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HISTORY REVISITED IN T. MORRISON’S NOVELS JAZZ AND A MERCY: BLACK INDIVIDUAL’S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

MA Paper

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HISTORY REVISITED IN T. MORRISON’S NOVELS JAZZ AND A MERCY: BLACK INDIVIDUAL’S SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

This MA Paper is submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of the MA in English Philology

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I declare that this study is my own and does not contain any unacknowledged work from any source.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to demonstrate how T. Morrison revisits African-American history and black individual’s search for identity from her African American standpoint and reveal how the writer breaks negative stereotypic images of the depiction of black women in two novels *Jazz* (1992) and *A Mercy* (2008) by analyzing the novels from the historical and black feminist point of view. The method chosen for the study was textual analysis and comparative approach. The research demonstrated that black individual’s perception and quest for identity is shaped and determined by their slave history and white racial stereotypes imposed on blacks. The research revealed that black individuals do have their strong sense of identity and self-consciousness of their past. The analysis also demonstrated how the writer broke negative stereotypic images of black characters in her novels and extended her literary techniques from Afro-American literary tradition to postmodern techniques which assert the speakerly or writerly features of both novels.
INTRODUCTION

The most prominent Afro-American studies in literature, history and culture began in the early 70s with the advent of feminist movement, Black Arts movement, and the Civil Rights Movement in the sixth decade of twentieth century which gave path to higher acclaim of African American women’s literature and African American culture. The ideas of black aesthetics pointed out the self-realization and self-consciousness of African Americans. Usually, until the Black Arts Movement and Black Feminist movement, Afro-American literary tradition was marked by the fact that Afro-American literature represents only the issues of slavery, racism and black people’s conditions in the Americas. Also, Afro-American literature was long suppressed by the domination of white literary tradition with its strong stereotypes about black literature providing only narrow critical response to black literature. Therefore, much of African American women’s literature has to be read anew.

It is a fact that Afro-American literature was and is still characterized by its specific socio-historical context, like any literature too, because history, especially its tragic side, is thought to be greatly reflected in literature. Therefore, the themes of slavery, racial prejudice, and problem of quest for lost or destructed identity are the most dominant ones in Afro-American literature. This leads to the following hypothesis of the research: black individual’s identity and perception of self-consciousness is greatly influenced and determined by the trauma of past and slave history.

The former distinction between black and white literatures has evoked a wider critical view: whether black literature is really a distinct tradition and has no contribution to American literature in its universal sense? Furthermore, more and more current literary critics started analyzing and viewing Afro-American literature not only as a separate and distinct literary tradition but also as literature which enters the overall and universal literary context. What makes Afro-American literature become more universal are the universal themes and aspects of human being presented in African-American literature. One of the most famous and acclaimed African-American women writers is Toni Morrison (born 1931), first black woman writer being awarded the 1993 Nobel Prize in literature, whose novels although being mainly about black characters, especially black women or depicting black slavery enter the context of wider literary tradition because her novels represent not only universal themes and problems but are also very rich in complex and professional literary techniques. Morrison’s fiction, especially the novels *Beloved, The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon* and *Sula* were critically and fully analyzed in dr. A. Uzéliienė’s Doctoral Thesis. Much critical research in Morrison’s fiction was carried out by prof. M. A. Pavilionienė. Nevertheless, the themes, problems and
ideas of the novel *Jazz* still remain not analyzed in depth and therefore needs critical literary analysis. The aspect of black individual’s quest for identity in historical context has not been fully analyzed in the two novels yet in Lithuanian and foreign literary criticism. The novelty and significance of the work also lies in the fact that the paper examines the aspect of racism from its different side, i.e., the impact of racism on the psyche of the racist or a master. Additionally, the two novels *Jazz* and *A Mercy* have not been compared to each other with the focus on black individual’s quest for identity in historical context.

Therefore, the aim of this paper is to reveal how Morrison revisits African-American history, slavery, racism, and black individual’s search for identity from her African American standpoint and reveal how the writer breaks negative stereotypic images of black women in two novels *Jazz* (1992) & *A Mercy* (2009) by analyzing the novels from the historical and feminist point of view. The following objectives are chosen to achieve the aim of the paper. First, to disclose the history of slavery as compared and opposed to its official version and compare slavery and racial issues in the two novels which are set at two different time contexts. Second, to show the importance and impact of slavery and African-American past onto black individual’s present state and the consequence of slavery and racial issues onto the development of black individual’s and especially black woman’s identity and reveal how the writer challenges and rejects negative racial stereotypes imposed on black women. Third, to reveal the essence of Morrison’s writing technique and place Morison’s writing in a wider context of literary tradition. In addition, to reveal and show how various aspects of humanity are viewed from black woman’s perspective, namely, individuality, identity, freedom, sexuality, love and relationships. Finally, to analyze and reveal the techniques employed by Toni Morrison, disclose the themes presented in the novels and show that black writing is not only about racism or slavery, but on the contrary to show the philosophical and more complex aspect of her writing.

The analysis and interpretation of Morrison’s prose is mainly based on the Black Feminist literary criticism and studies of African American culture and history. Therefore, the scope of the research mainly covers the formation and development of Afro-American women’s literature, Morrison’s personal standpoint of literature and literary criticism, theory on black feminist thought and a short overview of Afro-American slave history with the focus on Morrison’s point of view of Afro-American slave history. In my paper I place Morrison’s fiction in the context of Afro-American Feminist thought and the historical context of slavery for the following reasons: first, Morrison in her novels rewrites the history of Afro-Americans from multiple points of view and in such a way her novels unravel new and different aspects of Afro-American history. Second, black female characters play a crucial role in Morrison’s
prose in exploring the problems of slavery, race, black woman’s condition and development of her self-consciousness from a black female’s point of view. Afro-American feminism puts great emphasis on the necessity to eliminate the existing stereotypes of black woman as inferior to white and black men and white women. I view Morrison’s prose as particularly capable of breaking the stereotyped black woman’s character.

The following methods are chosen to carry out the research: the historical and the comparative approaches, since the two novels, *Jazz* and *A Mercy*, are being compared in historical context; textual analysis as the two novels are analyzed and interpreted; and black feminist literary approach which will help to reveal and interpret the essence of black female ideology. The two methods, historical and black feminist approaches are closely related as they both advocate for the importance of analyzing black literature in African American historical context. In addition, we will read and analyze Morrison’s *Jazz* as a postmodern novel and find postmodern features in the novels. However, when analyzing Morrison’s fiction we will not strictly categorize her works as feminist, historical or postmodernist texts. Instead, we will do what Morrison urges her readers to do: to engage with the text and see the multiple possibilities for reading and understanding her texts.
1. AFRO-AMERICAN WOMEN WRITERS’ LITERARY TRADITION

1.1. The beginning and formation of Afro-American women’s literary tradition

Due to complicated historical and social conditions caused by slave trade and racial segregation, Afro-American literature was long hard to define as there were many discussions whether to consider Afro-American literature as African or American. Black character’s identity was another problematic issue as it was complicated for its double or even multiple identities. A. Uzieliene suggests that the later questions can be answered only having accepted the attitude that Afro-American literary tradition is part of a literary tradition of the United States (A. Uzieliene 2000).

The formation of African-American literary tradition is usually divided into the following periods: the early period lasting from 1890 to 1920, the period of Harlem Renaissance (1920-1940), and the present day period.

