the need to project the story onto a collective concept of freedom. Therefore the former slave has the responsibility to strive for a better world and offer himself or herself as an example for the black community of the power of the word and freedom.

Snead (1984: 68-71) mentions repetition as one of the characteristics of black culture and literature. The most characteristic form of repetition can be found in performance, in the rhythm of music, dance and language. The black church is at the junction of music and language and it is an essential manifestation of repetition. Repetition of words and phrases is used as a means to provide black literature with structure and rhythm. The repetitive format of black folklore and folk-lyric is often adopted without alterations into the black novel. Repetition can therefore be used to shape the plot of the

novel. By using the repetitive forms of language and rhetoric the entire plot can be shaped into a circle where the narrative is non-progressive. Such use of repetition can be seen as a return of a pre-logical past where, instead of comprehensible words, there was 'mumbo jumbo'.

Another feature of black literature is the act of naming. Benston (1984: 152-165) identifies the act of naming as a feature of black literature. Language is used to define people, and in black literature black people in many cases redefine themselves by changing their name. Naming is therefore an attempt to reform the fragmented familial past and distance oneself from the master and the institution of slavery. African American literature as a whole can be seen as a genealogical poem attempting to restore continuity imposed by the history of black presence in the United States. In other words, there is the need to displace the literal master by a literal act of unnamng. Even with the social and economic freedom, the new self of the black man was not complete without the act of naming oneself. This simultaneous unnamng and naming affirmed autonomy and identification in relation to the past. Moreover, the practice of naming occurs in African American literature as a reflection of the tensions between and individual and the community, intuition and influence and self-reliance and history. The rise of "black consciousness" in the 1960s intensified the concern with naming in African American literature.

The journey motif is central to African American literary tradition. According to Butler (1984-1985: 58-62), instead of being directed toward a particular place, the journey motif typically exults in movement through indefinite space. In addition, when compared with journey books from English and European traditions, the African American classics are typically open-ended in nature. In other words, movement and change are viewed as a process whereby these journeys consist of unlimited personal development and function as a metaphor of the American desire for the "new life". For example, at the end of slave narratives the hero is usually pointed "North" in order to reach a state of human liberation. Although modern black writing does have its share of characters trapped by their environment and stripped of their humanity, there are also protagonists who are regenerated by open movement. Thus the journey is an exploration of the inner self toward varying degrees of independence and freedom.

According to Tally (1994: 357-364), it is important to understand the special historical position of African American women in literature, restricted both by race and sex. In literature many black women writers have chosen to recover an "invisible" history of the slave experience which in many cases entails the difficult task of righting the history as it is represented by white narrators. In other words, the black female author uses her creative ability to ensure the survival of not only the nuclear family, but also that of her community by revitalizing the values that sustained blacks during slavery. These values include a strong sense of racial pride and self-worth, an egalitarian relationship between sexes, a common front against racism and a commitment to improve conditions for the race as a whole. Thus the combination of history and fiction is used by contemporary female writers to preserve their culture. This sense of mission has remained as an outstanding feature in black women's writing. In addition to the moral vision of family and community, black women writers emphasize the role of religion which is a source of strength for the community. In spite of the changes in the circumstances of the black community, the moral imperative of sustaining the traditional values has not changed.

Tate (1985: 16-18) comments on the unique vantage point of black women writers where their work is influenced by Western culture and traces of African heritage and male-female attitudes. In most cases they look at the world from the point of view of black female characters who struggle to maintain their dignity and emotional sensitivity in an impersonal and often threatening world. However, there is no direct correspondence between real life events and the literary product. The relationship of personal experience and imaginary world in the finished product depends on the individual writer. What is typical for many black women writers is the tendency to write for themselves in order to maintain intellectual and emotional clarity and to sustain personal development.

The quest theme is seen by Tate (1985: 19-21) as a characteristic of black women's writing, whereby they search for a meaningful identity in a world of growing isolation, moral decay and meaninglessness. Since the character's quest for self-discovery is in many cases physically limited because of ties to children and community, she often remains in one place while reaching a new awareness of the self and the outside world. Therefore

the destination of the quest is not a place but a state of mind, and the emergence of her awareness is often communicated through symbols. Although the heroine's quest is physically restricted, her need to form personal relationships adds depth to her quest. In these relationships she is either confused and troubled or has reached some understanding of herself and of others which benefits both parties. There is an element of exploitation and instability in the first type of relationship, and in order for the relationship to mature the heroine must resolve the central conflict.

Another characteristic of black women's writing pointed out by Tate (1985: 22-24) is self-esteem or rather the lack of it. Whatever the origin of the heroine's loss of pride and personal worth, she is caught in a vicious circle whereby the deterioration of her self-esteem increases her involvement in destructive relationships which in turn erode her confidence in herself even further. The situation can be resolved either by ending or maintaining the relationship, and frequently the black heroine resolves the conflict through change which can be a result of a wilfull decision or a more subtle, but equally valid ability to construct a meaningful life based on her intellect and emotions. Whether the character remains trapped in a destructive relationship or breaks it in order to improve her life, the message is that women are responsible for making themselves stronger. Self-appreciation will in turn enable them to form mutually fulfilling relationships.

Tate (1985: 24-25) points out that while many black writers regardless of their sex celebrate black survival of racial obstacles, there are writers who pay attention to the less successful characters and the validity of their struggle. In addition to celebrating racial victory, black women writers acknowledge defeat in order to insure the recognition of vulnerability and avoid its consequences. Therefore works of black women, such as Maya Angelou, Gwendolyn Brooks, Zora Neale Hurston, Gayl Jones and Alice Walker, encourage black people to take responsibility for their behaviour and maintain their sense of human dignity in spite of the racial and social factors.

As far as Morrison's works are concerned, most of the features mentioned above can be found in her writing. Morrison places considerable importance on the preservation and recovery of oral tradition and the African American cultural heritage in general. Telling stories has an important role in maintaining a meaningful connection to the ancestors and to the members of

one's immediate family. Thus oral tradition is a significant factor in reinforcing African American cultural values and sustaining one's identity. In addition, the majority of Morrison's characters struggle in varying degrees with issues of self-esteem and personal development. Therefore the quest theme is a relevant feature in her writing and is present in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. However, while the black female character often remains in one place during her quest for self-discovery, in *Song of Solomon* an important female character searches for a new awareness without physical limitations. Thus the character is somewhat unconventional and expresses herself in a way typical for male characters.

Another common feature in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is the journey motif. Typical for African American literary tradition, the journey is a continuous process toward independence and freedom. This is evident especially in *Song of Solomon* where the journey taken by the protagonist provides him with a growing awareness of himself and the world. Open movement is therefore a prerequisite for independence and personal growth. Although there are characters in *Beloved* who are trapped by their environment as well, open movement is not necessarily the answer to their problems. Taking a journey can be of tremendous importance in taking charge of one's life, but constant travelling is seen rather as a form of escaping the painful past than facing it and developing as a person. Thus there are characters who are either regenerated or debilitated by open movement. In addition to these features, Morrison uses the combination of history and fiction in *Beloved* where she focuses on depicting the slave experience through the lives of the characters, thus contributing to the recovery of the "invisible" history of slavery. In her novels Morrison also emphasizes the importance of self-appreciation and egalitarian relationships, which are common features in black women's writing.

The primary data of this study consists of Toni Morrison's novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The aim is to analyse the confrontation with the past and the search for identity through the experiences of the individual characters by dealing with the novels according to their common themes. The analysis of the novels includes studying the effects of the past on the present and on the relationships of the characters as well as looking at the conflicts which result from the confrontation with the past. Moreover, the process which the

characters go through while searching for a new identity and the effects of that process are examined. Since both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* focus on depicting the changes within and between individuals, the themes deal with the issues related to the personal and interpersonal development of the characters. Therefore the features of black literature which have been discussed above are not the primary concern of the thesis. However, they do have an important role in the novels in providing the framework within which the themes are considered. Thus such features as the journey motif and the quest theme are included in order to place *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* within the larger context of black literature.

3 SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED

3. 1 The Setting

In order to discuss the events which take place in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, it is important to look at the background of the novels and establish the general framework which has shaped the lives of the characters. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison tells the story of the Dead family, and follows the development of the main character through his search of identity while at the same time revealing the history of four generations of the family. The Dead are a wealthy black family living in an unnamed town in upper Michigan in the Great Lakes region in the beginning of the 1960s. The protagonist is Macon "Milkman" Dead, a self-centered young man, who is detached both from his family and the black community. He has ambiguous feelings toward his parents who are bound together by habit and mutual disgust. Manipulated and fought over by his parents, Milkman grows up in an oppressive environment, which has an extensive effect on his personality and therefore on his treatment of other people. While living a materially privileged life, Milkman's growth as a person is noticeably arrested. He has adopted the Western values of money and property at the expense of his mental development. Thus his goal in life is to gain wealth and independence in order to live his life without obligations and responsibilities. Affected by the example of his parent's

marriage, Milkman is determined to avoid commitment and the unhappiness it brings.

Milkman leads a carefree life made possible by his father's wealth and the sacrifices of his mother and his sisters. He takes everything for granted and is oblivious to the feelings of the people closest to him. He is profoundly ignorant not only of the members of his family, but of himself as well. When Milkman is suddenly faced with the past and its implications on his own life and identity, a process of change is triggered which leads to the formation of a new identity. Milkman is already in his early thirties when he has his identity crisis. After hearing some disturbing details concerning the relationship of his parents, he starts to question everything. Milkman's inability to deal with the past and the uncertain future make him frustrated and confused. As a means to solve the situation and gain his independence he leaves home. Eager to find the alleged gold of his aunt Pilate, Milkman retraces her steps in small and remote Southern towns. Along the way the gold loses its meaning and he becomes more and more interested in the family history. Searching for any piece of information about his ancestors, Milkman travels through the countryside with Pilate as his spiritual guide. Slowly the past of his family is revealed, and in the process Milkman finds a new sense of self and a different way of looking at the world. He begins to see himself in relation to his ancestors and the African American cultural heritage.

In *Song of Solomon* the use of setting is elaborate. Morrison does provide the reader with clues, but the setting remains vague. The main events are set in the beginning of the 1960s, and much of the action takes place in an unnamed town somewhere in upper Michigan. The town itself is portrayed paradoxically. On the one hand it is a definite location with restrictive customs and mores, on the other hand it is a condition of placelessness with only vague coordinates in space and time. It seems that by using a setting which is both fluid and fixed, Morrison wants to emphasize the inner state of rootlessness and stagnation of the characters.

The events in *Beloved* are set in the 1870s. The main character is Sethe, a black woman in her forties who lives with her daughter Denver in a house inherited from her mother-in-law in rural Ohio. Sethe's husband Halle disappeared twenty years earlier and she has not heard from him since. Her two sons have run away from home, and Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, has

been dead for years. Therefore the only companion Sethe and Denver have is the ghost whom they believe to be the manifestation of Sethe's dead baby girl. The ghost has haunted the house since Sethe's infanticide, which she committed in a desperate attempt to keep her children from being returned to slavery.

Sethe and Denver live an isolated life. Ostracized by the black community, they live their lives without meaningful contacts to other people who not only disapprove of Sethe's infanticide and her attitude toward the community, but are also afraid of the ghost. The events which change their lives are set in motion when Paul D, Sethe's friend from the days of slavery, comes for a visit and stays. His presence exorcises the ghost, but the disappearance is only temporary. Aggravated by the exorcism, the ghost returns in the figure of a young, black woman called Beloved. The enigmatic character of Beloved takes over the household and quickly gains control over the situation. Beloved's presence stirs up painful memories and profound emotions which have been repressed for years, and in order for the characters to move on with their lives, they must not only confront the past, but accept their responsibility for it as well.

In *Beloved* Sethe is a black woman who, since her escape from slavery twenty years earlier, has fought hard to keep the past at bay. Since then her single aim in life has been to live on and forget the part of her life shadowed by slavery. However, the same tenacity and decisiveness which have made it possible for her to cope with everyday life have stopped her from moving on with her life and growing as a person. The pervasive nature of slavery has affected her view of herself and her loved ones to such a degree that she is unable to change her way of thinking and abandon the mental status of a slave. Therefore nothing has really changed in spite of the changes in Sethe's living conditions. Slavery has shaped her way of thinking to such a degree that even as a free person she is unable to act accordingly. In her mind she is still very much a slave, and although she insists on being an independent person free from her past, her personality and behaviour are to a large extent shaped by slavery. Once Beloved appears, the suppression of the past is no longer an option. The intensity and sudden burst of emotion stirred by Beloved's presence is more than Sethe is able to handle. She becomes a victim of physical deprivation and emotional abuse which almost kills her. She is saved

by Denver's courage and the support of the black community. However, Sethe is ultimately responsible for her own recovery. She is the only one who can change her way of thinking and take the responsibility for her personal growth.

The setting in *Beloved* is less elaborate than the setting in *Song of Solomon*. The characters live in rural Ohio near the river which is used by slaves as a gateway to freedom. There is no obvious connection between the setting and the mental state of the characters as in *Song of Solomon*. Although Sethe and Denver are both physically and mentally confined to the house, their confinement is rather the result than the cause of their mental state. They have isolated themselves out of fear and pride, and the house provides them with security and comfort. Therefore stepping outside the boundaries of the yard is a step toward imminent danger. This belief is best described by Denver's thoughts toward the end of the novel when she is forced to face the world: "... she stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch... Out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again" (*Beloved* 243-244).

On the surface *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* do not seem to have much in common in terms of the characters and their life experiences. However, in spite of the different backgrounds and modes of survival of the characters, both of the novels are ultimately concerned with the issues of personal growth and the complexity of human relationships

3. 2 Family Dynamics

Although both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are concerned with the struggles of individual characters, their development can not be discussed without considering family relations. Whether the relationships between family members are characterized by feelings of closeness or distance, the development of individual characters is intertwined with the way they communicate with the people closest to them. Therefore the relations between family members are of the utmost importance in discussing the novels. On the surface these relationships seem quite straight-forward, but as the events start to unravel the complexity of the interaction between the characters is revealed. A closer look at the way they relate to one another helps to outline

the circumstances and the underlying emotions which affect the behaviour of the characters.

The Dead family lives under the domination of the father, Macon Dead, who rules his family with the same precision and ruthlessness as he conducts his business. The atmosphere in the house is dictated by his overwhelming presence to the extent that "Macon kept every member of his family awkward with fear" (*Song of Solomon* 1989: 10). His position as the richest and most influential black man in the town determines the way he relates to the members of his family. The appearance of respectability and propriety surpasses even the maintenance of family ties. The most obvious proof of this is Macon's attitude toward his sister. He has cut all contact with Pilate not only because of her unacceptable lifestyle, but also because he believes she cheated him out of the gold they found as children. The closeness that once characterized the relationship of the siblings is destroyed by Macon's belief of Pilate's deceit. In addition Macon tries to keep his son away from Pilate by giving him the following advice: "Just listen to what I say. That woman's no good. She's a snake, and can charm you like a snake, but still a snake" (*Song of Solomon* 54). Fortunately Milkman's curiosity for his aunt is only increased by Macon's views. Later in the novel it becomes evident that the relationship with Pilate is the key factor in Milkman's development.

Macon's relationship to his children and wife is characterized by uneasiness and disgust. He treats his daughters, Lena and Corinthias, as trophies of his wealth and success. Lena describes their relationship to Milkman: "First he displayed us, then he splayed us. All our lives were like that: he would parade us like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate us like whores in Babylon" (*Song of Solomon* 216). Macon exercises total power over their lives while at the same time completely ignoring their wishes. The only way the daughters can get their father's attention is to do something he considers wrong or inappropriate. They grow up feeling isolated and worthless, not having enough courage to change their lives. Corinthias finally stands up to her father and decides to share her life with a man she, not her father, has chosen.

Macon's relationship to his son is ambivalent and shadowed by the negative feelings he has for his wife. Although he does love his son, his suspicions make it impossible for him to have a healthy relationship with

Milkman. The only way he can relate to his son is through orders and criticism. Macon's view of the circumstances surrounding the death of his father-in-law and the conception of Milkman pervade his attitude toward his son. Furthermore, as Smith (1985: 726-727) points out, Macon's avid materialism and rugged individualism have made him incapable of showing emotion and communicating normally. His adoption of Western values makes him see even the members of his family as property, degenerating all its members.

The marriage of Macon and Ruth is not a happy one. There are obvious tensions between them which reflect on the family as a whole, and the only thing they share is contempt for each other. For more than thirty years they have had no sexual contact because Macon has shown no interest in Ruth since Milkman was conceived. He is disgusted by her both physically and mentally since he is convinced that Ruth had a sexual relationship with her father. Therefore he sees her as an obscene and devious woman who is not only useless as a wife, but has somehow corrupted his son as well. The main reason for this suspicion is the nickname his son has acquired: to Macon "it sounded dirty, intimate, and hot" (*Song of Solomon* 16). He believes that "it had something to do with his wife and was, like the emotion he always felt when thinking of her, coated with disgust" (*Song of Solomon* 16-17).

Ruth is an unhappy woman who has been treated with submission and disgust first by her father and later by her husband. Her efforts to win over her husband's affection have been to no avail, and so she has resigned herself to a loveless marriage. Because she is deprived of an emotional outlet in her relationship to Macon, Ruth has invested her love on her son Milkman, who in turn has ambivalent feelings toward his mother. The obvious resentment his father has for his mother has affected Milkman's view of Ruth, and he regards her with suspicion. However, in spite of his feelings for Ruth, Milkman is more than happy to accept everything she has to offer. He has grown up thinking that everyone, especially the women in his life, are there to serve him and fill his every need. Therefore he has no consideration for the feelings of others, and in stead of the fearful respect he has for his father, Milkman is mostly indifferent where his mother is concerned. Moreover, Milkman's relationship to his sisters remains distant, and it is only toward the end of the novel when he starts to realize the sacrifices his family members have made in order for him

to have a carefree life. His selfishness and lack of concern for others keep him from creating rapport with his family and growing as a person.