Oral Afro-American tradition including work songs, spirituals, legends, folk tales and the “call and response” of spiritual leaders and slave narratives are considered as the beginning of Afro-American literary tradition of 1890-1920. In most spirituals the use of call and response patterns, rhythms, repetitions and realities of slave lives, black slaves expressed the dreams of flying away, leaving work and worries of the world behind, troublesome sufferings of slaves and deliverance into the promised land of freedom (R. Gray 2004). Slave narratives presented two major trends in Afro-American literature: autobiographical and confessional writing and a strong tendency to express social protest and self consciousness through literature. The beginning of literary tradition to African American women writers was important for it was a means of overcoming their inferiority and regaining acknowledgement in White dominating American society. However, it is important to note that slaves were deprived of the possibility to read and write as literacy was a great aesthetic and political power. Morrison insists on remembering the conditions in which slaves were trying to write. It was not only the Age of Enlightenment but also the Age of Scientific Racism. Particularly during this period such scholars and philosophers as David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson had documented their conclusions that blacks were incapable of intelligence. For example, Jefferson claimed that “Never yet could I find that a black had uttered a thought above the level of plain narration, never see even an elementary trait of painting or sculpture”. Similarly Kant asserted his racially biased idea that “This fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid.” However, Morrison admits, that she knows no other slave society in history that wrote more about its own enslavement as African Americans (What Moves at the Margin; 2008).
The beginning of African-American women writing is marked by two famous names Lucy Terry Prince (1730-1821) and Phillis Wheatley (1753-1784) whose poems gave birth to African-American and African American women’s literature. The early black female writers were influenced by religious teachings, personal slave experiences, and historical events.

Between 1830 and 1840, first black autobiographies and biographies appeared. Both men and women depicted their lives from slave and free person’s point of view. The most common themes of black women writers of the middle of 19th century were religious pilgrimages at home and abroad, sexual exploitation by both white and black males and confrontations with racist and sexist views as well as white churches.

During the period of slavery (1619-1865) and even afterwards black women underwent physical, psychological and sexual violence which was another theme developed in their works. Black slave woman was forced to play a number of humiliating and difficult roles: she was a servant, workforce, breeder, and mother. Harriet Jacobs, a former slave, depicted her hardships and experiences in the narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). Under the pseudonym of Linda Brent she exposed the sexual, physical and mental abuses endured by female slaves, as well as the hazards of being a fugitive in the North. Jacobs in her work touches not only upon the theme of black female slave exploitation and sexual abuse but also oppression of race and problematic condition. In addition, some critics, for example, Gerald Early claims that Wheatley developed the theme of identity and the experience of living in a disrupted community, a community in which slaves were deprived of family and moral values by white masters, a community whose traditions and history was taken from by white slave owners. Although not acclaimed for a long time as talented female writers, black women of the colonial period already challenged the existing constraints of race, sex, class and servitude and paved the way for the Afro-American literary tradition. *(Early 2005).*

Black women, especially early black female writers of the 19th century, already participated in the struggle for racial equality and women’s rights movement. Such black women writers as Sojourner Truth, Frances E. W. Harper, Paulina E. Hopkins, Anna Cooper, and others began to express their experiences as suppressed black women, putting great emphasis on the female aspect of their being. Cooper’s work *A Voice from the South, 1892*) can be regarded as one of the first African American feminist work in which she tried to emphasize gender differences by asserting that a black male writer cannot rightly express the experience of black female. Believing that the world without woman is incomplete, Cooper encouraged black women to write and express their African American female experience.
Sisters Angelina Grimke and Sarah Moore Grimke wrote the works in which they insisted on the feminine rights and especially, on the importance of women emancipation, education and the need to free women from restricted roles.

The essays and articles written by Fanny Fern reveal another important issue of black females: black woman who expresses her strong wish to be a writer but undergoes the problem of prejudice caused by male literary establishment.

Another famous name in the history of African American women’s literature and the leader of black feminist movement was Sojourner Truth who in her works and public speeches spoke on behalf of black females and advocated for the importance of black male and female liberation and black female pride as crucial elements of her and all women’s identity. Struggling to be a member of both abolitionist and black women’s rights movement she was a prolific writer as well. In her works she masterfully employed the autobiographical, rhetoric writing and Biblical allusion to resist the racial and patriarchal constraints imposed on black females and thus paved a distinctive way in Afro-American literary tradition. Although being an illiterate former slave, Truth’s famous question “Ain’t I a Woman?” challenged the understanding and definition of womanhood. Critic P. H. Collins (2000) believes that rather than accepting the existing assumptions about what a woman is, Truth challenged the very standard herself and deconstructed the concept of woman.

Frances E. W. Harper also contributed to the formation of Afro-American literature. Her works concern the difficult condition and emancipation of women, the struggle for racial and sexual equality, history of slavery expressed by means of African American oral traditions.

Pauline E Hopkins was another prolific African American Woman writer who developed the themes of racial injustice and sexual oppression by both white masters and black men. In her works, according to the writer herself, Hopkins tried to ‘to raise the stigma of degradation from my race.’ (A history of American literature 2004). She, as many other black writers of that time struggled for integration and sexual equality and against racial prejudice and sexual abuse.

Our Nig (1859), the first published novel by an African American woman, Harriet E. Wilson, is an exemplary work in Afro American women’s literature which depicts unbearable life and experience of black person and white brutality in a form of autobiography, slave narrative and fictional elements. Our Nig is an important part in the history of African Americans as it also develops the theme of namelessness and invisibility, which, in Richard Gray’s words, is the central theme in African American literature. In Our Nig the narrator emphasizes the difficulty of finding a name for oneself in culture. In Gray’s opinion, Our Nig
is the bridge between nineteenth and twentieth century black literature as it is one of the first African American novels written from first person narrator’s perspective (Gray 2004).

The literature of Afro-American women writers of the early period can already be defined as the beginning of Afro-American women’s literary tradition as early black women writers in their fiction using Afro-American narrative techniques developed common themes of slavery, complicated black woman’s fate, racial oppression and the problem of namelessness that can be regarded as distinguishing features of Afro-American women’s literature.

1. 2. Afro-American women’s literary tradition during Harlem Renaissance and Black Feminists’ Movements

At the beginning of the 20th century the US witnessed the rebirth of African-American culture known as Harlem Renaissance, during which black art, literature and music gained more acclaim and popularity. The main idea manifested by black writers and artists of Harlem Renaissance was that black people do have their own art, literature, and civilization. According to Uzieliene, the representatives of Harlem Renaissance ventured to give back the black person his/her self-esteem, encouraged to look back at black roots, history, aesthetics, and Afro-American language. Thus was transformed Afro-American literary tradition as new Afro-American oral tradition elements, such as spirituals, the rhythm of Blues and Jazz, were introduced into Afro-American literary tradition (Uzieliene 2002).

The Black Arts Movement led by the literary and political activist Amiri Baraka was initiated by the assassination of the civil rights leaders Malcolm X in 1965 and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968. It promoted Black Power and black nationalist ideals and insisted on the inherent goodness and beauty of blackness. It primarily focused on the aesthetics derived solely from black culture and the black experience. Although often confrontational and populist in tone, the Black Arts Movement put great emphasis on vernacular traditions and public performance. As Ishmael Reed put it, the importance of the Black Arts Movement was that it “inspired a lot of Black people to write” (African American Literature; 2004). More importantly, Black Arts Movement helped to develop a more thoughtful criticism of black literature which uncovers the essence and aesthetics of African American writing. “The Black Arts Movement”, asserts Larry Neal, “proposes a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic” (Neal 2000; xvii). Neal’s proposed “radical reordering” is important in literary criticism of African American literature since western literary criticism have often excluded
or devalued African American literature, especially black women’s literature and have often valued literature in terms of dichotomous thinking: light vs. dark, white vs. black or superior vs. inferior. Therefore, African American literature and its criticism challenged white literary criticism and its domination by revealing its weaknesses and limitations.

The most notable women writers of the period of Harlem Renaissance were Zora Neale Hurston and Nella Larsen who continued the formation of African American women’s literature and developed the theme of black female character’s struggle with racial, sexual, and class oppression in search for identity and personal fulfillment in complex social environment.

Nevertheless, there still prevailed views that Afro-American women’s literature as such does not exist. And only with the advent of feminist movement in the 60s and 70s and the Black Arts movement in the 1960s in the US, Afro-American women writers and their literature gained more interest and acclaim. In the 1970s and beyond there appeared a greater demand for a new look at the canon of American literature, those works that are considered as important by academics and literary critics. Until that point, literature by black women and women of marginal cultures had been considered inferior and outside the mainstream American literature. But as academics began to examine the literature from different points of view, women writers were admitted to the canon, they were included in anthologies, read at universities and discussed by literary critics. As women writers were accepted, multicultural writing was also accepted.

The advent of feminist views emphasized the essence of Afro-American women’s literature which had not been regarded as significant before. African-American women’s literary tradition is formed by common themes such as racial and gender inequality, fate and condition of a black female and female writer, the peculiarities of the formation of black woman’s identity, her position and roles in a multicultural society, and black woman’s consciousness.

In the 70s black women began to openly express their problem of experience as both suppressed women and the members of minority groups. The black women writers of this period (G. Naylor, Toni Cade Bambara, Sherley Anne Williams, and Gayl Jones) were exploring the issues of their problematic position and struggle for liberation in racial and mainstream culture and whose work signaled a significant shift in African American literature. As Catharine R. Stimpson states, black women writers also claimed for the rejection of male power over women, the deconstruction of dominant images of black women, and the need for women to construct their own experience, history and identity. (Stimpson 1988).
1.3. Contemporary Afro-American women writers

The most representative female writers of recent period are T. Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor who continue such central themes in Afro-American women’s literary tradition as friendship between women, search and discovery of identity and community, racial oppression and sexual violence, the importance of the history and ancestry.

The literature of former and recent African American women writers provides a comprehensive view of black women’s struggle to form positive self-definitions in the face of derogative images of black womanhood. African-American woman’s experience of internalized oppression has been the prominent theme in African American women’s writing. According to Collins, pain, violence, and death form the essential content of black women’s lives. They are suspended in time and place; their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are often destroyed (Collins 2000). Critic E. Shelley Reid also adds that such contemporary African American writers as Morrison and Walker and their fiction mark a pivotal change in Afro-American literary tradition because they have been transforming the strategies used by earlier African American novelists. Morrison and Walker not only challenged negative images imposed on black women but employed an innovative style of writing such as “interlocutory, dialogic style” and giving voice to “multiple characters through multiple settings in time and place” (Reid 2000; 320). Therefore, it is right to say that contemporary black women writers not only continue Afro-American women’s literary tradition but they also enrich this tradition with new elements thus making it more significant. In the works of African American women writers of recent period readers may find African American voices revisiting the past, history, and African American traditions by means of long-standing oral traditions and experimenting with postmodern techniques with a view to expressing their attitudes to intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. In such a way contemporary black women writers not only challenge and stimulate writing but also continue a distinct African American literary tradition.
Toni Morrison is regarded as one of the most significant African American novelists who emerged in the 1970’s. Her first notable work -the contribution to *the Black Book* (1974), a collection of essays, photographs, music, artwork, newspaper articles and other documents depicting moments of black history, gave not only the path to her later literary and critical works but presented her personal standpoint of African American history which was later depicted in her novels with the focus on breaking the stereotyped misconception of blacks. According to Morrison, she sees too much of black history and culture being wrongly defined, either by whites or by misguided black youth. Too many people, both black and white have wrong impressions of black culture- that it is illiterate, that it adores white culture, and that there is some special, mysterious soul of black people rooted in the distant past. Morrison believes that even the *black-is-beautiful* slogan is a distraction. According to her, the culture’s strength lies in what the people are, rather than in how they look like, as she put it “The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world” (*Morrison* 1974).

Apart from National Book Award in 1975, National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977 and Pultizer Prize in 1988, she was the first black woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. Morrison has written nine highly acclaimed novels *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1994), *Love* (2003), and *A Mercy* (2008) and a number of significant nonfiction works. Morrison has often been praised for her use of language and sense of voice that emerges not only in her dialogue but also in the development of her narratives which employ a mixture of the literal and fantastic, the real and the surreal. Her novels are also remarkable for the depiction of African American experiences and especially, deep physical and psychological realities of black women’s experience who are forced to live and experience themselves in terms of white American standards of culture, tradition, aesthetics, and social norms.

The key concern of Morrison’s novels is the history of violence perpetuated upon black Americans, the damage brought by such violence to black cultural traditions, and the means by which African Americans must act to preserve their history and culture. In her fiction Morrison reveals how the individual who defies social pressures can forge a self by drawing on the resources of natural world, on a sense of community and family, on dreams and on unaccountable sources of physical power.
The most common theme that unites most of Morrison’s novels is the effects of slavery on African-Americans’ with the focus on African American point of view. In an interview in 2003 on National Public Radio, Morrison said she wants to write from a “strong historical and cultural base in describing what impacts people, especially, maybe exclusively, African Americans.” (Burton 2007; 43). Morrison rewrites the African American experience in America from the viewpoint of black people, especially women as their role of slaves was particularly complicated in order to dissolve the misconceptions and misrepresentations of African Americans. The revision of history and slavery in particular in Morrison’s prose shows how history and tragic past of African-Americans have influenced their present state. The fact is that the official version of the history of slavery is presented from white point of view, according to which, slavery was the transportation of Africans from Africa to America as a work force which lasted from 1619 to 1865. However, the official version in the literature of white writers, especially male writers, does not reveal the effects of slave trade onto black people, their lives, self-consciousness and identity. Rather, black men/women in the novels of H. Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway are depicted either as minor characters or as illiterate, uncultured servants capable only of working and maintaining the family. Critic Sondra O’Neil divides three main black woman’s stereotyped pictures created by white male writers: tragic mulatto, mammy, and black hussy. Black woman was depicted as filthy breeder, nurse, and concubine.

In the collection of lectures, Playing in the Dark (1992) Morrison reveals her own standpoint about African American literature, its criticism by white critics, African American history and black characters depicted in the literature written by white writers and especially read and interpreted, or rather misinterpreted by white readers and critics: “The response of writers like Twain, Melville, Faulkner and Hawthorne towards blacks hadn’t been recognized by critics in a formal study”, she says. (Morrison 1992). She finely addresses the existing misconceptions and misrepresentations of African Americans in white literature. She claims that the condition of being white is treated by American writers, such as Melville, Poe, Twain, and Hemingway- as the standard condition for humanity while the black characters are either disregarded or serve as a background. Everything else, such as roots in Africa, is a variance from the norm. According to the writer, American literature and the characters should not be deracialized since the society is shaped so much by race, and such themes of American literature as individualism, masculinity or innocence, are responses to the presence of black characters. Morrison believes that the presence of black slaves helped to define who was American and who was not. When speaking about novels of Melville, Twain or Hemingway, Morrison stresses both, the very depiction of black characters in the novels of these writers
and the necessity to reread these novels and focus on the presence of Africans as means for white characters’ superior portrayal and development. For example, discussing Twain’s *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), Morrison asserts that there could be no progress of Huck’s maturity into a moral human being in America without the presence of nigger Jim. In *Playing in the Dark* Morrison claims that E. A. Poe’s narrative is one of the most important to the concept of American Africanism. In Poe’s narratives Morrison notices strong opposition between white and black characters. Consistent appearance of white characters, characterized by extraordinary strength and consistency always appears in “conjunction with representations of black or Africanist people who are dead, impotent, or under complete control.” *(Morrison 1992, 33)*. African slaves were regarded as a population who sacrificed themselves so that the others, especially white immigrants could reflect on freedom. In American literature, and society too, black slaves served as a means or background against which white masters could reflect on evil, sin, greed, integral aggression, and their own power and identity. In addition, derogatory perception of African slaves as savage also served as a powerful justification for white masters’ inhuman behavior and brutal treatment of slaves. What is most important is Morrison’s argument is that white characters’ interactions with blacks in literature written by whites lead to an important moment for white character, namely, self-awareness. Therefore, African American presence is crucially important in both American literature and its criticism and American history.