The family dynamics in *Beloved* are different from *Song of Solomon* but none the less interesting. After the death of Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, Sethe was left alone with Denver and the ghost. Over the years the ghost has become a fixed part of their lives, and in a strange way a source of comfort as well. This is largely because the ghost represents something constant in their lives. Although the ghost is largely responsible for the isolation of Sethe and Denver, it is also the only one that does not abandon them. For Sethe the presence of the ghost is something she does not love but has come to accept. For Denver, on the other hand, the ghost is an inseparable part of her life and her personality. The ghost has become her friend and companion, and in its absence "Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out*" (*Beloved* 28-29).

The relationship of Sethe and Denver is a very close one because all they have is each other. Sethe has lost all the people she ever loved except for Denver. Therefore she has given all her love and attention to her daughter, who in spite of Sethe's complete devotion to her has strong ambivalent feelings toward Sethe. On the one hand Denver loves her mother deeply, but on the other hand she is also frightened of her. Denver is not capable of releasing herself from the underlying fear of being killed by her mother like her baby sister was. The fact that the infanticide is never discussed does not help to create an atmosphere of trust between mother and daughter. Since Denver has no personal memory of the event, she has made her own conclusions. Although Denver has no knowledge of the reasons for her mother's violent streak, she believes there is something inside her that makes her capable of extreme violence. When faced with the choice between Sethe and Beloved, Denver remains loyal to Beloved because of the innate fear her that Sethe might harm or even kill Beloved: "Maybe it's still in her the thing that makes it all right to kill her children. I have to tell her. I have to protect her" (*Beloved* 206).

Sethe's love for Denver is unconditional, but somewhat misguided as well. Her protective attitude together with the isolation from the black community have stunted Denver's growth. Sethe's need to protect her from

the outside world has done more harm than good. Moreover, Sethe is unable to let go and see the necessity of treating Denver as an adult. Her view of Denver is best summed up in her comment to Paul D: "A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that suppose to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing" (*Beloved* 45). Denver's view of herself is therefore based on Sethe's treatment of her as a child. As a result Denver is not able to take responsibility for her actions or adopt the identity of a young adult. Therefore, in the absence of outside human contact, her image of herself depends on the feedback she gets from Sethe. Paul D's presence does seem to provide Sethe and Denver with some new insight of the world and the importance of social contact, but before any considerable change takes place on a personal or interpersonal level, Beloved comes into their lives and takes charge of the situation.

Beloved's appearance is the turning point in the lives of the characters although they do not recognize it at the time. As a result of Beloved's appearance, the power relations change considerably. For one, the possibility of Sethe, Denver and Paul D becoming a real family is destroyed. Denver's loyalty to Beloved creates a gulf between her and Paul D: "If there had been an open latch between them, it would have closed" (*Beloved* 57). Paul D's suspicions about Beloved do not get any support from Sethe, and Paul D is gradually pushed aside. Beloved takes over much in the same way as the ghost did before her. But whereas the ghost would throw things around and terrorize the household, Beloved wins Sethe and Denver over by what seems to be complete devotion and boundless love. Both women become emotionally attached to her in a way that seems almost magical, as if they were under some sort of a spell. A complete stranger whom they know nothing about literally walks into their lives and is accepted without question. Although they are at first somewhat puzzled by Beloved's mysterious past, it does not weaken their affection for her. In a matter of days Beloved becomes so important to them that the very thought of her leaving causes enormous anxiety especially in Denver. Beloved becomes an emotional outlet to them, filling the role of daughter and sister.

However, Beloved's arrival drives a wedge between Sethe and Denver. Once Denver realizes that she means nothing to Beloved compared to Sethe, she spends every waking moment to steal Beloved's attention away from

Sethe. Sethe and Beloved become more and more involved in each other's lives while Beloved gradually pushes Denver aside. However, the distance between Sethe and Denver enables Denver to see the severity of the situation and motivates her to seek help. By reaching out, Denver not only saves her mother but also initiates her own search for identity.

Despite of the different backgrounds of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, what they have in common is their inability to communicate with another and understand each other's feelings. Struggling with personal issues, the characters are unable to recognize the effects of their actions and take responsibility for them. Therefore the changes which take place in their lives and their relationships are the basis for both personal and interpersonal development.

3. 3 The Supernatural Element

An important part of the magic and the emotional range in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* stems from the connection and intertwining of the material world and the spiritual world, which is manifested by the strong presence of the supernatural in the lives of the characters. It is interesting that, whether this supernatural element is evil, as in *Beloved* or good as in *Song of Solomon*, it is personified in two major characters. Moreover, people's perception of these characters is in clear opposition with their true nature. Therefore Beloved, who is initially considered as harmless and loving, turns out to be cruel and merciless, while the infamous and despised Pilate is in reality a deeply caring and nurturing woman. These misguided views are in part responsible for the inability of the characters to see themselves and their actions for what they really are.

According to Malmgren (1995: 97), the supernatural element in *Beloved* is an essential one, and *Beloved* can be seen as a ghost story since it deals with the "spiteful" spirit of Sethe's dead baby girl. A poltergeist, Beloved's initial manifestation, haunts the house and the people living in it with a vengeance. Shortly after the infanticide, strange phenomena start taking over the house: the sound of baby's laughter and steps on the stairs, tiny hand prints appearing in a cake, moving furniture and shattering mirrors. Sethe and her family are aware of the ghost's origins, but they are still surprised by the

powerful manifestations of the ghost:"... she had forgotten... the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stones under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough" (*Beloved* 5). Sometimes weeks or even months go by without disturbances, but the ghost is always present, casting a shadow over Sethe's family until it finally drives away Sethe's sons Howard and Buglar. In addition to Sethe's infanticide, the ghost functions as a barrier between Sethe and the black community. People are not only suspicious of Sethe, but they are also too afraid of the ghost to approach the house and make any contact with its residents.

The ghost is exorcised twice before it disappears for good. The initial exorcism is done by Paul D, but it is effective only temporarily. As a result the ghost takes more drastic action, and the spirit returns in the human shape of a young, black woman who literally "walked out of the water". As it is later revealed, the spirit of Sethe's dead baby girl has returned to confront and revenge Sethe for the killing. The second exorcism is done by the women of the black community after they become aware of the severity of Sethe's situation. After years of denying Sethe their support, the women decide to help her get rid of the ghost. The general feeling among the women is best summed up by Ella, one of Sethe's neighbours: "Whatever Sethe had done, Ella didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present ... she could not countenance the possibility of sin moving on in the house, unleashed and sassy" (*Beloved* 256). It is the support of the community which enables Sethe to release herself from *Beloved* and initiate the process of healing.

The figure of *Beloved* is highly ambiguous, and the reader is given no direct answer concerning her supernatural nature. There are two possible interpretations of her and information to support both of these views. One interpretation is that *Beloved* is simply a young, black woman who has been kept hidden and locked up by a white man for his own purposes. This possibility is supported by *Beloved* herself when she admits that she knew one white man and describes being called beautiful in the darkness. Furthermore, there is a description of a sea voyage, which is an indication that *Beloved* might have been brought from Africa as a slave and has experienced the slave ship passage. Malmgren (1995: 98) also sees Morrison's dedication of

the novel to the black Africans who died on the way to slavery as an indication of Beloved's human nature.

However, there is an impressive body of evidence supporting the view that Beloved is indeed the reincarnation of Sethe's dead baby girl. She calls herself by the same name that was carved on the tombstone of Sethe's baby. Such a detail could naturally be a coincidence, but there are other things which make this view more plausible. For example, Beloved is the same age than Sethe's daughter would have been if she had lived. She also has a scar on her neck that could have been left from Sethe's assault on her. Physical appearance aside, Beloved has detailed information about the past that no stranger could have. She also possesses an exceptional amount of physical strength, and she has the ability to leave and enter a room without making a sound. Thus the novel presents a rather contradictory and enigmatic view of Beloved, leaving the final interpretation to the individual reader. The novel would certainly be easier to understand if Beloved were given a more concrete identity. On the whole, however, the ambiguity and elusiveness of Beloved is one of the factors which makes the novel more memorable and interesting.

On the personal level, Beloved is the baby that Sethe killed. She is the physical embodiment of Sethe's past, a visible reminder of the single act which changed everything. Beloved's arrival therefore resurrects the past and forces Sethe to confront and understand her act. However, Beloved is meant to be seen as something more than just a character in the novel or a reminder of one woman's personal history. She is also the embodiment of the communal past of the black people, representing all the victims of slavery. She thus symbolizes the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten.

The supernatural element in *Song of Solomon* is strongly connected to Milkman's aunt Pilate, who, in addition to his friend Guitar, is the only person in Milkman's life who offers an alternative view of the world. The spiritual world is very much a part of Pilate's life, and she claims to be in contact with her dead father, who gives her advice in difficult times. Moreover, Pilate seems to possess skills which among other things enable Ruth to get pregnant with Milkman. However, the most remarkable thing about Pilate is the fact that she was born without a navel. This physical abnormality becomes a decisive factor in Pilate's life, labeling her as unnatural and out of this world. Once people find out that she has no navel, they become frightened and see her as a threat to

their well-being. In their mind her physical defect is connected with supernatural powers and the ability to cast spells on others. Therefore Pilate is ostracized from each community she wants to join. As a result of people's treatment of her, Pilate learns to hide her defect. Moreover, the fear of being found out forces her to move around and avoid getting too attached to anyone. Although Pilate's constant travelling enables her to become a unique and independent person, it also robs her of the support and membership of the black community therefore inhibiting a part of her identity from developing.

Pilate is the good witch who is misunderstood and treated unfairly because she is different. In addition, she abandons the lifestyle accepted by the majority and lives according to her own rules. Although Pilate is by no means perfect and without unresolved issues, she has been able to preserve a certain kind of innocence and compassion which the other characters have lost. She has a connection to the past and to the ancestors, and because of that connection she has in many respects been able to stay true to herself and to her heritage. Therefore Pilate can be seen not only as a personal reminder of the Dead family history, but also as a keeper of stories, a link to the communal past and culture of the black people.

The supernatural element has an important role in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. This is indicated by Morrison's choice to link the supernatural element with the central characters of Pilate and Beloved who play an essential part in the lives of the characters. Moreover, their supernatural characteristics and abilities, which both fascinate and frighten other people, are an inseparable part of their personalities. In people's minds these features not only make them different, but dangerous as well. In *Song of Solomon* Pilate personifies the primitive side of man, the mysterious element of life which can not be explained by logic. In addition to the fearful respect she receives from people, Pilate is considered a threat to the community. Her lifestyle challenges the social and moral norms of the community, questioning the majority's view of the world. Beloved, on the other hand, is the personified reminder of the horrors of slavery, a manifestation of the collective past, which the members of the black community try hard to forget. The appearance of Beloved upsets the balance and shows with stunning clarity the false belief that an unspoken past is a forgotten one. Therefore the fear and anger which is directed toward Beloved is a result of the realization that, as long as the

past is not confronted, it has the power to enslave you and rob you of your humanity and independence.

There are two distinctly different views regarding the treatment of the supernatural in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. On the one hand the supernatural element is seen as a natural part of everyday life where the presence of ghosts and spirits provides the characters with comfort and guidance. On the other hand anything that cannot be explained by logic is considered a threat to the well-being of the individual and the community. Irrespective of the views adopted by individual characters, Morrison's choice to assign the supernatural element with such an important role is based on something more than adding an interesting twist to the plot of the novels. Thus the supernatural element can be seen as a symbol of the inner demons which haunt the characters, manifesting the issues they are unable or unwilling to resolve. Therefore the point that Morrison makes is that the characters have to face their demons in order to reach their full potential as individuals and as members of their community.

The following analysis of *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* focuses on the individual characters and their development. In order to provide a coherent analysis, the novels are examined according to their common themes. The themes deal with issues which are relevant to the personal and interpersonal development of the characters, thus depicting the conflicts within and between individuals in search of a stable identity.

4 DISTORTIONS OF LOVE

4.1 Interaction Between Past and Present

Torn by strong and often ambivalent feelings, the relationships of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are fraught with conflict and tension to an extent where normal interaction is impossible. Thus love and its distortions are an important element in the novels. Because of personal experiences and unresolved issues, the characters's view of love has been distorted. As a result, love manifests itself as control and possession, disrupting the normal development of identity and relationships. The problems

of one generation have an undeniable effect on the next generation, and the issues of abandonment, manipulation and desire appear repeatedly in the central relationships. Since the characters are not aware or try to deny the effect the past has in their lives, they are unable to change the harmful patterns of behaviour. Thus they enforce the possessive view of love and transmit it onto their children.

The personal past of the characters is a relevant factor in discussing their view of love. For various reasons they have either been deprived of love or the love they have received has been detrimental to them. Whatever the circumstances of their formative years, the unresolved issues of the past are the basis for their distorted view of love. A majority of the characters try to detach themselves from the past and the painful experiences by not discussing them. Although such a defense mechanism enables them to go on with everyday life it does not help them solve the underlying issues. In spite of the efforts to suppress the past it is always present and reflected in the central relationships.

The relationship of parent and child is at the centre of both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Whether this relationship is a close one as in *Beloved* or more distant as in *Song of Solomon*, it is strongly defined by the individual experiences of love acquired in the important developmental stages of childhood and adolescence. Many of the major characters are either orphans or deprived of one parent, which has a significant effect on their understanding of love. The pervasive effect of the past is manifested primarily in their parenting practices, and their good intentions are shadowed by their misguided actions based on the distorted view of love which they have adopted.

In *Beloved* Sethe is an orphan who has been deprived of parental love since early childhood. She knows nothing of her father except that he was a black man whom her mother loved. She was raised by the slave community, and the closest thing she ever had to a mother was a nurse maid called Nan who was also her only source of information concerning her parents. Although her mother lived on the same farm they had only casual contact. Sethe barely knew her mother and she has only one vivid memory of her:

"One thing she did do. She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, 'This is your ma'am. This', and she pointed. 'I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you know me by this mark.' Scared me so. All I could think of was how important this was and how I needed to have something important to say back, but I couldn't think of anything so I just said what I thought. 'Yes, Ma'am,' I said. 'But how will you know me? How will you know me? Mark me, too,' I said. 'Mark the mark on me too' ". (*Beloved* 61.)

Unfortunately Sethe's next memory of her mother is also her last. Her mother was hanged and Sethe remembers trying to recognize her mother by looking for the mark before she was yanked away from the pile of dead women. Although the fact that Sethe did not have a close relationship to her mother presumably made it easier to deal with her death, such an experience must have affected her. However, it is not until years later that Sethe is confronted with her past. Once *Beloved* starts to ask her questions about the past, the feelings of anger and abandonment toward her mother begin to surface. At this point, however, Sethe is not yet either able or willing to process the various feelings aroused by the events that are taking place in her life. After years of suppressing the past and thereby trying to deny it, she is not prepared for the surge of emotions evoked by *Beloved's* appearance. What makes the situation even harder for her are her own unresolved issues concerning love and motherhood.

There is an important connection between Sethe's distorted view of love and her past. Her complete devotion and possessive love for her children stem from her own experiences of being abandoned and treated as property. Regardless of the circumstances surrounding the death of her mother, as a grown woman with children of her own Sethe feels anger toward her mother for not being there for her. Her mother did let her live, but she did not love her enough to be a part of her life. Even though Sethe was provided with maternal care by Nan and her mother-in-law, they could not make up for the absence of Sethe's mother any more than they could undo the emotional damage inflicted on her by slavery. Sethe herself is not aware of the underlying effect of the past on her behaviour, and therefore she can not recognize the harm she

causes to her children's development by trying to protect them from the outside world. Therefore there is no chance for proper recovery as long as the past is not confronted and accepted.

On the surface Sethe seems to be in accordance with her past. She has moved on with her life in spite of the losses she has experienced and concentrated on being a good mother to her daughter Denver. She has given up the hope of ever seeing her husband again and she believes him to be dead, and she thinks about her sons and her dead mother-in-law only occasionally. However, Sethe's relationship to her past is far from healthy. She sees the past as a constant threat, an enemy she has to fight every day in order to maintain the delicate balance in her life. After eighteen years of her escape from slavery and the killing of her baby girl she is in a sense still running. The fact that she has never talked about the infanticide has a double effect. On the one hand, Sethe could have been overwhelmed by grief and guilt had she paid too much attention on her violent act. On the other hand, Sethe's complete silence about the infanticide imprisons her mind and makes it impossible for her to grow as a person. Moreover, avoiding the subject has a negative effect on her relationship to Denver who is the centre of Sethe's life. Her single goal is to suppress the past and make sure Denver has a better life which in Sethe's mind is achieved by never letting her know about the infanticide. After all, Denver is the only thing she has left and the risk of alienating her by revealing the past is one Sethe is not willing to take.

Sethe sees herself primarily as a mother, and providing Denver with all the love and protection she was deprived of as a child is of the utmost importance to her. However, as a result of her personal experiences, Sethe's image of motherhood is somewhat misguided. In her efforts to be a good mother and protect Denver, she also isolates her from other people thus giving her no proper tools to face the outside world. Denver grows up feeling threatened by the things and people outside her home, and remains dependent on her mother who is the only person with whom she has contact. Although Sethe is aware of Denver's need for meaningful contacts, she does nothing to encourage Denver to go out and meet people. Denver has learnt from her mother that the outside world is full of people and things that are bound to hurt you, and therefore she has chosen voluntary isolation as a means to protect herself.