It is important to note that early African American male and female writers were forced to conform to the demands of whites and depict black characters according to white perception. Morrison notes that in order to be acknowledged and assimilated in America a black writer had either to de-black his or her black characters or to portray black characters according to white norms and stereotypes, such as the contended slave, comic Negro, the exotic primitive who accepts his/her inferior state *(Morrison 1992)*.

Morrison in her fiction breaks the stereotype of black person’s depiction. Black person and especially, black women are portrayed as strong, self-conscious human beings, searching for their identity which was deprived of during the centuries in the racially and sexually oppressed country. The depiction of black characters and especially black women in the literature of white writers was marked by strong racial stereotype. Formerly, black person was usually depicted as a wild, uncultured and uncivilized being without any historical or cultural heritage. Black female character was depicted as either a hypersexual wild woman, or a religious and devoted slave-nanny taking care of white children. Interestingly, Morrison’s fiction extends itself beyond women’s experience and write not only of black women, who are
depicted as proud of their exceptional ability to survive but also of the experience of black men whose identity and masculinity was also destroyed throughout slavery and afterwards.

Some Morrison’s novels, such as *Sula, The Bluest Eye, A Mercy* are especially representative of black feminist readings due to the ways in which the writer challenges social and cultural norms of gender, race, and class. Now it is generally believed that most Western literature and language in which the white literature is written is male-centered, thus, excluding women’s and especially, black woman’s artistic expression in writing. Before the advent of black and white feminists’ movements the society was divided into the male world characterized by strength, power, domination, and logics, and female, who was characterized as weaker, too emotional, and incapable of clear verbal expression. Inevitably, such stereotyped division has influenced the language of both sexes in a way that men disregard women’s linguistic and literary capability and creativity. Therefore, a black feminist approach to language and reading was established with a view to building the bridge of hearing and understanding black women’s voices in literature accepting the differences as important and representative of their experience. It is important to note that the difference and uniqueness in women’s language and literature exist not because of biological differences from men but due to women’s particular experience in a male dominated world. As far as black women are concerned, they had to undergo not only sexist stereotypes but racist as well. Therefore, their place in society and literature was of double complication as they had long been excluded from dominant White women’s American literature. Being excluded, black women writers, thus, had to form their own ways of linguistic and literary expression in order to express their experiences as a form of oppression and resistance. Such expression of resistance is revealed in Morrison’s novels as well as in the ways she revisits the experience of black life, especially, black woman’s life.

As far as black female’s fate and world are concerned, the problems of parent-child, male-female, and female-female relationship, female abuse and exploitation are also present in Morrison’s novels. Morrison’s works *Jazz* and *A Mercy* address the issues that are essential not only to Afro-American experience but also to human experience in broader terms.

The importance of family and relationships in African American community is another prevalent theme examined in Morrison’s novels that is closely interrelated to the theme of motherhood and community. The writer does not try to depict an ideal African American family and its values. On the contrary, she reveals what was the impact of slavery on African American families. Therefore, families and communities in her novels are depicted as extremely struggling to reshape their family models which were destroyed during slavery. During the slave trade black mothers were not only raped and forced to produce children but
did not have the possibility to raise and take care of their children, while black children were sold and deprived of the possibility to live with their parents. Consequently, such destruction of black families lead black people to experience the sense of lost identity, lost history and lost self-consciousness as well as self-esteem. In her novels Morrison demonstrates how black characters try to live in destroyed families and communities and how they create a sense of family even among alien people in order to live fully and develop their black selves under harsh and unbearable conditions.

The theme of motherhood is of special importance in Morrison’s novels *A Mercy, Jazz, Beloved,* and *Sula* as mother-child, especially mother-daughter relationship play an important role in revealing black woman’s condition, consciousness and black womanhood which differ a lot if compared to dominating white society. According to Patricia Hill Collins, black women revealed an independent standpoint about the meaning of black womanhood. These self definitions enabled black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of black womanhood advanced by dominating groups. Black women’s grounding in traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive African American women’s culture (*Collins* 2000). A completely different and distinct black womanhood and black female point of view serve not only as a means of resistance against white dominating society and its imposed social norms but also as a means of self definition and self realization. Collins believes that the formation and articulation of a self-defined standpoint is the key to black women’s survival (*Collins* 2000).

Morrison’s novels greatly contribute to American literature in a way they present innovative and unconventional manifestation of sex and sexuality. She is regarded as one of the first African American women writers to explore and express sexuality from its multiple aspects. Through the spectrum of sexuality black female characters express their “love, hate joy, sadness, compassion, lust, and even longing for spiritual transcendence” (*Charles* 2004). In Morrison’s novels sexuality plays as important and positive role in woman’s self expression and realization as love, passion, spirituality. Black female characters’ sexuality can be linked to their desire and openness to experience everything that is new in the world. Critic John Charles asserts that “Black writers were obliged to present African Americans in the best light possible in order to combat racist stereotypes, including the belief that peoples of African descent possessed animal-like, uncontrolled libidos” (*Charles* 2004) Therefore, the theme of sexuality was silenced or treated in a conservative manner among Black writers. For example, when writers such as Claude McKay, Nella Larsen and Langston Hughes dared to address sexuality openly during the Harlem Renaissance, they were often condemned even by Black critics for seeming to pander to and perpetuate white racist stereotypes (*Charles* 2004).
Thus, early black women writers were in a way silenced, and deprived of possibility and freedom to freely express themselves. Morrison is one of the representative writers who breaks the conservative stereotype of black woman’s sexuality and shows it from its positive side, as an essential means for a woman’s connection with herself and others. As critic John Charles has put it, Morrison, broke the taboo of speaking openly about the darkest issues of black community, as she insisted on producing fiction that described every aspect of black community— including good and bad experiences (Charles 2003). Black woman’s sexuality has long been characterized by negative meanings. Due to the stereotypical image of Jezebel imposed on black female slaves by their white masters formed a stereotype according to which black woman’s sexuality was regarded as dark, animal-like, dirty and sinful or even abnormal, and thus deviant within American society what reinforced sexual violence and racial oppression towards black women. These derogatory images of black female sexuality were strengthened by dominating beliefs and myths of Africans’ excessive sexual desire which usually served as justification for white masters and black men’s sexual abuse and rape aimed at black female slaves.

New and unconventional treatment of sexuality, relationship, or perception of the world or history manifests itself best through black characters’ depiction and behavior in Morrison’s novels. The role of character and black character in particular play an important part in the writer’s fiction as it is through the eyes of a character that events, problems, ideas are seen and experienced. Since the world in the novels is seen from the characters’ eyes it provides multiple aspects of that world. It allows the reader to see the situation from different points of view. When speaking about her works, Morrison reveals that she deliberately places characters of her novels in very complicated situations or “enormous duress” as she names it in order to reveal the very essence of the character. In addition, “in most of these circumstances there is a press towards knowledge” says Morrison, therefore, the characters are always forced to experience and learn something. As far as black characters are concerned, the writer views them as particularly various: “one of the most fetching qualities of black people is the variety in which they come, and the enormous layers of lives that they live” (An Interview with Toni Morrison, by Nellie McKay, 2001).

As far as Morrison’s writing technique is concerned, her writing combines language from different registers, vernacular, lyric, standard, and biblical. African-American vernacular language and conversations, which characters engage in, help to create the complexity of African-American culture. In addition, Morrison’s prose is rich in language, symbols and imagery. She also employs the mixture of realistic and supernatural or mythical elements in her novels. For example, her most famous novel Beloved employs an extraordinary mixture of
narrative genres, ranging from realism, slave narratives, to the Gothic and African American folklore. In *Beloved* Morrison employs the elements of lyrical, vernacular language as well as magical elements.

The writer employs African and Western literary traditions and conventions for both structure and technique, rewriting African American culture and history. Morrison’s novels feature multiple points of view, which allow the reader to see the problems and themes from multiple points of view. The inclusion of numerous flashbacks suggest that time is more circular than linear.

In her famous novel *Jazz*, Morrison employs an innovative way of telling the story. Several literary critics regard this novel as an imitation and improvisation of jazz music techniques. As Richard gray put it, history in this novel is presented as a process of constant telling and retelling (*Gray* 2004) by means of multiple points of view and collective speaking. However, other critics describe the narrative structure of *Jazz* as circular, rather than piece of jazz music. (*Z. I. Burton* 2008). According to critic Aimee L. Pozorski, Jazz represents music as a medium for conveying black culture: the experience of its differences and similarities and of the complexity of African American identity not otherwise portrayed in mass media since black people were deprived of their identities due to harsh slavery conditions and racial prejudices after slavery. The critic believes that in many ways, Jazz in this novel operates as the central expressive element of black culture, contributing crucially to the production of black culture and individual identity since jazz has become a hallmark of African American art and culture. *Jazz* illustrates how visual media are inadequate for representing African American experience (*Pozorski* 2003).

In order to understand and analyze Morrison’s fiction it is necessary to know her literary and critical point of view. First and foremost, Morrison writes from a black person’s and especially, black woman’s point of view. According to Morrison, what matters most in reading her books is the importance to understand what she means by “church”, “community”, or “ancestors” in her novels. In other words, her books have to be read taking into account Afro-American history, culture and tradition. Second, Morrison writes from a black female perspective. She believes that African American women have a very “distinctive and powerful artistic heritage, which is neither white nor male” gained from black female ancestors. This distinctive feature of Afro-American women is the picture of black woman, who is strong, dominating, respected and independent. This totally different picture of a black female denies the former existing stereotyped picture of a black woman: owned, humiliated and inferior to a white one.
Since Morrison writes primarily from African American perspective, in order to better understand what is meant by ancestors in her novels, it is important to see how the role of ancestor is understood and treated in African Cosmology. According to Shanna Greene Benjamin, typically, in Western notions of the spirit, death marks the soul’s separation to heaven or some other afterlife. In contrast, for West Africans, the spirits of the deceased remain on earth, dwelling among the living in rivers and trees, and also through their descendants. For the West African, there is no separation between the spiritual and material worlds. The ancestors live on a spiritual continuum between worlds and generations. Therefore, even though an individual’s physical body may be gone, he/she remains present as spirit, as ancestor. While anyone has the power to tap into the energies of the ancestors, community elders are the primary link between the people and their ancestors; they ensure that subsequent generations understand the importance of the ancestors as well as modes of access to them (Benjamin 2003). Morrison’s literature acts as a strong link between the African American past and present generations. In her novels the role of the ancestor has an important part in characters’ lives as the ancestor strongly determines the present state of the characters. In most of her novels black characters are haunted by tragic historical past which acts upon them in a way that they feel lost and without identity. Therefore, these characters are forced to look back to their past, find the contact with their ancestors in order to find their real self. Her novels reveal that strong connection between the ancestor and the character ensures the well-being of both African American community and black individual himself.

As far as writing and literature are concerned, in Morrison’s opinion, literature has to produce both political and aesthetic effect. As she has put it “for me, a novel has to be socially responsible as well as very beautiful” (The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison; 2000).

However, critic Marc C. Conner argues that the tendency to focus exclusively on the political, cultural, and racial elements in Morrison’s writings means that an essential aspect of her work has been largely undocumented and unheard. Marc C. Conner advocates for this opinion by referring to Morrison’s own idea in which the writer states that “finding or imposing Western influences in/on Afro-American literature has value provided the valued process does not become self-anointing”. I tend to agree with Jennifer E. Dunn and Conner’s idea that Morison’s writing is not limited to a single culture and that it has universal appeal and accessibility. In Corner’s opinion, Morrison’s statements about her own particular aesthetic status reveal a dual attitude toward African American and her literature: on the one hand, her literature is irrevocably, indisputably Black, but on the other hand, her literature is not limited to racial and political ideology. Whereas, Dunn believes that it remains a debatable and important question of how to read, value, and theorize Morrison’s prose which
can be attributed to American, Afro-American, or black women’s literature. In addition, the critic rightly claims that Morrison’s fiction and critical standpoint fostered the emergence of new literary approaches to fiction, such as “new thought in the areas of black feminist criticism, African American studies, and reader-response theory” (Conner 2000; Dunn 2008).

Conner claims that Morrison’s critical writings reveal four main elements that constitute the essence of her “black” writing: the presence of displacement or alienation; a close relationship between author and reader; an oral quality to the voice of the text; and a quality, of music in the writing that is distinctively black. According to Conner, all these elements together make “Morrison’s own aesthetic ideal” (Conner 2000). And indeed, in Morrison’s fiction the characters find themselves alienated or marginalized. As far as writer-reader relationships are concerned, in Morrison’s view, her works aim more at opening and extending the reader’s imagination and thus contributing to the text rather than merely illuminating social reality. The participation of the reader and the audience in construction of the text in Morrison’s opinion is the essential characteristics of black literature and the very function of literature as well. Further, Morrison argues that the most definitively “black” element of her writing is her use of language. The use of oral and musical elements in her fiction reveal African American heritage and gives significant and unique voice to her fiction.

Although being distinctively African American novels, some of Morrison’s works contain the elements of postmodernist writing techniques. In order to find and analyze the instances of postmodernism in Morrison’s prose it is important to define the most representative features of postmodernism.

Features, such as nihilism, irony, parody, and pessimism, are often ascribed to postmodern literature. However, critic Josephine Hendin states that in the best experimental fiction even nihilism can be seen as reasoned and necessary. For example, parody may help a novelist and his characters contain, control, and organize emotions or situations. Pastiche may express a sense of the interchangeability of experience. Pessimism, for example, may serve a moral purpose as and indictment of an undesirable status quo or it may have a protective function as a defense against unrealistic hopes. Postmodernist fiction admittedly leaves out much of the joy and nobility which exists in the real world, but all art involves exclusion; no single work of art tells the whole truth about all experience. Postmodern fiction exaggerates, dramatizes, and probes the problematic. It provides the vision of people under pressure, of desperate measures, of sometimes horrendous solutions, of necessary attempts (Hendin 1979). Similar themes are discussed in Morrison’s novels where black characters are placed under exclusively problematic conditions and are forced to find their own ways out even if it comes to killing or selling one’s own daughter as in Beloved or A Mercy. Although being set in the
times of slavery, Morrison’s novels touch upon both exceptionally African American experience and postmodern universal experience that could be attributed to any human being.