In *Song of Solomon* the distortions of love do not have such tragic consequences as in *Beloved*, but the past is nevertheless a relevant factor in the parent-child relationship. The absent parents are idolized, and not having them in their lives is experienced as a great loss by their children. However, the physical presence of a parent does not necessarily provide the children with the kind of emotional and moral support they need in order to become strong and independent persons. On the contrary, as a result of their own unresolved issues the parents manifest their love in ways that cause considerable harm. The parents are a part of their children's lives, but for the most part in a way that is intrusive and overpowering. The issues of their personal past affect their view of love and are reflected in their relationships to each other and their children.

Whereas Sethe systematically suppresses the past, in *Song of Solomon* Ruth in many respects lives in the past and what she perceives as a happier time in her life. Because of her husband's successful business her life is financially secure. However, the material wealth can not replace the emotional deprivation of Ruth's life. She is a lonely woman despised by her husband and ignored by her son, and although she is concerned with the future of her two daughters there is a distance between them. In addition to Milkman, the only source of comfort in Ruth's life is her relationship to her dead father whom she visits regularly at the cemetery. The death of her father is something Ruth has never really been able to accept. He was the centre of her life, and even after her marriage maintaining their symbiotic relationship remains as Ruth's number one priority. In the absence of support and comfort from her family, Ruth turns to her dead father whom she sees as the only person who really understands her and cares for her. Although her unusual attachment to her dead father helps her to endure the loneliness she feels, it also keeps her from reaching out and forming a meaningful connection with the living. Ruth associates the feelings of happiness and harmony with the past while her present life, not to mention her future, seems lonely and hostile. Therefore she longs for the past, which in turn puts a strain on her marriage. Moreover, the distorted view of love which she has adopted from her father affects the way she relates to the members of her family and causes considerable damage especially to her son Milkman.

Ruth's view of love has been shaped by her relationship to her father Dr. Foster whom she idolizes not only as a parent but also as a man. When Ruth was a child her father kept her isolated from other people in his selfish claims to be cared for and adored. As Branch (1995: 59-61) points out, by isolating her and compensating for the loss of a mother with material possessions, Foster constructs a dangerously symbiotic relationship to his daughter: he makes her a princess in an ivory tower and never encourages her to try out her wings in the real world. Because of Foster's inability to let go, Ruth is completely dependent on her father and does not have the possibility for personal growth. By keeping Ruth to himself Foster is able to preserve her idealized view of him. Therefore Ruth's identity remains as that of a little girl who thinks her father is a hero, and although her image of him becomes more realistic over the years, Ruth is still unable to let go of him and the past. Since Ruth's present life does not provide her with the kind of unconditional love she feels she received from her father, she has turned to him for comfort and support. After all, the dead can not hurt or reject her as the living have. When confronted by Milkman in the cemetery, Ruth describes her relationship to her father:

"I had no friends, only schoolmates who wanted to touch my dresses and my white silk stockings. But I didn't think I'd ever need a friend because I had him. I was small, but he was big. The only person who ever really cared whether I lived or died. Lots of people were *interested* in whether I lived or died, but he cared. He was not a good man, Macon. Certainly he was an arrogant man, and often a foolish and destructive one. But he cared whether and how I lived, and there was, and is, no one else in the world who ever did. And for that I would do anything". (*Song of Solomon* 124.)

Ruth's view of love is best manifested by her relationship with Milkman which is distorted by her perception of love as possession and control. An important factor which shapes her mothering practices is the loss of her own mother at a young age. The lack of maternal love has damaged Ruth's development, and is in turn reflected in her attitude toward her son. In the absence of a mother she has had to create her own view of motherhood based on her faltering sense of self-esteem and the model of love adopted from her father. According to Branch (1995: 66-67), being abandoned by both

her father and her husband, Ruth is left without any outlet for human contact or stimulation. As a result she uses Milkman to gain physical and emotional pleasure by breastfeeding him until he is old enough to talk, stand up and wear knickers. Breastfeeding her son gives Ruth the feeling of sovereignty and power: "She felt him. His restraint, his indifference, all of which pushed her into fantasy. She had the distinct impression that his lips were pulling from her a thread of light. It was as though she were a cauldron issuing spinning gold" (*Song of Solomon* 13). This private ritual is therefore an act of domination and an effort to find meaning in her life through motherhood.

Like his wife, Milkman's father Macon struggles with unresolved issues related to his past. Macon has a strong need to control everyone and everything around him, which is based on the most formative experience of his life, namely the murder of his father. The loss of a father he deeply loved left Macon feeling insecure and helpless. His strong and self-reliant father, a widely respected black man in his community, was killed by white men because they wanted his land. As a result of this devastating experience, Macon becomes acutely aware of his own powerlessness. After the murder of his father, Macon begins to associate power with money, and the only way he feels he can avoid his father's destiny and regain a sense of control is through avid materialism. Unfortunately Macon applies his materialistic view on people as well, which is best summed up in his advice to Milkman: "Let me tell you right now the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things. And let the things you own own other things. Then you'll own yourself and other people too" (*Song of Solomon* 55).

According to Branch (1995: 66-68), the deep sense of helplessness triggered by the murder of his father changes Macon radically. He spends the remainder of his life fighting back "something wild" which is the sense of his own powerlessness. Macon becomes obsessed with order, and his intense need to control affects his relationship with Milkman bringing up the question of ownership. As a result, Macon does not want anybody else, especially his wife, to have an influence on Milkman. In his mind Milkman belongs to him, and he does everything he can to create distance between Ruth and Milkman.

In spite of the business-like and selfish manor in which Macon relates to Milkman, he acts in what he perceives to be in the best interest of his son. For Macon the measure of a man is integrity, and you can not be a whole man

without self-ownership which can only be achieved through owning something outside the self. By providing Milkman with wealth and teaching him business skills, Macon is giving him the best legacy he can think of: showing him how to cope in the world and gain control over himself and other people. Thus Macon ensures that his son can be his own man, and will never feel helpless and powerless as he did and still does in his heart.

The past has a tremendous effect on the everyday life of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, no matter how determined they are to deny its influence or even its existence. Even when the past is embraced, it distorts the characters' perception of themselves and each other, thus complicating their efforts to sustain a mental balance and gain a new sense of self. Therefore the construction of identity is not possible until the past is confronted honestly.

4. 2 The Question of Identity

Although the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* appear to have achieved a certain balance, they have no secure basis on which to build their lives. Whatever means they use in order to control their lives, they can not ignore the feelings of insecurity and confusion forever. Thus the process of finding one's identity is at the centre of both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The main characters are more or less unaware of who they really are and what they are capable of as individuals. Their image of themselves is distorted and limited, which keeps them from reaching their full potential not only on a personal, but also on an interpersonal level. Moreover, there are unresolved issues which manifest themselves in the relationships of the characters as submission, domination and ownership. A new sense of identity is gained only by solving those issues, which have their root in the personal past of the characters and affect their view of themselves and each other.

Sethe is an independent and a rather introverted person who relies on nobody but herself. In spite of her self-reliance, she does not consider herself to be important or valuable as an individual. The only value she places on herself is that of a mother, a provider of food and security for her daughters. Memories of her own babyhood are activated by practices which signify her motherly devotion:

"I'll tend to her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else - and the only time I did it was took from me - they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby. Nan had to nurse whitebabies and me too because Ma'am was in the rice. The little whitebabies got it first and I got what was left. Or none. There was no nursing milk to call my own. I know what it is like to be without the milk that belongs to you; you have to fight and holler for it, and to have so little left. I'll tell Beloved about that, she'll understand. She my daughter. The one I managed to have milk for and to get it to her even after they stole it ..."
(Beloved 200).

According to FitzGerald (1993: 677-678), this daughterly discourse expresses Sethe's trauma of being abandoned. Sethe's bond with her mother was severed before she had developed a separate identity, and therefore she has no clear sense of self or the boundaries to that self. Similar to a pre-Oedipal infant, she "didn't know where the world stopped and she began" (*Beloved* 164). As a result, Sethe has replaced her individual identity with the role of a mother. To Sethe her children are the only parts of her that are valuable and beautiful. Moreover, by making such a profound investment in being a mother, she is attempting the impossible which is to make up for her own loss as a daughter:

"My plan was to take us all to the other side where my own ma'am is. They stopped me from getting us there, but they didn't stop you [Beloved] from getting here. Ha Ha. You came right on back like a good girl, like a daughter which is what I wanted to be and would have been if my ma'am had been able to get out of the rice long enough before they hanged her and let me be one ... I wonder what they was doing when they was caught. Running, you think? No. Not that. Because she was my ma'am and nobody's ma'am would run off and leave her daughter, would she? Would she, now?" (*Beloved* 203).

Sethe is unable to accept that her mother was her own person with interests separate from her daughter, and that she decided to escape even when it meant separation from her daughter. This traumatic experience of her childhood has lead Sethe to believe that mother and child are an inseparable unit, and the murder of her daughter Beloved is an extreme consequence of this belief.

As a grown woman without individual identity, Sethe focuses all her energy and attention on Denver, who does enjoy being the priority in her mother's life, but feels lonely as well. She misses her grandmother and her brothers, and the ghost is her only companion. Therefore she is highly dependent on her mother for both physical and mental well-being. Her image of herself is based on the feedback she gets from Sethe, who treats her as a child. As a result, Denver has no need to separate herself from her mother and take responsibility for her own life. Sethe's inability to let go of her and encourage her to go out into the world delay the development of Denver's identity. Living in isolation with her mother and the ghost does not offer Denver any challenges, which would motivate her and provide her with the opportunity for personal development. Without the arrival of Paul D and the subsequent events, Denver might not have gained the initiative to search for her own identity separate from her mother.

FitzGerald (1993: 675-677) points out Denver's lack of contact with the social world. She is imprisoned in her home by fear:

"All the time, I'm afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again. I don't know what it is, I don't know who it is, but maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again. I need to know what that thing might be, but I don't want to. Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me too".
(*Beloved* 205.)

When Paul D arrives, it costs Denver the company of both her mother and the ghost. Thus, she is faced with an Oedipal conflict which she avoids by attaching her emotions on Beloved. Denver transfers her dependence from Sethe on Beloved and projects her good feelings about herself onto Beloved. As a result, Denver's sense of self becomes dependent on Beloved which is best illustrated by her reaction on Beloved's temporary disappearance in the cold house:

"The room is just as it was when they entered - except Beloved is not there. There is no point in looking further, for everything in the place can be seen at first sight. Denver looks

anyway because the loss is ungovernable ... She feels like an ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream, floating on darkness, thick and crashing against the edges of things around it. Breakable, meltable and cold ... This is worse than when Paul D came to 124 and she cried helplessly into the stove. This is worse. Then it was for herself. Now she is crying because she has no self. Death is a skipped meal compared to this. She can feel her thickness thinning, dissolving into nothing". (*Beloved* 122-123.)

In spite of such intense experience of psychic disintegration, Denver is eventually able to negotiate her way into selfhood and society. She is faced with a crisis of survival which requires her to grow up and accept her responsibilities as an adult. Therefore Denver is able to see her mother as a whole and separate person and accept the fact that she might lose her.

In *Song of Solomon* Ruth's identity is strongly defined by two men, namely her father and her son. Above all, she sees herself as her father's daughter and as the mother of Milkman. The complete devotion she has for them is the basis of her otherwise lonely existence, and the connection she has with them is the only thing that makes her feel happy and important. Therefore she has a tremendous emotional investment in her father and especially in Milkman, who is the centre of her life. Ruth's sense of self is highly affected by their relationship and by her image of herself as a caring mother. Although her goal is to be a good mother to Milkman, Ruth is unable to consider Milkman's needs for independence and emotional distance in order to find his own identity. Ruth's own needs for love and acceptance are so overwhelming that she is unable to act in the best interest of her son. Therefore, instead of letting go, Ruth holds on to Milkman and enforces the possessive view of love adopted from her father. In her mind she and her son share a special bond which can not be broken. However, when Milkman's life is being threatened by his former lover, Ruth realizes she does not know her son at all or has never really thought of him as an individual: "... she felt hurt because Milkman had not told her himself. Then she realized that he really didn't tell her anything, and hadn't for years. Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion" (*Song of Solomon* 131).

According to her own words Ruth is a "small woman because I was pressed small" (*Song of Solomon* 124). She has been showered with material

wealth since she was a child, but emotionally she has been deprived throughout her life, first by her father's indifference and second by her husband's contempt. As a result, her self-image is distorted and incomplete. In many respects she has maintained her childhood identity of a little girl who adores her father. In Ruth's mind her father is the ideal man who loved her unconditionally. Therefore she has unrealistic expectations of love, which are in part responsible for the disintegration of her marriage. Ruth is constantly comparing Macon to her father and making her husband painfully aware of his shortcomings. This comparison is a conscious act on Ruth's part designed to aggravate Macon. The disappointment of being imprisoned in a loveless marriage together with the firm belief that Macon is responsible for her father's death are the driving forces behind Ruth's revenge on her husband. She is determined to make him pay for all the hurt he has caused her, and she does it by manipulating him. She provokes him in any way she can in order to get him to react and thus feel more alive herself as well. The mental and at times physical abuse that follows their confrontations is the only form of communication between them, and they are both responsible for sustaining such a destructive pattern of behaviour. Although Ruth is in many instances treated unfairly by her husband, she also contributes to her own misery by provoking him.

Ruth has had disappointments in her life, and she has been denied the one thing she has ever really wanted: love. The lack of love and acceptance in her marriage have driven her to look for emotional gratification elsewhere, namely in her relationship to her father and to Milkman. Although Ruth's identity is rather incomplete and her self-esteem is low, she has a certain tenacity and persistence, which is both a blessing and a burden to her. On the one hand, holding on to her father and to her son is the greatest source of joy in her life. On the other hand, however, her inability to let go inhibits her growth as a person thus preventing her from reaching her full potential and finding happiness within herself.

Similar to his wife, Macon has developmental issues which affect his identity. Branch (1995: 66) points out the importance of the losses he has experienced on his complex and contradictory character. Macon leads an isolated life and on the surface seems to prefer it that way. However, the death of his parents together with his estrangement from his sister Pilate have

caused permanent damage to Macon. Moreover, he has intense longings for meaningful connections. Although Macon despises Pilate and does not want anyone to know that they are related, there are times when he misses her so badly that he sneaks to her house just to hear her sing or catch a glimpse of her: "Tonight he wanted just a bit of music - from the person who had been his first caring for." (*Song of Solomon* 28). In addition, he longs for a connection to his ancestors and a "real" name as well:

"Surely, he thought, he and his sister had some ancestor, some lithe young man with onyx skin and legs as straight as cain stalks, who had a name that was real. A name given to him at birth with love and seriousness. A name that was not a joke, nor a disguise, nor a brand name. But who this lithe young man was, and where his cane-stalk legs carried him from or to, could never be known. No. Nor his name. His own parents, in some mood of perverseness or resignation, had agreed to abide by a naming done to them by somebody who couldn't have cared less". (*Song of Solomon* 17-18.)

Macon clearly has inner conflicts created by his personal experiences. Unfortunately, instead of trying to resolve them, he ignores them and keeps them hidden in order to protect his image of a hard-boiled businessman, which is the basis of his identity. He does not want to show any sign of weakness or hesitation either in business or in his personal life. He needs to be in control in order to feel secure. As a result of his dominating attitude, Macon has achieved a strong foothold in the business life of the town. A lot of people have a fearful respect for him, but he is not a likeable man, not even to his own family. In order to meet his approval everything has to be perfect, and he does whatever he can to achieve it. The members of his family are no exception. Their lives are dictated by Macon who sees them as his personal property. This applies especially to Milkman, toward whom Macon has strong ambivalent feelings which have their origins in his relationship to Ruth. Macon is unable to separate between his feelings toward Ruth and Milkman, and therefore he can not act naturally around his son. Moreover, he is convinced that Ruth has a corrupting influence on Milkman, which only intensifies his need to control Milkman and create distance between his son and his wife. When Milkman starts to work for him, "Macon was delighted. His son belonged to him now and not to Ruth" (*Song of Solomon* 63).

Macon is a complex and contradictory personality who on the surface appears to be strong and self-sufficient. However, there is a constant inner struggle to maintain his identity and the image he wants to convey to other people. As a result of the traumatic experience of his father's murder, Macon's ultimate goal in life is to stay in control and therefore protect himself against the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. Although his ruthless treatment of people can not be justified by his past, it can be understood in the context of his life experiences.

The tensions between Ruth and Macon are largely due to their personal past. Their developmental dilemmas follow them and affect the way they relate to each other and to their children. Milkman especially is the mirror of the demons that haunt their lives. From early childhood to adulthood he is used as a weapon in the struggle between his parents. Both of them regard him as their personal property and try in different ways to dominate him. Instead of being loved Milkman is objectified. As a result of the personal rivalry between his parents, Milkman is denied the comfort, peace and love he needs to grow as a person. Therefore his identity is still vague at the age of twenty-two. Milkman has no real sense of who he is or what he wants to do with his life. Detached both from his family and the black community, he has no secure basis on which to rely. Moreover, he feels threatened by close relationships and prefers superficial contacts which do not require commitment. The example of his parent's marriage has affected his attitude toward women and commitment to such an extent, that he is both unable and unwilling to form a reciprocal relationship. The women in his life are there to simply fulfill his needs, and they have no right to expect anything in return. His treatment of Hagar reflects his selfish attitude. After ten years Milkman ends their relationship because he has grown tired of her and is no longer attracted by her. Without any regard for her feelings, Milkman breaks up with her by sending her a letter of thanks with money. Hagar's inability to accept such a callous rejection makes her desperate and unstable and finally leads to her death. Before Milkman is able to accept his responsibility for what happened to Hagar, or indeed understand the consequences of his actions on the lives of other people in general, he has to go through a process of personal growth in order to reach a better awareness of himself and the people in his life.