The most prominent postmodern feature in Morrison’s novels is unconventional narrative voice in her sixth novel *Jazz*, which is often considered as postmodern novel. What is particular about the narrator in *Jazz* is its nameless narrator who is ambiguous in terms of gender, age or even race. Critic Martha J. Cutter asserts that *Jazz* is an excellent example of not only a speakerly text, a talking book, but extremely open text from a reader-response point of view. To my mind, this unconventional narrative technique asserts the postmodern idea of multiple of truths and multiple points of view rather than one absolute truth about the world. In addition, it becomes close to R. Barthes’s idea of writerly texts and asserts Morrison’s invitation for the reader to become co-author of her novels. Therefore, Morrison’s novel *Jazz* can be considered as writerly and thus, postmodern, which can be re-read and re-written anew. As critic Jeannette E. Riley has put it, in involving readers in the process of telling and interpreting the stories, Morrison forces them to confront the ways in which we create and re-create our own identities and stories—how we know who is who, and how we define people’s identities by having to define our selves in the process (*Riley* 2003). The critic’s idea asserts another principal feature of postmodernism—disbelief (*Gregson* 2004), doubt and constant quest for truth. Although postmodern thought is mostly affected by various deconstructions, I believe it can be related to Morrison’s novels as well since the writer masterfully challenges the existing theory of African American history, rewrites it from completely different and multiple perspectives and in such a way deconstructs it, rewrites it anew and challenges the official representation, or rather misrepresentation of African Americans and their history. However, she does not strive to reveal any truth or answer any complicated questions; she rather poses new questions and problems to be discussed. Furthermore, postmodern individual is always placed in the state of disbelief and uncertainty which is similar to African Americans’ state and condition as their lives throughout different centuries were primarily marked by continuous quest for self and identity. As Gregson put it, slaves suffered from loss of identity as they were deprived of subjectivity and their selves were invaded by an oppressive and alien otherness (*Gregson* 2004). Therefore, African American slaves faced a particularly difficult task: first, they had to reject the stereotyped racial attitude imposed by white masters, second, they had to struggle a lot to find their true self, third, they had to fight in order to be fully accepted not only as equal Americans but, primarily as African American individuals rather than stereotyped representatives of their race and thus lacking identity.

Morrison’s works are also very rich from the point of view of intertextuality. Her works are influenced by texts ranging from the Old and New Testament, to Greek and Roman
classics, to African myths, tales and religious traditions, to contemporary writers, which shows her masterful ability to employ not only African-American literary traditions in her writing but postmodern techniques as well, as intertextuality is one of the postmodern techniques. Intertextuality is defined as an implicit and explicit relationships between texts that may take a variety of forms, including allusion, parody, and pastiche. Intertexts may be literary or cultural (for instance, allusions to film or advertising copy). Postmodernist thought sees all texts as referring to other texts, rather than to an external reality. Intertexts illuminate meanings by drawing on the connotations surrounding the text that is alluded to or parodied. (Linda Trinh Moser 2010).

As it was mentioned earlier, Morrison is famous not only with her evocative fiction but her distinct and unconventional literary criticism as well. In the collection of critical essays Playing in the Dark Morrison challenges the set of assumptions according to which “traditional, canonical American literature is free of (...) presence of Africans and African Americans in the United States” (Morrison 1992; 5). The writer disagrees with the conventional Eurocentric view that African Americans are an unimportant part in the evolution of American literature. On the contrary, she asserts that the presence of African Americans has not only formed the Constitution, politics and the history of the American culture but enhanced the formation of the country’s literature and should therefore be discussed in the national literature rather than remain in the margin. The writer also suggests the idea that the traditional and ingrained features of American literature such as “individualism, masculinity, social engagement versus historical isolation” were mere responses to the presence of Africanist presence. In addition, racially varied American population added to another distinct feature of American literature- unity and coherence. Therefore, Morrison explores the ways in which Africanist presence was constructed in the US as a close examining of literary blackness may help do define the notion and nature of literary whiteness and deeper reading of American literature. As the writer notices, the subject of African presence and its importance in American literature and criticism has long been silenced and avoided due to the ignorance of race issues. Morrison insists on the idea that race matters must be the focus of literary criticism as the exclusion of race issues in literature destroys literature, art and artist. Morrison complains that in the literature of white Americans not only the presence of blacks was excluded or unnoticed by literary critics but women’ issues were unread too. Having considered Morrison’s Aesthetic and critical views, one could say that her insightful literary criticism not only challenges the traditional reading of literature but opens up new ways in the discussion and re reading of such issues and notions as Americannes, Africannes, race, and gender.
2. BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT AND BLACK FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

2.1. The formation of black feminist thought

Maria W. Stewart is regarded to be the first African American feminist of the early nineteenth century who encouraged Black women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood which was so prevailing at that time. In her lectures in public on political issues she mainly pointed out that race, gender, and class oppression were fundamental causes of black women’s inferior state and negative images encouraged black women to form self-definitions of self-reliance and independence. Stewart’s perspective on various oppressions, her urge for the necessity to replace derogated images of black womanhood with self-defined images, and her belief in black women’s activism were the core themes developed and advanced by black women intellectuals. Intellectually and socially active black women, such as Maria W. Stewart, Zora Neale Hurston, Sojourner Truth, Ana Julia Cooper, laid a vital analytical foundation for a distinctive African American standpoint on self, community, and society and thus, established a multifaceted African American women’s intellectual tradition. However, it is important to note that it was not until the Civil Rights’ Movement, Feminists’ Movement and The Black Arts Movement when black women’s intellectual work was considered as worth of attention.

In the early 1970s African American women, namely, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Barbara Smith challenged the notion that all women share the same experience and began to frame black feminism to reflect concerns related to racism as well as patriarchy. In addition, it is important to remind that the life and condition of a black female was affected by harsh historical moments such as slavery, racial inequality, sexual and physical exploitation. These harsh historical conditions led black feminists to the idea that the position of a black female cannot be analyzed and explored on the basis of universal criteria applicable to white women. Therefore, according to Afro-American literary researchers Barbara Christian, Sherley Anne Williams, Barbara Johnson, in analyzing black woman’s fate it is necessary and important to take into account the historical context of Afro-Americans. P. H. Collins adds that race, gender and class oppression characteristic of the US slavery not only shaped all
subsequent relationship that women of African descent had within black American families and communities, with employers, and among one another, but it also created the political context of black women’s intellectual work, which was particularly silenced and suppressed.

Black feminist critic Collins believes that black women’s oppression has been structured along three independent dimensions, which, in my view, has strong ties with not only African American women’s literature but the depiction of African Americans in white literature. First, the exploitation of black women’s labor during and after slavery represents the economic dimension of oppression; by which the critic stresses the high cost black women had to pay in order to survive. The second dimension of oppression is the political one as African American women were deprived of the civil rights and possibilities. The third one is the ideological dimension which reveals the misrepresentations of black women by means of negative stereotypical images applied to African American women. These three dimensions as black women’s oppression were denied by black women as being derogatory and humiliating. Black writers sought to deny the former stereotype of black female character in white literature in which black woman was depicted as breeder slave woman.

Black feminist thought is distinct from other feminist thoughts in a sense that it focuses primarily on African American female experience and emphasizes such themes as race, gender, work, family, sexual politics, motherhood, and political activism. However, the expression of such themes and ideas were not easy for black women as they have always been socially suppressed. Critics Zinn, Caraway, and Smith also note that although black women have expressed their distinctive feminist conception on how race and class intersect in structuring gender, historically they have been excluded from white feminist organizations. Therefore, this suppression within white-dominated America forced black women intellectuals to use music, literature, other arts, and social behavior as an important medium for the construction of a distinctive black feminist consciousness.

Before defining Black feminist literary criticism it is important to look over the distinguishing features of black feminist thought as the themes and problems addressed in black feminist thought are both reflected in and interrelated with black women’s literature.

Collins distinguishes six features characteristic of black feminist thought. The first feature is the common experience shared by black women in the United States. The experience of social, racial, and sexist segregation shapes black feminist thought and makes it distinct from other feminist thoughts.