Milkman's selfishness and his lack of concern for others are largely due to his upbringing. He has never been denied of anything and the members of his family, especially his mother and his sisters, have always put him first. He is unaware of the sacrifices they have had to make for him to lead a carefree life. More importantly, he shows no interest in their lives unless it serves his purposes. Enraged by his ignorance and interference, Milkman's sister Lena confronts him:

"Our girlhood was spent like a found nickle on you ... You have yet to wash your own underwear, spread a bed, wipe the ring from your tub, or move a fleck of your dirt from one place to another. And to this day, you have never asked one of us if we were tired, or sad, or wanted a cup of coffee. You've never picked up anything heavier than your own feet, or solved a problem harder than fourth-grade arithmetic. Where do you get the *right* to decide our lives?" (*Song of Solomon* 215).

However, at this point Milkman is yet too self-absorbed to hear what his sister is saying and consider the consequences of his actions on other people's lives. His treatment of people stems from the bitterness of his parents' relationship. The unhappiness and misery of their marriage has convinced Milkman of the dangers of commitment. Therefore in order to avoid the destiny of his parents, Milkman protects himself by shunning away from close relationships:

"He hated the acridness in his mother's and father's relationship, the conviction of righteousness they each held on to with both hands. And his efforts to ignore it, transcend it, seemed to work only when he spent his days looking for whatever was light-hearted and without grave consequences. He avoided commitment and strong feelings, and shied away from decisions. He wanted to know as little as possible, to feel only enough to get through the day amiably and to be interesting enough to warrant the curiosity of other people - but not their all-consuming devotion". (*Song of Solomon* 180.)

Affected by the example of his parents, Milkman associates commitment with unhappiness and hostility, which only intensifies his need to preserve his independence and find pleasure where he can. He wants to disassociate himself from his parents out of fear of becoming like them: "He

just wanted to beat a path away from his parents' past, which was also their present and which was threatening to become his present as well" (*Song of Solomon* 180). In other words, Milkman wants to find his own identity and release himself from what he sees as a negative effect of his family. His attitude is understandable considering the possessive attitude of his parents toward him and their personal rivalry, which reduces Milkman into an object. As a result, he feels used by them and is distressed by their demands on him. Thus Milkman "wondered if there was anyone in the world who liked him. Liked him for himself alone" (*Song of Solomon* 79). Although he is accustomed to being treated as an object, he longs for acceptance and the feeling of being wanted for himself and not for the things he can provide for other people. Milkman therefore feels he is valued not as a person, but as a source of emotional gratification. With such a negative self-image, Milkman sees detachment from people as the only way to protect himself and find fulfillment.

The way his parents relate to him and to each other has an undeniable effect on Milkman's identity. Caught between the personal rivalry of his parents, Milkman has no real respect either for himself or for the people around him. He has no proper tools to relate to other people on an equal plain. In response to the oppressive home environment, Milkman strives to become an independent person by avoiding commitment and responsibility. However, without a clearly defined identity, he is unable to reach his potential. The only way to develop himself is to gain a new awareness, which is a difficult but a necessary process.

The inability of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* to recognize the important part identity plays in their lives causes damage not only to themselves, but to those close to them as well. Therefore whenever there is a conflict, the characters continue to blame each other and strengthen their old patterns of behaviour instead of re-evaluating their views and taking responsibility for their actions. As long as their identity is based on assumptions rather than the truth, the characters can not reach the clarity of vision they need to reach their full potential.

5 SLAVERY AND RACISM

5.1 Burden of the Past

Since all the main characters in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are black, their lives are undeniably affected by their inferior status based on their race. The effects of slavery and racism on their lives may be covert, but nonetheless pervasive. In spite of their efforts to distance themselves from the painful experiences, which are to a large extent concomitant with their race, the identity of the characters is fundamentally shaped by racial issues.

Slavery in the United States, which developed during colonization, was initially a means to provide the growing colony with cheap labor. The considerable economic gain achieved by the importation of slaves usually overthrew moral concerns over the issue, and the practice of slavery became established. As the decades passed, slavery and slaves became an inseparable part of the American society, which in turn led to changes in the social structure and in the white attitude toward the black (see p.5). Thus slavery contributed to the appearance of racism and the organization of the American society based on the subordination of the black people.

The institution of slavery and racism are present in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. The issue of racial inferiority manifests itself through physical and mental abuse and the denial of humanity and freedom for black people. Although the characters struggle to forget the painful experiences of slavery and are, in varying degrees, aware of the social realities of race, the ways in which they choose to deal with these issues are often misguided and detrimental both to others and to themselves.

In the case of *Beloved* slavery has an essential role. Slavery has crippled both the body and the mind of its victims, and the inability of one generation to successfully resolve the painful experiences of the past affects the next generation as well. Changes in everyday life have not eliminated the lifetime effect of degradation and exploitation. Although the characters are no longer slaves, the ideology of slavery is imbedded in their personalities thus affecting every aspect of their lives. The mental status of a slave stays with them decades after their bodies have been released from slavery. Moreover, the legacy of slavery lives on and shapes the identity of the next generation.

When Sethe realizes her status as an object and as a commodity, she decides to free her children from the dehumanizing effects of slavery. Ironically she has adopted the strong notion of possession characteristic to slavery and applies it to her own children. Therefore she sees them as objects, and unconsciously enforces the very institution from which she tried to save them.

Sethe's life is shaped by slavery. She is born a slave and remains as one for nearly twenty years. Slavery is the only way of life she knows or can even imagine. Being deprived not only of food, but of parental love as well are facts of life to which Sethe has to adapt herself from early childhood. Like all slaves, she is aware of her position in relation to the white people. Moreover, she has no fantasies about a better life outside the institution of slavery, that is not until she has children of her own. As Mr. Garner, Sethe's master, becomes ill, a man the slaves call Schoolteacher takes over the Sweet Home farm. Consequently Sethe becomes acutely aware of the bleak future of her children when prior to her escape from slavery she overhears Schoolteacher's instructions to his pupils:

"He was talking to his pupils and I heard him say, 'Which one are you doing?' And one of the boys said, 'Sethe.' ... I heard him say, 'No, no. That's not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right. And don't forget to line them up.' I commenced to walk backward, didn't even look behind me to find out where I was headed. I just kept lifting my feet and pushing back. When I bumped up against a tree my scalp was prickly". (*Beloved* 193.)

According to Kimball (1997: 49), it is after this incident that Sethe understands for the first time her complete helplessness against such racist views which deny the humanity of all slaves and transmit the slave culture across the generations. Therefore her two boys, her daughter Beloved and the baby she is carrying have already been degraded and destroyed as human beings. In addition, Sethe becomes aware of her own role in sustaining such a violating culture. Her labor is used to complete the spreading of the ideology that dooms her children when the students write down their comparisons of her animal and human characteristics with the ink she made. Sethe's decision to escape is prompted not only by this revelation, but also by the assault on her by Schoolteacher's two nephews. She is still nursing Beloved and nine-

months pregnant when the two men hold her down and take her milk while Schoolteacher takes notes. After Sethe reports the assault to Mr. Garner, they beat her so badly that the nerves in her back are permanently destroyed. As Fulweiler (1996: 337-338) points out, Sethe is assaulted both as a person and as a mother. Therefore the assault not only robs Sethe of her human dignity, but is a crime against nature and motherhood as well. Moreover, the assault is ultimately responsible for Sethe's infanticide, which she commits in a desperate attempt to protect her children from the degradation of slavery.

The key love relation in *Beloved* is the relation of mother and child, and Sethe's infanticide is the central event of the novel. In order to understand Sethe's tragic act of killing her daughter it must be set against the historical frame of the slave culture. While *Beloved* depicts an individual's capacity for destructive love, it also bears historical truth. Slave mothers often killed their children, either in rage against their white fathers or, as in Sethe's case, as an act of mercy. Sethe's own mother had had children by white men which she did not kill but abandoned: "She threw them all away but you ... Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man" (*Beloved* 62). Different from her mother and many slave women, Sethe is fortunate enough not to be sexually exploited by white men or have children by them. Moreover, she is able to live together with her husband Halle for years and have four children with him. However, like all slave women, Sethe is subjected to the white gender conventions and treated accordingly. Fox-Genovese (1993: 168-171) discusses the dominant pattern for gender relations during slavery. The popular image of "Mammy" reflected white values, referring to slave women in terms of motherhood and reproduction and claimed those privileges for the masters. Therefore the sexuality of slave women was displaced into nurture, transforming potential hostility into sustenance and love. The image of "Jezebel", on the other hand, presented slave women isolated from the men of their own community. Free from the social constraints that surrounded the sexuality of white women, black women were seen as lusty wenches overwhelmed by their sexual impulses. The image suggested that black women asked for the treatment they received, and thus legitimated the behaviour of white men and eased their consciences. As a result, slave women were not provided with the protection conventionally granted to white women. This in turn exposed them to public violence and sexual exploitation,

which was not only demeaning to the women, but threatening to slave men and their image of themselves as men.

The assault on Sethe is a result of these popular images of slave women. Schoolteacher and his nephews regard her as a piece of property, not as a person in her own right, which enables them to detach themselves from the assault. According to Kimball (1997: 47-50), they have no concern for the safety of Sethe's unborn child or her sister. By taking her milk and beating her they not only humiliate and violate Sethe, but also place her children in danger. Although Sethe's psychological and physical scars are severe and permanent, the experience together with the discovery of the essence of slavery prompt her decision to break the cycle and escape in order to offer her children a better future.

Freedom has a tremendous effect on the way Sethe relates to her children. While still in slavery, she could not "love 'em proper in Kentucky because they wasn't [hers] to love" (*Beloved* 162). Linehan (1997: 303-311) states that the children are Sethe's in the biological sense, but claiming them as hers invites disaster since both the slave parent and child belong to the master. As slaves Sethe's family members are in a constant threat of being separated from each other by sales, and therefore it is better "to love small". The possibility of a stable family is destroyed by the conditions of slavery. However, once Sethe reaches freedom she can love her children without restraint, thus demonstrating a desire to possess and claim her children as her own. Unfortunately Sethe is unable to control her possessiveness when the freedom of her children is being threatened. The change from slavery to freedom, from one set of extreme conditions to another is too much for her to handle, and as a result she resorts to violence. The killing of her daughter is a horrific act, but to Sethe it is the ultimate expression of her love and self-determination. After a lifetime of being treated as property and being deprived of her selfhood, Sethe's act is an affirmation of her independence and freedom.

Sethe feels that the infanticide is justified "because it came from true love" (*Beloved* 251). In her mind even death is better than slavery, and therefore she will rather kill her children than let them spend the rest of their lives as slaves. When the slavecatchers find her and her children, Sethe acts instinctively:

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

In her desperation Sethe sees infanticide as the only way to save her children from a faith worse than death. As Fulweiler (1996: 350-351) points out, Sethe's infanticide is a reaction to slavery. Sethe kills her daughter in the belief that she belongs to her in the same way as slaves belong to their masters. Thus there is a chain reaction whereby Sethe acts under the influence of slavery, applying the view of possession to her children. Moreover, Sethe's act is also a violation of natural law and the black community. Sethe's neighbors consider her a murderer, and Sethe's own feelings of guilt and pride motivate her to use isolation from the community as a means of voluntary punishment for her crime: "Whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. This here's all there is and all there needs to be" (*Beloved* 183). Therefore Sethe constructs a self-imposed psychological slavery to replace the legal slavery of Sweet Home farm.

The single act of infanticide changes not only Sethe's life, but the life of her children as well. Haunted by the ghost of her dead baby girl, Sethe's sons run away from home in adolescence, and Denver grows up with the ghost as her only companion. The presence of the ghost isolates Sethe and Denver from the black community, thus restricting their social life into a minimum and affecting Denver's personal development. Moreover, the ghost is a constant reminder of Sethe's desperate act and its consequences. The loss of her daughter and the circumstances surrounding her death are always present in Sethe's life. With the appearance of *Beloved* twenty years later, Sethe's dearest wish is realized: her baby girl has come back to her. However, at this point Sethe is both unwilling and unable to process the issue of infanticide. Overwhelmed by the joy of having her daughter back, Sethe focuses all her energy on *Beloved*. She wants to make up for the killing, and is convinced of *Beloved*'s subsequent willingness to forgive her. However, *Beloved* denies

Sethe of the comfort of forgiveness and instead claims retribution for the infanticide. Therefore Sethe is forced to face her past and accept the responsibility for her actions, which are essential elements in the process of healing.

There is a historical analogue between the plot of *Beloved* and actual accounts of slavery. According to Rushdy (1992: 569), the idea for the novel was inspired by fragments of stories, one of which is the story of Margaret Garner. She was a slave who after escaping from her owner Mr. Gaines in Kentucky, crossed the Ohio river and attempted to find refuge in Cincinnati. Once the house where Margaret and her husband were hiding with their four children was surrounded by the slavecatchers, she cut the throat of her little daughter. She also tried to kill her other children and herself, but was overpowered before she could complete her desperate work. The story of Margaret Garner together with similar accounts inspired Morrison to develop *Beloved* and remember the forgotten victims of slavery. Morrison comments on the importance of the commemoration of the dead: "Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her".

Although the events in *Beloved* focus on Sethe and the infanticide, all the characters are, in varying degrees, victimized by slavery. Sethe's husband Halle who had disappeared inexplicably the day of her assault never to return, had hidden in the barn and witnessed the assault. Sethe is unaware of her husband's presence until Paul D tells her:

"You said they stole your milk. I never knew what it was that messed him up. That was it, I guess. All I knew was that something broke him. Not a one of them years of Saturdays, Sundays and nighttime extra never touched him. But whatever he saw go on in that barn that day broke him like a twig". (*Beloved* 68.)

Shocked by the news, Sethe's initial reaction is anger: "He saw them boys do that to me and let them keep on breathing air? He saw? He saw? He saw?" (*Beloved* 69). However, as she listens to Paul D's account of the events, she is able to understand the devastating effect of the violation on Halle and his inability to defend her. Kimball (1997: 52-53) emphasizes that whether Halle holds himself back from killing the boys and Schoolteacher or is

paralyzed at the prospect, his failure to act ultimately breaks him. Devastated by the violence and his failure to help his wife, Halle's whole being is taken over by the experience. Unable to express his agony in words, Halle is imprisoned in a private ritual, repeating the defilement of his wife by smearing butter on his face. He is unmanned and debased, regressed from loving father and husband to a powerless robot.

Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, is an important maternal figure not only for Sethe, but for the black community as well. She takes care of Sethe and her children, and she has a significant role as a spiritual leader of the community. In spite of her lifetime experiences of hard physical labor and emotional losses, she seems to have an endless amount of love and strength. As a result of slavery, she has lost contact with her children, all of whom except for Halle are taken from her at an early age:

"Seven times she had done that: held a little foot; examined the fat fingertips with her own - fingers she never saw become the male and female hands a mother would recognize anywhere ... All seven were gone or dead. What would be the point of looking too hard at that youngest one? But for some reason they let her keep him. He was with her - everywhere". (*Beloved* 139.)

Baby Suggs's life is profoundly shaped by the pain of being separated from her children and not being able to see them grow into separate personalities. She has to spend her life without any knowledge of her children and having nothing but fragmented memories of them. Therefore she has a special relationship with Halle whom she is able to keep with her, who protects her and ultimately buys her her freedom with his labor. After Halle's disappearance Sethe and her children are the only family Baby Suggs has left, which makes the thought of losing them even more unbearable. Once the slavecatchers come to take them back to slavery, Baby Suggs is struck by the realization that even in freedom the black people have no defence against the white people. Little by little she loses her faith and hope until one day she takes to her bed and slowly slips away. Toward the end of her life, Baby Suggs's thoughts are consumed by failure and hopelessness, and she feels great resentment for the white people who have not only destroyed her life by severing the bond between her and her children, but control the faith of all

blacks: "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed", she said, "and broke my heartstrings, too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (*Beloved* 89).

Similar to Sethe, Paul D has chosen to suppress the painful memories associated with slavery. However, instead of settling down, Paul D travels around the countryside in an effort to forget the past and avoid close relationships and the subsequent possibility of getting hurt. He has no plans for the future, and after his escape from prison in Alfred, Georgia, he does his best to distance himself from everything that reminds him of the horrors he has experienced:

"After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing. If he could do those things - with a little work and sex thrown in - he asked for no more, for more required him to dwell on Halle's face and Sixo's laughing. To recall trembling in a box built into the ground. Grateful for the daylight spent doing mule work in a quarry because he did not tremble when he had a hammer in his hands. The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind". (*Beloved* 41.)

During his imprisonment Paul D fought hard to keep his sanity in appalling conditions, and the only way he was able to survive was to give up all hope, to work and deaden his feelings. After his escape Paul D keeps on running in the false belief that ignoring the pain and detaching himself from his experiences will help him to make a better future for himself. Therefore instead of processing his emotions, Paul D keeps them locked tight in his heart: "By the time he got to 124 [Sethe's house] nothing in this world could pry it open" (*Beloved* 113). However, seeing Sethe and becoming a part of her life releases powerful and contradictory emotions, which force Paul D not only to confront his own past, but to gain a new understanding of the nature of slavery as a whole. As a result, he is able to see Sethe and her infanticide from a different perspective and help her to regain control of her life and build a new identity.