The second feature accounts for the individual black woman’s experience. Despite the fact that African American women share common experience, this does not exclude diverse responses to the problems faced by black women. Therefore, differential, individual
treatment of the topic or problem also serves as black feminist standpoint. The existence of core themes in black feminist thought does not mean that African American women respond to these themes in the same way and that there does not exist homogeneous black woman standpoint. Collins asserts that “there is no essential or archetypal black woman whose experiences stand as normal, normative, and thereby authentic (…) Instead, black feminist collective standpoint exists, but is characterized by the tensions that accrue to different responses to common challenges.” (Collins 2000, 28).

The third distinctive feature of black feminist thought focuses on the connections between black women’s experiences as a heterogeneous collectivity and any ensuing group knowledge or standpoint which Collins names as dialogical relationship between black feminist practice and black feminist thought. The critic claims that “by taking the core themes of a black women’s standpoint and infusing them with a new meaning, black feminist thought can stimulate a new consciousness that utilizes black women’s everyday, taken- for granted knowledge. Rather than raising consciousness, black feminist thought affirms, rearticulates, and provides a vehicle for expressing in public a consciousness that already exists.” (Collins 2000, 32).

The fourth distinctive feature of black feminist thought is focused on the essential contributions of African American intellectuals who ask questions and investigate all dimensions of a black woman’s standpoint. Speaking about this feature Collins points out great emphasis on autonomous, self-defined and independent analysis and black feminist thought. However, by autonomous, the critic does not mean separatist or exclusionary, rather she stresses that black feminist intellectual work does not confine itself only to African American experience, but as Sonia Sanches pointed out “I have always known that if you write from a black experience, you are writing from a universal experience as well. … I know you don’t have to whitewash yourself to be universal.” (Collins 2000, 37). African American writer Alice Walker also reveals a similar standpoint as she believes that “the truth about any subject only comes when all sides of the story are put together, and all their different meanings make one new one. Each writer writes the missing parts to the other writer’s story.” (Collins 2000, 38).

The constant change is the fifth distinctive feature of black feminist thought, as in order to operate effectively within black feminism it must remain dynamic. In addition, the changing social conditions that confront African American women stimulate the need for new black feminist analyses.

The final distinguishing feature of black feminist thought is its relationships to other social justice projects as critic Pauli Murray believes that without the ties to human solidarity
and social justice, any politic movement, be it nationalist, feminist may be doomed to ultimate failure. (Collins 2000).

2.2. Black feminism in Afro-American women’s literature

Critic Collins believes that challenging the stereotyped images of black women in America has been a core theme in black feminist thought. To my mind, this core theme is also central and is reflected in black women’s literature. The main essence of black literary feminism was its aim to show how black women deny the stereotyped portrait of black woman depicted by both white and black writers. The following controlling images of black women that have been seen in both society and literature can be pointed out. The first one is that of black mammy, who is depicted as a faithful, obedient domestic servant. The fact that black mammy is defined as an obedient servant by dominant white society emphasizes black woman’s acceptance of her subordination at least in the eyes of those who impose such an image. Collins believes that “juxtaposed against images of white women, the mammy image as the “other” symbolizes the oppositional difference of mind/body and culture/nature thought to distinguish black women from everybody else.” (Collins 2000, 73). The second controlling image of black woman is that of welfare mother who in American society is defined as being content to sit around and collect welfare, avoiding work and passing on her bad values to her children. Another controlling image of black woman is Jezebel or whore that originates from the times of slavery when black women were portrayed as being in Jewelle Gomez’s words, “sexually aggressive wet nurses” (Collins 2000, 81). Critics Davis and White claim that Jezebel’s function was to transfer all black women to the category of sexually aggressive women, which in its turn provided a powerful justification for the widespread sexual assaults by white men. (Collins 2000, 81). In addition, what concerns black woman’s sexuality, it has always been defined from the negative point of view as from the years of slavery black woman’s sexuality was related to fertility and breeding. What is more, the prevailing standards of beauty, such as skin color or facial features are an example of how controlling images serve to derogate black women. Collins rightly states that such controlling images imposed on black women are designed to make racism, sexism, and poverty seem natural, normal, and an inevitable part of everyday life. Similarly, Barbara Chrisitan claims that enslaved black women became the basis for the definition of American society’s other, which is based on either/or dichotomous thinking. Such either/or dichotomous thinking categorizes people, things and ideas in terms of their difference from one another (Keller 1985).
adds that in either/or dichotomous thinking, one element is objectified as the Other, and is viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled. According to famous feminist bell hooks, “As subjects, people have the right to define their own reality, establish their own identities, name their history. As objects, one’s reality is defined by others, one’s identity created by others, one’s history named only in ways that define one’s relationship to those who are subject”(1989). Therefore, confronting the controlling images in black feminist thought and black feminist literary criticism is one of the key concerns. For example, black women writers Morrison and Gwendolyn Brooks in their fiction explored the theme of the tension that exists among black women who try to resist the prevailing standards of beauty. Morrison is one of many African American writers that not only depicts black women’s personal and unconventional responses to controlling images but also focuses on the process of black woman’s personal growth towards independence, self-esteem, and black female identity.

In addition, black literary critics and black feminists such as bell hooks, P. Hill Collins also sought to reveal the development of black women’s literary tradition. African American literary critic Mae Henderson asserts that the interrelations of race and gender are important as they form the discourse of black women writers (Henderson 1990). In addition, black literary criticism provides a different lens through which the concepts of race, class, and gender of contemporary black women writers can be reinterpreted and read anew. An especially notable fact of black feminist literary criticism is the treatment of formerly silenced taboo issues and topics and the ways contemporary writers explore and address former themes and former black women writer’s literature.

Another predominant concern of black literary feminism is the reinterpretation of the history, slavery and black woman’s integration in white dominated and hostile environment in which black women are regarded as the “others”. This concern is especially vivid in Morrison’s prose in which black women characters are placed in extremely complicated conditions in order not only to survive but to regain their black consciousness. To achieve this, black characters must revisit their historical past in order to have basis for their present state. In addition, black feminist critics have also challenged the concept of black ones in American as black women have struggled not only against white dominating society but white patriarchal society and black men’s society as well. Mae Gwendylon Henderson finely explains this issue saying that “They [black women] enter into a competitive discourse with black men as women, with white women as blacks, and with white men as black women. (Henderson 1990; 185).
The advent of Civil Rights’ Movement, Black Arts Movement and feminists’ movement gave more attention to black female writers who until early seventies were invisible in American literature. By the mid-1990s black feminist literary studies were one of the most intellectual developments in American literary criticism. Black feminist literary criticism drew more attention not only to black women writers but also to such issues as racial and gender identity. Critic Farah Jasmine Griffin notes that the development of African American women’s literature and its criticism were a direct response to the masculinist bias of the civil right and especially, the black power and black arts movement. In addition, it was also a response to the feminist movement’s tendency to normalize the experience of white women as equivalent for all women (Griffin 2007).