The characters in *Beloved* use a tremendous amount of energy on suppressing the past. Although their need to protect themselves from the traumatic experiences of the past is perfectly understandable, the futility of

their efforts becomes apparent as the events progress. Thus the intensity of the emotions revived by the presence of *Beloved* reflects the pervasiveness of the past and the necessity to confront it in order to have a better future.

5. 2 Dismantled Identity

The formation of a stable identity and the recognition of the factors which are involved in the process are important issues in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. Slavery and racism are, in varying degrees, a part of black people's identity and affect the way they view not only themselves but others as well. The power relations between people and therefore their possibilities to control their own lives are not in balance. As a result, the identity of the black people is incomplete and distorted, which in turn puts a strain on their relationships and leaves them without a solid basis for personal growth.

The relationship of slaves and masters was defined by the extreme form of domination during slavery. Patterson (1993: 6-9) considers the concept of power and the distinctive nature of slavery, according to whom the basis of the master-slave relationship was the threat and use of violence, which did not constitute a crime. The whip was considered an indispensable instrument in all known slaveholding societies. The slave was ultimately powerless and an extension of his master's power. In order to avoid death, which was usually violent, the slave had to submit his or her life to the master. However, this did not absolve or erase the prospect of death. Because the slave was not recognized as a person in his or her own right, the master could claim the slave's life at any time. Moreover, the slave ceased to belong to any legitimate social order and was denied all claims on, and obligations to, the parents and other living relatives. This in turn led to a cultural isolation from the social heritage of the African American ancestors. In spite of such alienation, there were strong social ties among slaves. However, the relationships between slaves were not recognized as binding or legitimate. Therefore regular sexual unions were not recognized as marriages, which had profound social and emotional implications. Slave couples could be separated at any time, and the women had the obligation of submitting sexually to their masters. Moreover, slaves had no claim or power over their children. The fear

of being separated from the members of one's family transformed the behaviour of the slaves and their conception of themselves.

In *Beloved* slavery is shown to have a profound effect on the lives of the slaves. They have to adapt themselves to the conditions of slavery and live according to the oppressive and unjust rules set by their white owners. Although Mr. Garner, the original owner of Sweet Home farm, is in many respects a kind master, the slaves are nonetheless enslaved. Their lives are characterized by deprivations of all kinds, including a limited sense of self and self-worth. This is best demonstrated by Baby Suggs's reflections:

"Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried or what they looked like alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing? (Was it nice to hear when she did?) Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife? Have I got a sister and does she favor me? If my mother knew me would she like me?" (*Beloved* 140).

According to Linehan (1997: 317), even as a slave Baby Suggs is able to pose questions about herself and recognize the fact that, in one sense, she does not have a self. However, she does have a core of individuality, which enables her to recognize the questions and experiences as hers, and no one else's. The existence of a self is suggested by her ability to pose such questions and regard them as vitally important. The conditions of slavery, however, do not offer her a chance to answer these questions, simply because she is not free to make decisions about her own life or the life of her children. The master has the power to decide whether she can have the opportunity to be a loving mother or a faithful wife. Having lost seven children to slavery, Baby Suggs has been deprived of an important part of her identity. It is not until at the age of sixty that she is given the chance to answer the fundamental questions and achieve a new self-consciousness when Halle buys her freedom:

"She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with clarity as simple as it was dazzling, "These hands belong to me. These my hands." Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new;

"Sethe had had twenty-eight days - the travel of one whole moon - of unslaved life. From the pure clear stream of spit that the little girl dribbled into her face to her oily blood was twenty-eight days. Days of healing, ease and real-talk ... All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and *decide* what to do with the day. That's how she got through the waiting for Halle. Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another".
(*Beloved* 95.)

Regardless of the extent of Sethe's claim for owning herself, the essential process of discovering her identity is ended by the infanticide. With freedom comes responsibility for one's actions, and although Sethe's act of killing her daughter is provoked by the slavecatchers, it does not reduce the moral significance of her act or her responsibility for it. Linehan (1997: 307-309) states that, since slaves were regarded as personal property and treated accordingly, they often had a strong desire to own or possess a thing as one's own. Therefore the individual who has the ownership of one's self is also accountable for the quality and actions of that self. Sethe's infanticide is a case of owning with a vengeance. She is faced with a difficult task of trying to build a new life and taking control of that life through a better understanding of herself and what it means to be a free person. Once the deprivations of slavery threaten her newly acquired freedom and the freedom of her children, Sethe acts in desperation, expressing her love for her children through the extreme act of infanticide. However necessary or justified the killing of her child may seem under the circumstances, it does not change the fact that her act is monstrous. Moreover, although such a destructive form of possessiveness may be the only way for Sethe to react, it can not be the basis for the creation of a stable, sane self.

Sethe's infanticide has a formative effect on her identity. She is able to take care of herself and Denver, but living in isolation and trying to detach herself from the past offers her no chance for personal growth. Linehan (1997: 307-308) points out that, although recollecting the infanticide no longer devastates Sethe, she wants to fashion a self discontinuous with its own past by creating what could be called a "timeless past". For Sethe the ideal condition is one without memory and without the burden of shame, guilt and pain which still haunt her. Such a voluntary amnesia is clearly impossible, and

Sethe is acutely aware of the fact that everyday life is far from timeless. Moreover, her desperate struggle to keep the past at bay keeps her from achieving an autonomous identity and a viable future. In other words, by refusing to confront her past, Sethe allows it to dominate her present and stunt her personal growth.

As a result of traumatic experiences which have not been processed, the identity of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is fragmented and unstable. Without a real sense of self, they are bound to maintain the harmful patterns of behaviour which in turn make them insecure in their relationships. Therefore the characters can not achieve a sense of balance and wholeness until they make a conscious effort to reconstruct their identity.

5. 3 Race Relations

Although *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* focus on depicting black characters and their life experiences, the inner dynamics of the novels is based largely on the relationship of the black and the white people. Moreover, the co-existence of these polar opposites is complicated by the inferior status of the blacks which is manifested by the institution of slavery and racism. In its cruelty and oppressiveness, slavery bound the slaves and their masters together in bitter antagonism, and created a complex and ambivalent relationship which had a pervasive influence on the lives of both parties. As Genovese (1993: 13-16) mentions, the basis of slavery was the principle of one man's appropriation of another's person and the fruits of his labor. Therefore slavery was essentially a system of class rule which was made more complex by the subordination of one race to another. This led to the creation of Southern paternalism to discipline and morally justify a system of exploitation. Paternalism was therefore an effort to overcome the fundamental contradiction of slavery by defining the involuntary labor of the slaves as a legitimate return to their masters for protection and direction. Although paternalism undermined the slaves' sense of worth as black people and reinforced their dependence on white masters, it also implicitly recognized the slaves' humanity by insisting upon mutual obligations and rights.

In *Beloved* the essence of the complex and organic relationship between slaves and masters is best demonstrated in the way it affects Paul

D's view of himself. While Mr. Garner is the owner of Sweet Home farm, there is almost an Edenic existence, which is destroyed by the cruelty of Schoolteacher and his nephews. However, although Mr. Garner is in many respects a more lenient master than his successor, the slaves are nonetheless enslaved because they have no adult consciousness. In spite of his more benign form of slavery, whereby the slaves are encouraged to make independent decisions and even defy their master, Mr. Garner still enforces the institution of slavery. It is only years after his death that Paul D begins to realize the true nature of slavery, which denies the humanity and selfhood of its victims no matter what form it takes:

"For years Paul D believed schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men ... Now, plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin, he wondered how much difference there really was between before schoolteacher and after. Garner called and announced them men - but only on Sweet Home, and by his leave. Was he naming what he saw or creating what he did not? ... Did a whiteman saying make it so? Suppose Garner woke up one morning and changed his mind? Took the word away". (*Beloved* 220.)

The realization that in the relationship between master and slave "definitions belonged to the definer - not the defined" (*Beloved* 190), is ingrained into Paul D's consciousness and has a long-lasting effect on him. Therefore even after years of freedom Paul D has doubts about his identity, and these doubts are voiced in his thoughts about his manhood: "Oh, he did manly things, but was that Garner's gift or his own will? What would he have been anyway - before Sweet Home - without Garner?" (*Beloved* 220). According to Linehan (1997: 321-323), in order to release himself from his doubts, Paul D suppresses his emotions and disengages himself from his memories and from other people. Therefore his relationship with Sethe is an important step for him and holds much promise. However, their relationship is complicated by Beloved's appearance. Moreover, his reluctant desire for Beloved awakens the emotions he believed were contained, and he is unable to resist her. In his confusion Paul D is convinced that Beloved has put a spell on him, which makes him unable to control his actions. In spite of his profound sense of shame, Paul D fails to take responsibility for his relationship with Beloved. Therefore instead of the truth, he acts on an impulse and tells

Sethe he wants to get her pregnant, which he sees as a way to "document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell" (*Beloved* 128). However, Paul D is forced to make some decisions about his identity once he learns about Sethe's infanticide. In order to renew their relationship, Paul D has to decide which values he wants to adopt as well as face his past and his feelings. As a result of recreating his sense of identity, Paul D is able to return to Sethe and there is a possibility that they can be equal partners in an intimate relationship without losing their independence.

Since the main events in *Song of Solomon* are set in the 60s, none of the characters have first-hand experience on slavery. However, slavery has a significant role in the history of the Dead family, whose ancestors were taken from their home in Africa and brought to the United States to live in slavery. Although the members of the Dead family, apart from Pilate, are both unaware and uninterested in their family history, it is shown to be a relevant factor in the process of finding one's identity. The importance of knowing one's roots is demonstrated in Milkman's personal growth. In the beginning of the novel Milkman is unaware of his family history and the part slavery has played in the lives of his ancestors, one of whom is his legendary great-grandfather Solomon who according to stories escaped slavery and flew back home to Africa. Hearing the stories of his ancestors gives Milkman a new sense of belonging, and gradually he starts to understand what it means to have "people" and "links", to be a part of a community. Moreover, Milkman's knowledge of the past helps him to deal with his personal issues, and therefore supports the process of finding his identity.

During the 60s the conflicts created by the efforts of the black people to achieve racial equality intensified in the United States and gave rise to black political movements. In *Song of Solomon* the black community is so isolated that it is barely aware of the political changes taking place. For example, Malcolm X is known only as "that red-headed Negro named X". In other words there is no organized political activity in the town. Even the Seven Days is a secret organization of seven men who perform random killings of whites to revenge unpunished acts of racial violence. Although the killings are random, the members of the organization have strong and radical views on race relations. Brenkman (1994: 73-74) sees that their acute sense of racial injustice stems from their own experience, and revenge is a means to gain at

least some form of justice in a society that does not allow them to address the wrongs done to the black people through the legal system. However, their vision of justice is nothing but a hallucination. Milkman's best friend Guitar, who is a member of the Seven Days, believes that their actions will "keep the ratio the same" between blacks and whites: "You can't stop them from killing us, from trying to get rid of us. And each time they succeed, they get rid of five to seven generations. I help keep the numbers the same" (*Beloved* 154). However, the acts committed in the name of justice strain the members of the Seven Days to the breaking point, because they reduce themselves into imitating the white killers and rapists:

"When a Negro child, Negro woman, or Negro man is killed by whites and nothing is done about it by *their* law and *their* courts, this society selects a similar victim at random, and they execute him or her in a similar manner if they can. If the Negro was hanged, they hang; if a Negro was burnt, they burn; raped and murdered, they rape and murder". (*Beloved* 154-155)

As a result of these acts, the members of the Seven Days are driven to madness, suicide, alcoholism and despair, and it is Guitar's involvement in the organization that makes him lose his grip on reality and drives him into violence against his friend Milkman. Morrison uses Guitar's manic rage to reveal the false logic of violence and racial paranoia, which ultimately turn against those who adopt them by destroying them from within. Although Morrison clearly rejects the radical ideas and expressions of black nationalism represented by the Seven Days, the novel as a whole is a contribution to nationalistic thought with its emphasis on the importance of the African American cultural heritage and the existence of a viable community as a means to preserve that heritage.

The unlikely friendship of Milkman and Guitar can be seen as representing the two primary ideological streams which have characterized African American political thought in the twentieth century. According to Story (1989: 150-156), their relationship reveals the dissonance characteristic to the African American world, and their socioeconomic differences and their divergent experiences can be distinguished as representing the ideologies of such historical advocates as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Guitar is a

member of the black working class whose experiences, such as the murder of his father, have shaped his consciousness and led to his active membership in the Seven Days. Milkman, on the other hand, is a member of the black bourgeoisie in pursuit of material and personal pleasure. As a result of his sheltered and privileged life, Milkman has no understanding of the realities of the world concerning the relationship between races. He has no social awareness of the position of black people in the society, and therefore he is unable to understand the meaning of race and racism. While Guitar joins the Seven Days and adopts its radical values and attitudes, Milkman ends up rejecting his background and sets out to rediscover his racial past.

The connection between Milkman and Guitar is severed by their different views. Guitar is unable to convince Milkman of the righteousness of his ideology, and once Milkman realizes the extent to which Guitar will go to achieve what he perceives as justice for his people, he comes to realize that he has to detach himself from Guitar and find his own values of which he can approve. Although distancing himself from his best friend is not easy, it is a necessary step in Milkman's development. In order for Milkman to become an independent person, he has to take responsibility for his actions and his development and find his own truth by which to live.

Whether the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* recognize the relevance of the social and psychological effects of race relations, their lives are nonetheless affected by such issues. How they choose to deal with the pressures caused by the white society is a complex matter. While the characters in *Beloved* focus on suppressing the pain inflicted on them by the ideology of slavery and racism, in *Song of Solomon* there is the added element of active and violent resistance against the crimes of the white society. However, both methods of survival are equally misguided and lead to psychic disintegration both on a personal and on a communal level.

6 THE PROCESS OF HEALING

6.1 Dynamics of Remembering and Forgetting

Once the traumatic experiences of the past begin to surface, the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are faced with important questions concerning their self-image and their relationships. In order to overcome the confusion caused by such fundamental questions, they have to process their emotions and redefine themselves as individuals and as members of the community. All the major characters in the novels have unresolved personal issues which have a significant effect on their behaviour and identity. Moreover, these unresolved issues are closely connected with the past of the characters. Whether the characters are unaware of the past as in *Song of Solomon*, or try desperately to forget it as in *Beloved*, the key to a new self-image and a viable future lies in the discovery and acceptance of the past. By denying the importance of the past, both personal and communal, the identity of the characters remains incomplete and distorted. Therefore in order to build a stable identity, the characters have to recognize the debilitating effect of their thoughts and behaviour, and find the strength to confront the past to create a better future.

On the surface the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* seem to be in accordance with their past. However, as more details of their lives are revealed, the reader becomes acutely aware of the unresolved issues which keep them from finding themselves and each other. Guth (1993: 575-576) discusses the problematic relationship of the present to the past by pointing out the constant interaction between the search for self-definition and an understanding of the past. The past can be seen both as a blessing and a burden, sometimes as a cultural foundation offering nurture, and sometimes as a restricting or a frightening element, a nightmare between the present and the liberating future. In spite of the painful process of finding a balance between the past and the present, Morrison emphasizes the nurturing aspect of the past and the freedom of spirit gained by an understanding of that past.

An essential element of *Beloved* is the underlying tension between the necessity to remember and the desperate need to forget, which is best demonstrated by Sethe's constant struggle to suppress the past and the

memory of the infanticide. She is determined to remember as little as she possibly can in order to protect herself and Denver, and although the years have taken away some of the pain she feels over the infanticide, Sethe still has to make a conscious effort every day to forget her act. Therefore her mind is more or less locked in the past, and for Sethe there is "nothing better than to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (*Beloved* 73).

The life of Sethe and Denver begins to change with the arrival of Paul D, who drives away the ghost and is therefore regarded with suspicion and hostility by Denver. Sethe, on the other hand, regains both physical and emotional fulfillment with him, and for the first time in years she feels hopeful about the future. Moreover, she finds herself thinking about the possibility of putting her trust on Paul D and letting herself remember the past: "Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal - not even leave the stove - and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?" (*Beloved* 18). However, although Sethe does share some things with Paul D, she is unable to take the crucial step and address the issue of infanticide. Paul D's rejection of her after he learns about the infanticide confirms her suspicions: "She despised herself for having been so trusting, so quick to surrender at the stove while Paul D kissed her back. She should have known that he would behave like everybody else in town once he knew" (*Beloved* 173).

Although Paul D has an important role in Sethe's development, it is Beloved's appearance that initiates the actual process of facing the past. Both Sethe and Denver immediately accept Beloved as a part of their family although they know nothing about her background. Sethe is flattered by her apparent adoration, and Denver becomes dependent on her company in the same way she depended on the ghost. The only person who has suspicions is Paul D, but he is unable to weaken the affection Sethe and Denver have for Beloved. Although Beloved succeeds in controlling all of them, the only one she really cares for is Sethe. Her only goal is to get as close to Sethe as possible and make her reveal her innermost thoughts and feelings. Sethe is surprised by the ease with which she is able to tell stories of her past:

"It became a way to feed her. Just as Denver discovered and relied on the delightful effect sweet things had on Beloved, Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost ... Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it - in any case it was an unexpected pleasure". (*Beloved* 58.)

Initially Beloved's devotion to Sethe and Sethe's willingness to reveal aspects of her past have a positive effect on Sethe's life. Beloved, Sethe and Denver are inclosed in a kind of symbiotic existence in which the three women complement each other and seem to find the kind of love and acceptance no one else can offer. However, they cannot sustain their harmonious existence forever. Once Sethe recognizes Beloved as her daughter, the issue of infanticide can no longer be ignored. Gradually the relationship between Sethe and Beloved becomes more obsessive and destructive, and the fusion between them deepens until it totally excludes Denver. The pleasure of telling stories becomes a desperate attempt to make Beloved understand Sethe's motivation for the killing. After years of living with the guilt caused by the infanticide, Sethe has been given a chance to amend the past to Beloved. Therefore she is ready to do anything "to make up for the handsaw", even sacrifice herself in order to make Beloved understand and forgive her. Consumed by Beloved's demands and her mental cruelty, Sethe is on the brink of starvation and mental deterioration. Everything else loses its meaning, even the well-being of Denver, who "saw themselves beribboned, decked-out, limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everyboby out" (*Beloved* 243).

Guth (1993: 585-587) comments on the disjunction between memory and the revival of the past by looking at Sethe's reaction to the appearance of Beloved. In spite of the obvious similarities between Sethe's dead baby girl and Beloved, Sethe does not recognize her daughter for a very long time. Therefore it is rather the actual presence of Beloved than Sethe's memory that revives the past. The slow process of recognition portrays a significant inversion whereby Beloved's return does not reflect the revitalizing power of memory. On the contrary, her apperance in the flesh challenges the continous process of forgetting, refusal and evasion. However, identifying Beloved as her daughter distorts Sethe's memory so that, in stead of processing the

infanticide, she sees Beloved's resurrection as a triumph of maternal love over time and death. In other words she focuses on the joy and love of the reunion in order to blot out the memory of the bleeding child in her arms. However, such an evasion of the past cannot last. The death that Sethe wants to forget is Beloved's primal experience, and with her overwhelming presence she forces Sethe to face the terror and loss she is trying to erase. The tension between remembering and forgetting is culminated in Sethe's attack on Mr. Bodkin, Denver's employer:

"He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand". (*Beloved* 262.)

Sethe sees in Mr. Bodkin the reappearance of Schoolteacher, and in her unconscious attempt to undo and change the past, she attacks the white man to protect the daughter she cannot bear to lose again. However, Sethe's attempt to alter the course of events is defeated by Beloved, who sees her mother's rush away from her as a repetition of the desertion she had experienced before. In order to avoid being abandoned again, she disappears as quickly and unexpectedly as she appeared. Therefore both Sethe and Beloved are destined to repeat the past by attempting to escape it.

Similar to Sethe, Denver's relationship to the past is complex and troubled. Influenced by her mother's example, Denver tries to prevent the past from intruding upon her present: "Besides, she had her own set of questions which had nothing to do with the past. The present alone interested Denver" (*Beloved* 119). Although Denver has no concrete knowledge of the past on which to base her fears, she feels threatened by her mother's past and the outside world. Moreover, Sethe's refusal to tell her the truth only deepens her ambiguous feelings toward Sethe, so that although Denver loves her mother, she is never able to dismiss the feeling of being threatened by her. The central story of infanticide remains unspoken, which distorts the relationship between Sethe and Denver and gives Denver no basis on which to build a stable identity.

Denver was only a newborn at the time of the infanticide, and therefore she has no personal memory of her mother's act, but rather an unsignified feeling of fear locked away in her unconsciousness. The first time she is actually faced with her mother's past is at the age of seven, when a boy in her school asks her a question that starts to haunt her: "Murder, Nelson Lord had said. "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there when she went?" (*Beloved* 104). Shocked by the possibility of her mother being a murderer and unable to confront her mother with what she has heard, Denver "went deaf rather than hear the answer" (*Beloved* 105). Soon after the incident she loses her ability to hear and speak for two years, withdrawing from the world around her. Wyatt (1993: 482-483) suggests that this is a case of hysterical conversion according to Freud's model, whereby the symptom enacts the content of the repressed desire. In Denver's case her paralysis of ear and throat represents Sethe's wish to repress the memory of infanticide, and Denver closes herself up in her mother's silence. After her recovery Denver is still unable to process the death of her sister on a conscious level, which leads to an unconscious processing of the infanticide in "monstrous and unmanageable dreams" of being decapitated by her mother. As a result of Sethe's inability to confront and articulate the killing, Denver's mind is imprisoned by the event.

Denver shows no interest in the past except for the story of her birth, which took place in the midst of Sethe's escape from slavery. However, even this portion of the past is coated with ambiguous feelings: "... she loved it because it was all about herself; but she hated it too because it made her feel like a bill was owing somewhere and she, Denver, had to pay it. But who she owed or what to pay it with eluded her" (*Beloved* 77). According to Krumholz (1992: 404-405), Sethe's intentional avoidance of the past, which she believes to protect Denver, actually keeps her from moving into the future. Denver is jealous of her mother's past, and being excluded from that past intensifies her feelings of bitterness and loneliness. However, Denver's love for Beloved, who has an endless hunger for stories of the past, forces her to confront it, first through the stories she tells Beloved and finally by leaving the house to save her mother from madness and from the voracious Beloved. The knowledge and understanding she has gained by listening to Sethe's accounts of her past

enable Denver to overcome her fears and take the necessary step to save her mother and free herself from the past to enter the present.

Although the characters of Denver and Milkman seem very different, what they do have in common is their problematic relationship to the past. In *Song of Solomon* Milkman lives a very limited life in terms of knowing and understanding the past. He has adopted his father's linear vision of time, and has either significant history or a real sense of the future. The memories he has of his childhood are characterized by feelings of uneasiness and isolation, which follow him into adolescence and adulthood. Moreover, being used as a weapon in the struggle between his parents has left Milkman with a strong need to detach himself from them and people in general. As an adult, Milkman is satisfied with his superficial life and sees no need to look back. The past, especially that of his parents, is of no interest to him, because knowing as little as possible gives him the advantage of keeping his distance and avoiding his responsibilities not only for others, but also for himself. In other words he does not have to grow up. After a confrontation with his father, Milkman is confused and angry at Macon for telling him about things that happened between his parents:

"As the stars made themselves visible, Milkman tried to figure what was true and what part of what was true had anything to do with him. What was he supposed to do with this new information his father had dumped on him? Was it an effort to cop a plea? How was he supposed to feel about the two of them now? ... He didn't want to know any of it. There was nothing he could do about it. The doctor [Dr. Foster] was dead. You can't do the past over". (*Song of Solomon* 75-76.)

For Milkman hearing details of his parent's past, or rather Macon's perception of that past, is disconcerting for two reasons. First of all, he is shocked and disgusted by the idea of an incestuous relationship between his mother and her father. Moreover, thinking about the past revives his own memory of being nursed by his mother until he was old enough to wear knickers. Being suddenly confronted with such powerful images of the past troubles Milkman and changes his view of his family members:

"Now he questioned them. Questioned everybody. His father had crept along the wall and then come upstairs with a terrible piece of news. His mother had been portrayed not as a mother who simply adored her only son, but as an obscene child playing dirty games with whatever male was near - be it her father or her son. Even his sisters, the most tolerant and accomodating of all women he knew, had changed their faces and rimmed their eyes with red and charcoal dust". (*Song of Solomon* 79.)

Although Milkman is offered a chance to process his feelings toward his parents and re-evaluate his own life, he is yet both unwilling and unable to face such deep and complex issues. Therefore he pushes the past aside, detaching himself further from other people and the things that are painful and confusing. Disassociated with his past and having no interest in the future, Milkman has no hold on life. Limited by his selfishness and lack of compassion, Milkman's personal development is arrested for years. However, he is not able to sustain the adolescent state of mind forever, and an essential part of his healing process is confronting the past and accepting the responsibility for his actions.

Milkman's aunt Pilate is the only member of the Dead family who seems to be in accordance with her past. Unlike her brother, Pilate does not try to deny her roots or detach herself from the past. Instead of letting the painful memories of her father's death and her expulsion from the black community to haunt her, she has accepted them as a part of her life. She has chosen to remember and value the past, and sees it as a source of strength in difficult times. Smith (1985: 729) points out her cyclical and expansive vision of time and of the world as a whole. Therefore she does not try to repress the past, but rather carries it with her in the form of stories, songs and even a bag of bones. Pilate believes that the past cannot be put behind and forgotten, but rather it should be synthetized with the present. She recognizes the constant interaction between the past and the present, and sees it as a basis for a person's identity. Pilate's vision of time and life is best described by the bag of bones containing what she believes to be the remains of a man her brother Macon killed decades earlier. Her explanation for keeping the bones sums up her philosophy of love, respect and responsibility for fellow men:

"I put him in my sack, piece by piece. Some cloth was still on him, but his bones was clean and dry. I've had it ever since. Papa told me to, and he was right, you know. You can't take a life and walk off and leave it. Life is life. Precious. And the dead you kill is yours. They stay with you anyway, in your mind. So it's a better thing, a more better thing to have the bones right there with you wherever you go. That way, it frees up your mind". (*Song of Solomon* 208.)

On the surface Pilate seems a rather flawless character with her deep reverence for human beings and her knowledge of human behaviour. She possesses vitality and strength of spirit, which the other members of her family have not been able to achieve. However, in spite of such good qualities, even Pilate is misguided. As a result of her physical deformity, she has no connection to a community and therefore no solid ground on which to stand. Moreover, her knowledge of family history on which she has based her life, is incomplete. Her father's ghost sends her messages she does not truly understand, and her misinterpretation of those messages damages her daughter Reba and her granddaughter Hagar. The problems they have are never really solved, and Hagar, who is loved to excess by both her mother and her grandmother, does not know how to cope in the outside world. Although Pilate's connection with the spiritual world has given her a certain insight on the inner life of human beings, her own life and identity are incomplete because she has no connection to the black community.

The characters in *Beloved* seem to have an unspoken agreement not to discuss and to forget as much as they can of their past. As individuals and as members of the black community, they are victims of a cultural psychosis inflicted on them by the institution of slavery and the ideology of racism. Therefore the characters are constantly struggling to maintain the delicate balance between remembering and forgetting in order to stop the past from intruding upon the present. In other words, the characters have made a conscious decision to forget the past, which stems from the fear of losing their independence and being enslaved and controlled by the past all over again.

The dynamics of remembering and forgetting is somewhat different in *Song of Solomon*, where the need to forget is not as acute as in *Beloved*. However, whether they know virtually nothing about the past or have a distorted view of it, all the major characters have difficulties in balancing

between their past and their present. Milkman's life, for example, is shadowed by his ignorance of his own personal history and the history of his family to an extent where he feels completely detached both from himself and the people around him. While Milkman tries to ignore the past, his mother Ruth has an idealized view of it. Since her present life can not offer her the love and comfort she needs, Ruth finds solace in the past. However, in spite of the different ways in which the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* choose to deal with the past, they can not have a better future until they make a conscious effort to accept both the past and the present and the interaction between the two.

6. 2 Reconstruction of Identity

As a result of the emotional turmoil triggered by the changes in their lives, the characters are faced with the task of reconstructing their identity. Therefore the search for a stable identity is at the centre of both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. In spite of the differences in their backgrounds and their lives in general, what the main characters have in common is a distorted and incomplete sense of themselves. This in turn enforces the destructive patterns of behaviour they have adopted early in life, and makes them unable to grow as persons. Moreover, it is important to recognize the development of identity as a gradual process, whereby the consciousness of the characters is raised as they first become aware of their developmental dilemmas and then start to actively resolve them on a conscious level. However, the reluctance of the characters to face the difficult issues not only prolongs the reconstruction of identity, but also makes the process more painful for all parties concerned. In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* Morrison draws attention to the fact that although the development of identity is a profound and challenging process to the individual in question, it affects others as well. Therefore what Morrison is suggesting is that a person cannot develop into a total self without the support of and consideration for other people.

In *Beloved* Sethe identifies herself primarily as a mother, and therefore measures her own value as a person through her ability to provide for her children. Although her devotion to her children enables her to save them from slavery, it also plays a significant part in her inability to develop a stable and

separate identity. Wyatt (1993: 475-477) comments on Sethe's limited self-definition, which is based on her physical connection to her children. Sethe sees herself as the heroic slave mother, who saved her children from slavery and gave birth in the face of what seemed like insuperable obstacles. The triumph of her maternal quest and the nurturing power of the slave mother gain a literal meaning for Sethe: "I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that wide*" (*Beloved* 162). Therefore Sethe's maternal body gains almost mythic dimensions with its ability to give and sustain life. However, in spite of such an omnipotent image, Sethe is unable to experience her existence on a personal level. In other words she sees herself only in relation to her children and their survival, and is thus concerned not for herself but "for the life of her children's mother". Sethe's view of her children as parts of her allows her to commit infanticide in order to enter death as a single unit. In addition to the killing of her baby girl, Sethe's sense of continuity with her children makes it difficult for her to tell her story and subsequently release herself from the past. Unfortunately Sethe's refusal to verbalize the past does not banish it. In stead the painful events are always present, occupying the various rooms in which they took place, demanding attention and keeping Sethe from moving forward with her life.

Although the drama of the infanticide has possessed the house in the form of the ghost for years, it is not until the appearance of *Beloved* that Sethe is forced to live out her unspeakable past. Once Sethe recognizes *Beloved* as her daughter, she is overwhelmed by joy. Being reunited with her daughter is a dream come true, and Sethe feels as if she has found a buried treasure:

"A hobnail casket of jewels found in a tree hollow should be fondled before it is opened. Its lock may have rusted or broken away from the clasp. Still you should touch the nail heads, and test its weight. No smashing with an ax head before it is decently exhumed from the grave that has hidden it all this time. No gasp at a miracle that is truly miraculous because the magic lies in the fact that you knew it was there for you all along". (*Beloved* 176.)

With the image of the treasure chest, *Beloved's* resurrection is a great discovery promising wealth and fortune. However, her presence also exhumes

the past Sethe has buried deep inside her, and in her attempts to prove her love to Beloved and gain her forgiveness Sethe is nearly destroyed. Therefore having Beloved back in her life is both a source of joy and pain for Sethe, who has to accept the fact that "anything dead coming back to life hurts". This duality is manifested in the interaction between Sethe and Beloved so that initially their relationship is harmonious and mutually fulfilling. However, such an ideal state is impossible to sustain because of the conflicting needs of Sethe and Beloved. While Sethe wants to disregard the issue of infanticide as if it never happened, Beloved's primary goal is to claim retribution for the killing. From Sethe's point of view her action was justified, and since she has paid the price for her choice she feels the incident should be forgotten. For Beloved, on the other hand, the infanticide is the primary experience of her life and therefore denying it is impossible. The arguments between Sethe and Beloved intensify, and it becomes more and more difficult for Sethe to maintain the illusion of a happy reunion. In spite of the obvious futility of her efforts, Sethe is relentless in trying to earn Beloved's understanding for her action:

"Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back just one of Beloved's tears. Did she know it hurt her when mosquitoes bit her baby? That to leave her on the ground to run into the big house made her crazy?" (*Beloved* 241-242).

However, Sethe's pleas have no effect on Beloved, who continues to taunt Sethe with her accusations. Although the mental anguish which Beloved inflicts on Sethe is an important factor in their destructive relationship, Sethe's own behaviour contributes to the oppressive situation as well. She wants Beloved to understand her action and forgive her, and yet she acknowledges no guilt. By categorically denying her responsibility for the killing, Sethe helps to maintain the tension between them. Moreover, she continues to provoke Beloved, which leads them into a vicious cycle of love and obsession. As observed by Denver, "Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (*Beloved* 252). According to Otten (1993: 658-659), Sethe regards her act as the proudest testimony of her love

for Beloved, and therefore she cannot assume guilt because it would cancel out the justification of her act. Thus Sethe does not even want to be forgiven, and she regards Beloved's refusal to forgive her as further evidence of the righteousness of her act and the strength of her love. As a result of such a thwarted logic, Sethe contributes to her own misery and prolongs the process of healing.

The killing of her child left Sethe with deep emotional scars which are hidden but not healed. She has never truly accepted the loss of her daughter, and therefore important aspects of her identity have not been developed. Sethe herself is aware that there is something missing in her life, but instead of recognizing the feeling of being detached and incomplete as something to do with her own identity, she associates it with the absence of her baby girl. Thus Sethe has still not developed a separate identity, but holds on to the image of herself as a mother, inseparable from her children. With the appearance of Beloved her sense of unity and wholeness are restored, and although the rediscovery of possession and belonging is deeply moving, it is merely a prelude in the progressively more destructive process. Ferguson (1991: 118) argues that both Sethe and Beloved are responsible for the destructive element of their reunion, Sethe by wanting to lose herself in her daughter, and Beloved by being unable to rationalize, articulate or understand the infanticide. Beloved relates to Sethe in terms of a pre-Oedipal discourse, demonstrating the qualities and behaviour of a child. Although both Sethe and Denver respond strongly to Beloved, her true nature remains unknown to them.

Exhausted by Beloved's demands and cruelty, Sethe is on the brink of both physical and mental deterioration. In her efforts to make Beloved understand her reasons for the killing, Sethe endangers not only her own life but the life of Denver as well. As a result of her obsession for Beloved, Sethe loses her grip on reality, and thus Denver is the only person who sees the situation for what it is:

"124 was quiet. Denver, who thought she knew all about silence, was surprised to learn hunger could do that: quiet you down and wear you out. Neither Sethe nor Beloved knew or cared about it one way or another. They were too busy rationing their strength to fight each other ... The flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb was thin as china

silk and there wasn't a piece of clothing in the house that didn't sag on her ... It was as though her mother had lost her mind". (*Beloved* 239-240.)

As Sethe is slowly slipping into madness, it becomes apparent that "if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might" (*Beloved* 242). Denver, who has become an observer of the situation, realizes that she cannot save her mother from Beloved without outside help. In spite of her fear of the outside world, Denver decides to go out to the black community and ask for help. As a result of her effort, a group of women from the community gather around and perform an exorcism, which ultimately leads to Beloved's permanent disappearance and initiates the final stage of Sethe's healing process. However, Morrison does not depict the details of Sethe's final healing, but rather suggests the possibility of a renewed identity and a stable relationship. After Beloved's disappearance Sethe is on the brink of death because the pain of losing her for the second time is overwhelming. Like Baby Suggs years earlier, she takes to her bed and prepares to die. Fortunately her will to live is restored with the help of Paul D, whose willingness "to put his story next to hers" is thus not only an act of a shared narrative, but also an affirmation that Sethe has a claim to herself:

"Sethe," he says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow."

He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." His holding fingers are holding hers.

"Me? Me?" (*Beloved* 273).

According to Rushdy (1992: 589-590), Sethe's ability to understand and reclaim herself stems from remembering and understanding her own mother's acts. Moreover, by situating herself within a communal narrative of mother-daughter relationships, Sethe is able to gain a new perspective on the infanticide and to her relationship with her daughters. Once the unspeakable things become spoken, Sethe's mind is released from the past, and she can look into the future. Thus as a result of her healing process, Sethe realizes that she is a person in her own right, and as such worthy of love and acceptance.

Denver is another character in *Beloved* who succeeds in negotiating her way into selfhood and society in spite of her arrested development and reluctance to accept change and adult responsibilities. Similarly to Sethe, Denver is trapped by her mother's past, which is made even more threatening by Sethe's refusal to discuss it. Due to all the losses she has sustained by people dying and leaving, Denver's life is very limited in terms of interactive relationships. Living in isolation with Sethe and the ghost, Denver has no contact to other people who could support her development. Therefore her identity is fragmented and unstable to an extent where she feels both her body and self dissolving into nothing without the continuous presence of Beloved. By transferring her dependence on Sethe to Beloved, Denver is able to develop certain aspects of her personality and regain the comfort she felt in the presence of the ghost. In considering Beloved's role in Denver's development, Ferguson (1991: 115) points out that on the threshold of adulthood, Denver both chooses and is pushed back into her lost childhood, which is part of what Beloved represents for her. Her limited sense of Beloved's fate has made her acutely aware of the perilous aspect of mother love, and in fear of the past repeating itself Denver grows aggressively protective of Beloved. Thus Denver's possessiveness is partly to protect Beloved from Sethe, and partly to repossess a part of herself that has not been realized. As a result, Denver's jealousy to mother her can be viewed as both regression and growth.

Denver's dependency on her mother and her strong ambivalent feelings toward Sethe are considered by FitzGerald (1993: 675-677) as primarily pre-Oedipal. When Paul D arrives and costs her the company both of Sethe and the ghost, Denver is faced with an Oedipal conflict. However, the conflict remains unresolved, because shortly afterwards Beloved materializes and becomes the object of Denver's emotional hunger, to whom she projects her good feelings about herself. Thus Denver defines herself through the eyes of Beloved, much in the same way as a baby sees itself mirrored in a mother's face:

"It was lovely. Not to be stared at, not seen, but being pulled into view by the interested, uncritical eyes of the other ... Denver's skin dissolved under that gaze and became soft and bright like the lisle dress that had its arm around her mother's waist. She

floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was". (*Beloved* 118.)

Although *Beloved's* presence clearly invokes positive feelings in Denver, the intensity of their relationship also makes Denver highly dependent on *Beloved*. Denver's sense of self depends on *Beloved*, and therefore the possibility of *Beloved* leaving her is also a threat to her fragile identity. Moreover, the realization that compared to *Sethe* she means nothing to *Beloved*, makes the need to possess her even stronger. Competing with *Sethe* for *Beloved's* affection together with the need to protect her from *Sethe* motivate Denver to choose *Beloved* over her mother. However, once Denver is excluded from the interaction between *Sethe* and *Beloved*, she is able to observe the situation without prejudice and thus recognizes the danger represented by *Beloved*:

"The job she started out with, protecting *Beloved* from *Sethe*, changed to protecting her mother from *Beloved*. Now it was obvious that her mother could die and leave them both and what would *Beloved* do then? ... Denver knew it was on her. She would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help". (*Beloved* 243.)

Although turning to the community for help is initially an effort to save her mother from *Beloved*, it is also an essential element in Denver's personal development. Rushdy (1992: 581-583) sees this as a crucial moment in Denver's life, which requires her to grow up into adult responsibilities and face the larger community. In addition, she has to stop dwelling on her mother's past and understand her act in the light of the communal history of slavery. The importance of historical knowledge as a source of integrity is demonstrated when Denver is visited by *Baby Suggs's* ghost:

"You mean I never told you nothing about *Carolina*? About your daddy? You don't remember nothing about how come I walk the way I do and about your mother's feet, not to speak of her back? I never told you all that? Is that why you can't walk down the steps? My Jesus my."

"But you said there was no defense."

"There ain't."

"Then what do I do?"

"Know it and go on out the yard. Go on". (*Beloved* 244.)

By following her grandmother's advice, Denver is able to leave the house, and begin to understand the forces of slavery and her own place within the context of black communal history. As a result, Denver matures into an independent young woman with a new understanding of her mother's infanticide and the dangers entailed in dwelling on the past. Thus Denver is able to successfully resolve her developmental dilemmas and take charge of her life. Moreover, she has an important role in saving her mother and in reuniting the members of the black community, who have been separated from each other by prejudice and pride. Thus Denver's initiative can be seen as an act of both personal and communal healing, leading to a renewed and energetic life with the promise of a better future.

Crippled by their traumatic experiences and limited by their distorted vision of themselves and each other, the characters in *Beloved* are faced with considerable obstacles in their personal development. Moreover, the fear of facing their past is a powerful motif for avoiding any thoughts and actions which challenge their fragile self-image. Although the reconstruction of identity requires a lot of self-reflection, an important part of the process is the revival of social contacts. Therefore finding one's inner resources and one's place within the black community and black cultural history are both needed to build a stable identity.

6. 3 Milkman's Search for Self

Although Milkman's development follows the same overall pattern as the development of the characters in *Beloved*, it is important to discuss his search for self separately in order to form a more coherent picture of his development. In *Song of Solomon* Morrison concentrates on depicting the different stages of Milkman's personal growth through a series of events. There is an interesting parallel between Milkman's growing awareness of himself and the unraveling of the larger story of the Dead family as representatives of black history. Therefore Milkman's development and the

uncovering of his family history are intertwined, emphasizing the connection between people regardless of space and time. Moreover, Morrison's choice of making Milkman the protagonist is an interesting one from the point of identity. In the beginning of the novel the reader is in the same position with Milkman, knowing virtually nothing about his personality or his past. However, as Milkman is faced with his personal issues, the reader has the opportunity not only to follow his development, but in a manner of speaking to be a part of the process. Thus it is easier to identify with Milkman and understand the process he goes through.

In discussing Milkman's development, several critics have chosen the psychoanalytical approach whereby his developmental dilemmas are identified as Oedipal. As stated by Branch (1995: 56), during the Oedipal phase the child has an unconscious desire to sexually possess the parent of the opposite sex and at the same time eliminate the parent of the same sex. As a result of a successful resolution of the conflict, which includes identification with the parent of the same sex to assuage powerful feelings of guilt, the child is left with a promise to rediscover the sexual attraction in adulthood. In *Song of Solomon* Milkman is introduced to the reader when he is four years old, which is the midpoint of a young child's Oedipal development. Milkman is characterized by the discovery that he cannot fly:

"When the little boy discovered, at four, the same thing Mr. Smith had learned earlier - that only birds and aeroplanes could fly - he lost all interest in himself. To have to live without that single gift saddened him and left his imagination so bereft that he appeared dull even to the women who did not hate his mother. The ones who did, who accepted her invitations to tea and envied the doctor's big dark house of twelve rooms and the green sedan, called him "peculiar". The others, who knew that the house was more a prison than a palace ... called her son "deep". Even mysterious". (*Song of Solomon* 9-10.)

In Milkman's case the Oedipal phase is resolved relatively late, and therefore a large part of his identity is still unformed by the time he reaches adulthood. The factors that have allowed Milkman "to stretch his carefree boyhood out for thirty-one years" (*Song of Solomon* 98) are mainly due to the personal histories of his parents, which are reflected in their family life and thus complicate Milkman's ability to resolve his own developmental issues.

According to Scruggs (1982: 329-331), he exists in a state of suspended animation, destined into a state of spiritual stagnation by his parent's treatment. As a result, Milkman's development has ceased at an early age, and like a child he remains preoccupied with himself without really having a self with which to be preoccupied. Because of his unformed personality, Milkman has become "a garbage pail for the actions and hatreds of other people" (*Song of Solomon* 120), and is used by others to allay their own miseries. Moreover, Milkman is misguided in his belief that once he finds Pilate's gold, he will find his true self. Thus in his effort to free himself from his family and their destructive patterns of behaviour, Milkman is actually repeating the mistake of his father, who also believed in the liberating force of the gold.

An important change occurs when Milkman "at twelve met the boy who not only could liberate him, but could take him to the woman who had as much to do with his future as she had with his past" (*Song of Solomon* 36). Branch (1995: 71) points out that as he develops the relationships with Guitar, Pilate and her family, Milkman is introduced to a lifestyle and a view of the world, which are very different from those he has adopted from his father. As a result of his friendship with Guitar, Milkman discovers male camaraderie and is offered an alternative representation of masculinity, which is detached from materialistic values. Pilate, on the other hand, acts as Milkman's conscience and provides him with some sense of the world and his place in it. Moreover, in Pilate's home Milkman finds the kind of unconditional love and acceptance he has not experienced before:

"Milkman was five feet seven then but it was the first time in his life that he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy - wise and kind and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house; he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out loud. And he was in love. No wonder his father was afraid of them". (*Song of Solomon* 47.)

Milkman continues to struggle with Oedipal issues, which are demonstrated in his ambivalent feelings toward his father. Torn between the need to emulate the father he fears and respects and the desire to gain autonomy, Milkman is unable to resolve the situation and strengthen his

identity. As a result of a confrontation with his father at twenty-two, Milkman is faced with the sudden memory of the extended breastfeeding of him by his mother, and her reaction to being discovered:

"He had remembered something. Or believed he remembered something ... He tried to see more of the picture, but couldn't. Then he heard something that he knew was related to the picture. Laughter. Somebody he couldn't see, in the room laughing ... at him and at his mother, and his mother is ashamed. She lowers her eyes and won't look at him. "Look at me, Mama. Look at me." But she doesn't ..." (*Song of Solomon* 77).

Branch (1995: 72) sees Milkman's memory as a reminder of his abandonment by Ruth. Moreover, the revival of the memory radically changes Milkman's perception not only of his mother but of all the women in his life so that their maternal care and love is eroticized and demonized in his mind. Therefore Milkman becomes increasingly suspicious in his relationships to women and prefers superficial contacts.

Although it takes a long time for Milkman to come to terms with his ambivalent feelings, his revived memory initiates the gradual process towards self-awareness. Faced with his own isolation and his inability to make a connection with other people, Milkman is for the first time conscious of his rootlessness and lack of personal growth. However, these reflections on his life do not lead to a major developmental change until several years later at the age of thirty-one. Branch (1995: 75-77) discusses Milkman's struggle with his problematic relationship to his mother. Motivated by curiosity and suspicion, he follows Ruth one night as she visits her father's grave. Unable to resolve the contradictory pulls of attraction and repulsion he feels towards her, Milkman's confrontation with Ruth at the graveyard devastates him. Her words are a reminder of her deep feelings for him and his own ambivalent feelings for her. Moreover, Milkman's emotional upheaval is manifested in his impulse to die, that is, in his decision to let Hagar take his life. His wish to die is also linked to his struggles with shame and failure to gain autonomy. Therefore he sees death as the ultimate escape from feeling guilty and powerless at being unable to change family history and the direction of his own life. However, Hagar is not able to kill him, and his victory over death makes physical escape possible. In order to gain the financial means to leave his family, Milkman

rather surprisingly turns to his father, who wants him to steal Pilate's alleged gold. By agreeing to execute Macon's plan, Milkman attempts to mediate the demands of his father and his own needs for autonomy. Thus the burglary is an important marker in Milkman's movement towards a mature adult identity and the resolution of the Oedipal tensions that have influenced his life.

Although the burglary makes Milkman feel "a self inside himself emerge, a clean-lined definite self" (*Song of Solomon* 184), the burglary itself is unsuccessful since Milkman and Guitar are caught red-handed, and the sack of gold turns out to be full of old bones. However, in the aftermath of burglarizing Pilate's home, Milkman recognizes his responsibility to Pilate and the danger that Guitar presents:

"Suddenly Milkman knew the answer to the question he had never been able to ask Guitar. Guitar could kill, would kill and probably had killed. The Seven Days was the consequence of this ability, but not its origin". (*Song of Solomon* 210.)

As a result of understanding the changes in Guitar's personality, Milkman is able to separate himself from his friend and take a necessary step to continue his development.

When Milkman begins his journey into the remote Southern towns in search of Pilate's gold, he is driven not only by the possibility of wealth, but by his need for independence and power. He perceives himself as a fairy tale hero, escaping from the demands and constraints of other people:

"The airplane ride exhilarated him, encouraged illusion and a feeling of invulnerability. High above the clouds, heavy yet light, caught in the stillness of speed ("Cruise", the pilot said), sitting in the intricate metal become glistening bird, it was not possible to believe he had ever made a mistake, or could ... In the air, away from real life, he felt free". (*Song of Solomon* 220.)

In the beginning of his journey, Milkman's view of the world is still very similar to his father's, and his exclusive vision and lack of compassion enable him to unconsciously abuse other people. The similarities between him and his father are further indicated by his search for the gold. Milkman believes that leaving everything and everyone behind will provide him with a sense of his

own identity, which he has never known. Thus in his mind financial freedom equals independence, and once he has the gold, he no longer has to submit to the claims of others. However, in the course of his journey Milkman goes through a fundamental change, which alters his views about money and relationships. Smith (1985: 730-731) states that, although Milkman's assumption that the key to his liberation may be found in the towns of Danville and Shalimar is correct, it is not the gold that will set him free. In order for him to gain a better understanding of the whole experience, Milkman has to replace his individualism and materialism with the communal and mythical values of his ancestors' world. When Milkman arrives at Danville his attitude, manners and even clothing set him apart from the people around him, and although he is treated with hospitality and consideration, he feels awkward and disconnected in the new environment. Graceful in the "civilized" world, he is clumsy and obtuse when he enters the wilderness in search of Pilate's gold. In spite of his detachment and the unsuccessful search, the few days Milkman stays in the town are important to his later development. Prior to his journey he had no interest in his family history or cultural heritage. However, in Danville Milkman experiences a real sense of place and history for the first time in his life. The stories of his grandfather, an independent and accomplished man, trigger Milkman's interest in his ancestors and his own origins. Gradually he begins to understand what it means to be a part of a true community and history. Moreover, he finds himself longing for the kind of connection to his ancestors and their heritage that the local people have managed to preserve. At the same time, however, he realizes that even in Danville people are losing that connection and their belief in better times: "And even as boys these men began to die and were dying still. Looking at Milkman in those nighttime talks, they yearned for something. Some word from him that would rekindle the dream and stop the death they were dying" (*Song of Solomon* 235-236).

Although Milkman does try to restore the faith of the townsmen by telling them about the success of his father and though he clearly begins to understand the importance of roots and communal values, he is not yet ready to adopt them and forget the gold. Persistent in his view of independence being provided by the gold, Milkman retraces Pilate's steps and goes to Shalimar where he continues to resolve his developmental issues in two

separate occasions. The atmosphere of the town is different from Danville, and within a few moments from his arrival Milkman gets into a fight with some of the younger townsmen because his ignorance over the customs and values of the community make him act in a way that the local people find offensive. With his civilized manners and obvious wealth, Milkman represents a challenge to their manliness:

"He was telling them they weren't men, that they relied on women and children for their food ... He hadn't found them fit enough or good enough to want to know their names, and believed himself too good to tell them his. They looked at his skin and saw it was as black as theirs, but they knew he had the heart of the white men who came to pick them up in the trucks when they needed anonymous, faceless laborers". (*Song of Solomon* 266.)

Although Milkman is aware of the open hostility directed at him, he does not recognize his own behaviour as the source of the confrontation. However, the fight is the first occasion in his life when he takes a stand and successfully defends himself. It is only after entering the rural South that Milkman has learned to "stop evading things, sliding through, over, and around difficulties" (*Song of Solomon* 271). Thus the fight is significant in leading him to a new state of self-awareness. Moreover, it helps him in his initiation into the grass-roots black community when some of the old men invite him into a bob cat hunt, which turns out to be the turning point of Milkman's journey in terms of his personal development. Unfamiliar with the woods, Milkman finds himself helpless and totally unprepared for the hunt. The woods and the complete darkness of the night are frightening to Milkman, and whatever skills or advantages he might have are of no use to him in the wilderness. He feels inadequate and clumsy compared to the other men, and is overcome with fatigue. While he rests, he finds himself alone in the darkness with his thoughts and feels "his self - the cocoon that was "personality" - gave way" (*Song of Solomon* 277). Left to his own devices, Milkman begins to reflect on his life and his relationships, and starts to question his self-centered attitude:

"It sounded old. Deserve. Old and tired and beaten to death. Deserve. Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn't deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others. He'd told Guitar that he didn't "deserve" his family's

dependence, hatred or whatever. That he didn't even "deserve" to hear all the misery and mutual accusations his parents unloaded on him. Nor did he "deserve" Hagar's vengeance. But why shouldn't his parents tell him their personal problems? If not him, then who?" (*Song of Solomon* 276).

Being alone in the darkness, stripped of all the material things through which he defines himself, Milkman is able to think clearly and recognize his own shortcomings. Thus the night and the darkness bring him a clarity of vision, which enables him to confront himself:

"Apparently he thought he deserved only to be loved - from a distance, though - and given what he wanted. And in return he would be ... what? Pleasant? Generous? Maybe all he was really saying was: I am not responsible for your pain; share your happiness with me but not your unhappiness". (*Song of Solomon* 277.)

At the moment of this personal revelation when Milkman gives birth to a new sense of self, Guitar, who has been following him since the beginning of his journey, makes an attempt on his life. Milkman is nearly killed by his friend, but is once again triumphant in the face of death. Branch (1995: 80-81) finds Milkman's confrontation with and victory over death to be a result of his new awareness of himself, validating his potential to become a better person. In addition, he has found a connection with both the feminine and masculine aspects of nature, which affirms him of his masculinity as an outgrowth of the Oedipal struggle. As a result of his revelation in the woods, Milkman has found a new joy in life because he has chosen life and love over death and destruction, thus breaking the pattern of behavior adopted by his parents. Therefore Milkman is finally able to put things into perspective and forgive his parents. Moreover, he is ready to take responsibility for his actions and come to terms with his treatment of Pilate and Hagar. With his sense of shame "as thick and as tight as caul" (*Song of Solomon* 300), Milkman recognizes that he has violated whatever sense of family and affection he ever felt for them, which is a signal of the development of his conscience.

Absorbed in family history and the African American cultural heritage, Milkman is driven towards further self-discovery. Persistent in his need to form a coherent picture of his family history, Milkman roams the countryside in

search of any information about his ancestors. What finally enables him to put the story together is a children's song. Although he has heard fragments of the song before, he has not had enough information or interest to really listen and understand the meaning of it. Suddenly everything that he has heard about his ancestors makes sense, and as the story of his family unfolds Milkman feels happy and proud of the connection he has found. After a lifetime of feeling like an outsider even in his own family, Milkman has achieved a sense of belonging and wholeness.

Although Milkman has gained a new insight on his life and relationships, Branch (1995: 81-82) argues that he does not fully understand the consequences of his actions until he returns home and is briefly imprisoned by the grief-stricken Pilate as punishment for Hagar's death, who could not stand his rejection and died while trying to win him back. Milkman comes to the realization that although he has changed and found a new identity, the past will always be a part of his life: "... the consequences of Milkman's own stupidity would always outweigh the things he was proud of having done" (*Song of Solomon* 335). Moreover, he realizes that he cannot live his life without being connected to other people. However complicated or difficult it may be, Milkman cannot separate himself either from his family or his ancestors. After all, it was human connection and not the gold that helped him to find himself.

When Milkman returns home, he is shocked to hear about Hagar's death, and as an act of atonement he acknowledges his responsibility in her death and takes the box of Hagar's hair that Pilate has saved for him. Moreover, he shares his knowledge of family history with Pilate and thus helps her to find inner peace. Together with Pilate he returns to Shalimar to bury the remains of her father, whose bones she has been carrying around for decades without knowing they were his. However, they are unaware that Guitar has followed them. Guitar, who is filled with murderous rage against Milkman, believes he did find the gold and has broken his promise to share it with him. Without his share of the gold, the Seven Days cannot continue with its mission, and in his desperation Guitar tries to kill Milkman. However, he accidentally shoots Pilate, and as she lies dying in Milkman's arms, she tells him: "I wish I'd a knowed more people. I would of loved 'em all. If I'd a knowed more, I would a loved more" (*Song of Solomon* 336).

Pilate's death and her final words make Milkman realize how important she has been in his life and how much he has lost in losing her so suddenly. Pilate has been Milkman's pilot and his spiritual guide, showing him an alternative way of looking at the world. She has taught him that flying is a state of being rather than a physical act: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (*Song of Solomon* 336). In other words, Milkman finally understands and values Pilate's ability to transcend self and self-love, and realizes that once you accept of whatever there is to come, the spirit can soar. As a result of his realization, Milkman is able to confront Guitar:

"You want my life?" Milkman was not shouting now. "You need it? Here." Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees - he leaped. As fleet and bright as a lodestar he wheeled toward Guitar and it did not matter which one of them would give up his ghost in the killing arms of his brother. For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could ride it". (*Song of Solomon* 337.)

The powerful and unresolved ending of the novel has raised a lot of critical commentary, and the meaning of Milkman's final act has been alternately read as suicidal, existential or transcendental. Clearly such an ending is highly ambiguous, and the reader is not supposed to know what happens between Milkman and Guitar. Branch (1995: 83-84) interprets Milkman's flight as the logical extension of his recuperation of family history. In accepting his responsibility to friends and family, Milkman has successfully resolved his personal issues. Moreover, he has become a shaman and a conservator of the African American heritage, and his flight is the ultimate rite of passage, which firmly grounds him in the Afrocentric values and enables him to apply that knowledge in his own life. Therefore it is not important whether Milkman survives his flight, because he has found himself and achieved a connection to his ancestors and their cultural heritage.

7 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* Morrison tackles the complex issues of the personal and communal past and the reconstruction of identity. Since these issues are dealt with within the framework of African American culture and heritage, the history and experiences of the black people are an essential part of the novels. Irrespective of the extent of the knowledge the characters have on the effect of race on their lives, the color of their skin plays an important part in their struggles toward self-awareness and independence. The meaning of race is especially pervasive in *Beloved*, where slavery and racist ideology have shaped the lives of four generations to the extent that the characters are unable to face the demons of their past, and are therefore denied the possibility to create a viable future. Since the characters have not had the opportunity to establish a stable identity separate from the institution of slavery and the ideology of racism, they lack the mental capacity to process the traumatic experiences of the past. Moreover, although the characters no longer live in slavery, the psychological effect of the time they spent in enslavement is an inseparable part of their everyday life. Even decades of freedom have not diminished the feelings of pain and anxiety associated with the past. Therefore in order to protect their fragile identity, the characters focus their mental energy on repressing the painful memories, which in turn has both a positive and a negative effect. While detachment from the past enables the characters to go on with their lives and take care of their families, it also prevents them from resolving the traumatic experiences. As a result, the characters are unable to release themselves from the mental status of a slave and assume the identity of a free person. As pointed out by Fulweiler (1996: 350-351), the characters thus transmit the heritage of slavery onto their children and unconsciously enforce the racist ideology which they believe to have left behind.

The racist views of the whites and their effect on the lives of the blacks are discussed in *Beloved* through the individual histories of the characters. Morrison points out the decisive role slavery and racism play in the lives of the slaves, pervading all areas of life including their sexuality and their rights as parents. The status of slaves as property determined their lives from birth, and any sign of resistance or free will could result in violence or even death

(see p.53). Moreover, the humiliation and degradation of slavery at times led to such violent acts as infanticide, which was a rather common practice during slavery. Although such a horrific act as the murder of one's child can not be justified, it should be viewed within the context of slavery and the long-term psychological effects of an institution which is based on the denial of the slaves' selfhood and their reduction to animals and objects of possession. What makes the infanticide and the subsequent events in *Beloved* even more tragic is the extent to which slavery affects the thoughts and actions of the characters. However determined they are to live in the present, the past is an inseparable part of their identity. Therefore their thoughts and actions are strongly affected by the values and views imposed on them by slavery and racism.

In *Song of Solomon* the question of racial inferiority is still present, but it is not such a dominant element as in *Beloved*. This is largely due to the different periods of time of the novels and the social and political changes which took place between the 1850s and the 1960s (see p.6-9). Therefore the focus has shifted from the everyday survival of *Beloved* to the struggle for equality of *Song of Solomon*, which demonstrates the changes in the position of the black people in American society. However, although slavery is no longer a relevant factor in the lives of the characters, the issues related to race are still of current interest. The majority of blacks depend on the whites for their income, and the opportunities for improving the socioeconomic status are restricted because of the color of their skin. Moreover, the constant threat of violence together with the inability of the legal system to protect the rights of the black people give rise to frustration and rage, which in *Song of Solomon* lead to indiscriminate acts of violence and thus contribute to the atmosphere of prejudice and fear. Therefore by depicting the consequences of extreme views and measures on racial issues, Morrison reveals the false logic of gaining justice by violence.

While the struggle for equality during the 1960s created tension between the blacks and the whites, it also intensified the internal division within the black community. This division is stated by Dinnerstein et al. (1990: 307-311) and manifested in *Song of Solomon* by the conservative and the more radical views on racial issues represented by the different characters. Therefore the disintegration and alienation within and between the blacks

depicts the dichotomy of African American political thought in the twentieth century. Interestingly enough, Morrison rejects both the adoption of Western values and the more radical views of black nationalism as means to achieve equality. Instead she promotes the more positive aspects of a culturally oriented world view, which include the knowledge and understanding of black history and heritage and the potential of using that knowledge as a basis for a viable and an inclusive identity. Thus Morrison suggests that by reviving the traditional values of support, respect and love imbedded in the black culture, African Americans can obtain better lives both on a personal and on a communal level even in today's society. In addition, Morrison's choice to depict such significant periods and events in the history of the black people in the United States is clearly an effort to raise people's consciousness concerning the historical and social position of African Americans and the psychological effects of slavery and racism both on a personal and communal level. Therefore Morrison's goal is to undercut the ideological basis upon which the treatment of black people has largely been constructed. The personal histories through which the events are depicted demonstrate the complex processes involved in the confrontation of the past and the development of a personal and yet collective sense of identity. Although the personal accounts of the characters' lives are powerful and provoke strong emotions, Morrison succeeds to maintain the credibility of her stories. Moreover, there are parallels between black history and the individual experiences of the characters, which contribute to the realistic touch of the novels.

In spite of the factual knowledge one might have of the institution of slavery, it is difficult to grasp the incredible cruelty and the depth of the impact slavery and racism on the lives of the blacks. The inferior position of the blacks and their dependency on the whites particularly during slavery characterize the fundamental imbalance between the races and the persistence of such power relations as discussed by Genovese (1993: 13-16). Therefore the experiences of the characters in *Beloved* manifest the logic of slavery, which leads from personal degradation to self-annihilation and from debasement to extinction. Moreover, if a person contests or rejects the logic of slavery, he or she is quite literally reduced to nothing. However necessary such resistance as escape or infanticide may be in terms of survival, the legacy of slavery converts the loved one into an object and thus enforces the

possessive aspect of slavery even in freedom. Finding an alternative to such "thick love" is therefore of the utmost importance in order to form reciprocal relationships and be able to look into the future and not the past.

Although confronting the past is necessary in terms of personal development, one can not help but feel sympathy for the characters in *Beloved* as they struggle to maintain control in the turmoil of emotions. Moreover, since the traumatic experiences have not been processed, they have sustained their original pain and intensity forcing the characters to relive the worst moments of their lives. What makes it all even more painful is the fact that the personal growth of the characters has been stunted by their experiences. As a result, they have no proper tools to deal with the situation and are therefore left virtually powerless against the upheaval caused by the revival of the past. However, such a fundamental change is needed in order to initiate the process of healing both on a personal and on a communal level.

An essential part of the healing process in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is the self-reflection of individual characters, which involves recognizing the effect of one's actions on others and assuming responsibility for those actions. Being deprived of such basic needs as security and confidential and reciprocal relationships has distorted the views of the characters, causing them to either distance themselves from their family members or desperately holding on to them. In spite of the different approaches, the common goal of the characters is to protect themselves and preserve what they perceive as stability and independence. Profoundly affected by their life experiences of manipulation and exploitation, the thoughts and behaviour of the characters reflect the selfish attitude they have adopted in order to maintain control of their lives. Although applying such a defense mechanism is understandable, it creates further complications by sustaining the distorted views. Therefore the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* have to not only recognize the error of their ways, but also be willing to initiate change from within and redefine themselves in terms of their personal histories and black cultural heritage.

There is a constant inner struggle in *Beloved* as the characters balance between the past and the present. In order to survive they have made the conscious decision to detach themselves from the painful memories. However, since the characters have not confronted the past, it still has the power to

enslave them. Moreover, the personification of the past contributes to the dramatic effect of the confrontation, intensifying the emotional upheaval of the characters. After years of trying to forget the past, they are suddenly faced with it in the most intrusive and painful way imaginable. Having one's past present in everyday life has devastating effects. Overwhelmed by strong and often contradictory emotions, the characters are driven to the point of physical and mental deterioration. Thus taking the initiative to resolve the situation and secure one's future requires a considerable amount of strength and courage. Initially Morrison's choice of taking such a relentless approach seems rather extreme. However, considering the nature of their experiences and the profound effect those experiences have on the lives of the characters, extreme measures are necessary in order to create a secure basis for a new and balanced identity.

The process of healing in *Song of Solomon* is somewhat different, but nonetheless extensive in terms of personal growth. Unable or unwilling to recognize how misguided they are, the characters focus their energy on things they perceive as sources of happiness. Whether that happiness is provided by spirituality, money or relationships, all the characters lead imbalanced lives as a result of not knowing or understanding their past and thus having an unstable identity. Moreover, affected by prejudice and strong ambivalent feelings, they are convinced of the righteousness of their views and actions, which prevents them from seeing themselves and each other for what they really are. Therefore the process of healing presents a considerable challenge, whereby everything that one has believed to be self-evident and true is questioned. In addition, although Morrison's choice to let the protagonist re-evaluate his life by running away from everything may be seen as a further indication of his inability to face the truth, it has an important function in terms of the healing process. By distancing himself from his friends and family, the protagonist is able to gain a new perspective on his life, and like in *Beloved*, take responsibility for his actions and thus have the possibility to improve his relationships.

Although the survival of the individual is of great importance in both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the role of the community can not be disregarded. The relationship between an individual and the community is complex and reciprocal, reflecting the socioeconomic and psychological issues

of the black society at different points in time. Therefore in *Beloved* the focus is on surviving the effects of slavery and racism on a daily basis, which is accomplished by avoiding the past at all costs. Moreover, the solidarity and unity of the black community is maintained as long as its members do not violate this unspoken agreement. Thus such an extreme act as infanticide leads to public judgement and ostracism. The killing is a startling reminder of the power of slavery, a horrific manifestation of the fact that even in freedom the former slaves are not safe. As years go by, the moral outrage subsides, but as a result of pride, prejudice and fear a lot of damage has been done both on a personal and on a communal level. However, in spite of the severed ties within the black community, there is still a sense of solidarity and responsibility, which motivates the community to help the member they have ostracized and thus initiates the process of healing of the individual and the community.

The relationship of the individual and the community in *Song of Solomon* is approached mainly in two ways. While some characters are acutely aware of the social issues current in the black society and are taking an active, although a misguided stand to change things, others including the protagonist have no interest in such matters. In both cases, however, the community has a decisive role in the personal development to the extent that it has the power to both disintegrate and revive one's identity. This is not to say that the characters have no free will, but rather that their life experiences affect their choices and decisions. Thus being deprived of different things, such as wealth, social status or secure relationships, predisposes the characters to make certain choices. However, they have the power to change their lives, and renewing the relationship with the community is an important part in the search for a stable identity. In addition, although reaching a new awareness of one's personal and communal history is relevant on an individual level, it also has significance on a communal level through the revival and preservation of black cultural heritage.

The traumatic experiences of the characters in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are very personal. However, Morrison constructs a parallel between the individual process of psychological recovery and a historical or national process, insisting on the significance of shared history by shared stories, traditions and experiences as a source of healing. Thus a better

understanding of one's culture and heritage provides a new perspective on things and contributes to the development of identity. In other words, Morrison indicates that individual power and collective strength are not incompatible. On the contrary, the connection between an individual and the community is of great importance both on a personal and a communal level. Morrison sees the community as composed of separate, distinct individuals who come together as a collective entity and yet remain complex, whole characters. Moreover, Morrison considers that cultural alienation leads to internal disintegration and rootlessness, thus destroying the foundation of personal and communal identity.

Both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are concerned with the process during which the characters confront their past and thus create a better future for themselves. Through the inner struggles of her characters, Morrison celebrates the human ability to transcend the limitations imposed by a certain way of thinking and the courage to face the demons within. Moreover, by placing her characters within the context of black history and culture and intertwining their lives and choices with the larger events and features of the black society, Morrison succeeds in maintaining a balance between credibility and dramatic effect, and offers the reader an insight into the black experience. However, in spite of the dominantly African American framework, the essence of both *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* is universal in nature. The struggles of the characters for love, independence and inner peace are features with which people can identify irrespective of their race or background. In addition, although the subject matter of the novels includes extreme forms of both physical and mental abuse, which at times seem overwhelming, there is a distinct element of hope. In spite of the debilitating experiences, the characters still have free will and therefore the potential to take control of their lives. Ultimately *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* are stories about survival and the strength of human spirit, which as such captivate the interest of a wide audience and contribute to Morrison's position as a prominent writer. Moreover, Morrison's ability to create complex and yet powerful stories together with her interest in the African American cultural heritage makes her work resound both on a historical and emotional level, creating an imaginative and an intriguing body of work. Due to the complexity of Morrison's novels, there are many interesting themes in addition to the ones discussed in the

course of this study. Furthermore, it would be interesting to compare Morrison's views with those of other contemporary black women writers, especially on the issues concerning black women and their life experiences.

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