The spread of active feminist and human rights movements for race equality in the sixth and seventh decades of the 20th century in the US marked a new way in Afro-American women’s literature. Although the theme of slavery and racial inequality remains the most important in Afro-American female writers, most famous black writers, such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Toni Cade Barbara break the former existing stereotypes of black woman and depict a completely different black female picture putting emphasis on black woman’s beauty, independence, self-esteem, self-reflexion, and self-consciousness. Black woman becomes the explorer of her inner and outer world. Black women writers assert the importance to think over gender stereotypes and gender hierarchy as rethinking and rediscussing such issues serve as essential condition for the survival of marginalized cultures. The theme of how black women experience and struggle to resist the internalized oppression has been one of the prominent themes in black women’s writing. African American writers choose their own ways in black female’s portrayal which helps to deny the internalized stereotypes. For example, some black female characters, such as Sula in Sula, Violet in Jazz or Florens and Sorrow in A Mercy are depicted as extremely atypical, or are even shown from derogatory side in order to deny the existing images and produce a completely new image of black woman. In my opinion, black woman writer’s choice to depict black woman as extremely sexual, wild and rebellious, which conveys negative rather than positive connotations, serves as a strong means to challenge the existing derogatory stereotypes. Black women writers not only portray black woman’s resistance to the ascribed stereotypes of beauty, motherhood, or womanhood, but they also put great emphasis on black woman’s personal growth towards more positive and individual self-definition. Black female character’s unexpected and even “abnormal” behavior or verbal expression is one of the forms to resist and reject the imposed social norms and in such a way create one’s own set of rules towards self-definition.
In an interview with Elisa Schapell, Morrison reveals her own black feminist point of view. According to the writer, writing allowed her to become liberated and free to make her own choices, make her own mistakes, and own explorations without the need to model herself according to the expectations of men. As she has put it, “… I will never again trust my life, my future, to the whims of men. Never again will their judgment have anything to do with what I think I can do. That was the wonderful liberation of being divorced and having children” (Morrison 1993). In the same interview Morrison also elaborates on the depiction of race by both white and black writers. According to the author, in her fiction she tries not to depict black characters by simply using the adjective black, as most writers do, but depict them by what he or she says or does (Morrison 1993). An indeed, in her fiction Morrison uses exceptionally evocative language, especially in characters’ conversations, and places characters in the situations of enormous complexity and challenge which contributes to the revelation and development of the black character’s identity. In addition, Morrison claims that she writes as African American writer, but admits that if her African American work “assimilates into a different or larger pool, so much the better” (Morrison 1993).

Afro-American feminist literary criticism is also closely related to a newly developed postcolonial criticism. M. A. Pavilionienė defines postcolonial criticism as a new phenomenon of feminist and contemporary literature studies which was born in the cultures freed from colonial oppression. Postcolonial criticism focuses mainly on women’s solidarity and their activity which helps to overcome cultural and psychological backwardness, tribal prejudices and constraints which have a negative impact on woman’s psychology. Postcolonial criticism seeks to change the stereotyped image of decolonized world which is viewed as an inferior opposition to the Western world (Pavilionienė 1998).

Critic James M. Ivory also agrees that African American literature can be read and analyzed as postcolonial texts. He believes that the term “postcolonial writer” is appropriate for black women writers including Morrison, who emerges as a prominent voice in American literature and whose novels examine the psychological weight of the darkest legacy of the African Diaspora (Ivory 2003). Colonial conquests were usually followed by the colonized culture’s humiliation and destruction, as the native country was regarded as inferior and thus must be replaced by the culture and system of colonizers. Similarly, African Americans brought to America during the years of slavery were deprived of their historical and cultural heritage as well as their African identity. Moreover, being forcefully brought to a strange country, they were forced to undergo racist, sexist and social segregation. Morrison’s novels finely celebrate such complexity of the African Americans’ experience in America and opens up new questions: which place should be regarded as African Americans’ home- America to
which they were brought by force, or Africa? Morrison’s novels examine such problematic issues as home and history which in Ivory’s words “remains a space of uncertainty for many African Americans” (Ivory 2003).

3. AFRO-AMERICANS IN SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF AMERICA

3.1. The impact of slavery on African Americans’ lives

The history of African-American people is marked by one of the cruelest events in human history- slavery which lasted for more than two hundred years (1619-1865). African-American history is marked by continuous dehumanization, humiliation, racial segregation, and exploitation. Despite the fact that slaves’ labor formed the basis for America’s prosperity, black people were viewed as people with no history, no culture, and no identity in America. Slave trade was strongly related to racial prejudices and racial segregation. Although in 1865 the thirteenth amendment to the Constitution abolished the slavery in the United States, the South was still governed by the white politicians. In the 1870s the whites regained much of the power and started racial segregation, the organization of Ku-Klux-Klan, established in 1865, terrorized the blacks and deprived them of the right to vote. For a long time black people were considered as inferior to white ones. Racial inequality and stereotypes were imposed on all aspects of African-Americans’ lives: their social rights (more precisely absence of them), their education, art, music and literature. Therefore, black people and especially black women had a particularly difficult struggle in the quest for freedom and identity. Black women had to undergo a double struggle as they suffered not only racial prejudice but were forced to suffer from sexism as well. They were deprived of their rights by both white and black males.

Slave trade had an enormous influence on the lives of black people and Afro-American females in particular. According to bell hooks, institutionalized sexism and racism was an integral part of social and political order imposed on black slaves by white colonizers and had a particular impact on the fate of enslaved black women. White slave owners profited not only from slave importation but also from slave breeding as planters soon recognized the economic gain they could get by breeding black slave women (bell hooks 1981).
Black woman’s condition and fate during the period of slavery and even afterwards was particularly complicated as they suffered from brutal behavior of white masters. Enslaved women could not choose whether to work— they were beaten and often killed if they refused. Both, harsh reality and the threat of violence acted as a form of social control for African-American women. Rape was a fundamental tool of sexual violence directed against African-American women. Therefore, challenging the pervasiveness of black women’s rape and sexual extortion by both white and black men and the effects of rape on African-American women has long formed a prominent theme in black women’s writing. Angela Davis rightly points out that “it would be a mistake to regard the institutionalized pattern of rape during slavery as an expression of white men’s sexual urges. Rape was a weapon of domination, a weapon of repression, whose covert goal was to extinguish slave women’s will to resist, and in the process to demoralize their men” (Davis 1981). African American women treated as sexual objects, were portrayed as animals and prostitutes. Such a treatment created the imposed derogatory image of black Jezebel.

3.2. Toni Morrison’s Unconventional View of Afro-American and American History

Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* is an insightful examination of the meaning of whiteness and blackness in American literature, history, and culture. The writer claims that Africanism is an inseparable part in defining the Americanness. Morrison views black American history as the history of whole American experience. Black feminist Collins also adds that Black individuals, being regarded as the “others” or strangers in society, challenge the moral and social order in a way that they are simultaneously essential for its survival because individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African American women, in particular, by being excluded, emphasize the significance of belonging to the wholeness of society (Collins 2000).

In her work Morrison discusses the problem of readers of all America being positioned as whites only. In addition, Morrison claims that the sense of identity that became a principal theme in American literature stemmed from the contrast between whiteness and blackness. Therefore, African-Americans play a crucial role in what could be defined as Americanness. Morrison believes that what helped American immigrants to define and understand their Americanness was the presence of Africans as opposition to Whites. In *Playing in the Dark*, the writer seeks to break the existing traditional norm in America that the bringing up of the subject of race is impolite and racist, and thus should not be discussed in literature. In addition, Morrison believes that race is an inseparable and important part of both American
life and literature as America is inseparable from racial issues. Although writing a lot about the impact of racism and slavery onto African Americans, Morrison puts great emphasis on the need to rethink the issues of “racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability… and see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (Morrison 1993). Race, in Morrison’s view, serves as a metaphor, essential in the construction of Americanness. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo, Morrison claims that prejudice and racism against African Americans has served two purposes: it has been a distraction against recognizing the unfair class differences in this country, and it has united as Americans all other immigrants, who can claim to be white and therefore part of the mainstream simply because they are not black (Morrison 1989). However, according to Morrison, America would not be what it is without the presence of blacks. The writer believes that America was ‘incoherent’ without the inclusion of African-Americans’ contributions to the forming of the nation, its history, language, literature, and culture’ (Christian 2000).

Slavery inevitably existed alongside with racial oppression. Morrison has expressed particular concerns of psychological consequences of racism. As she has put it, “the trauma of racism is, for the racist and the victim, the severe fragmentation of the self, and has always seemed to me a cause (not a symptom) of psychosis” (A History of American Literature; 2004). In rewriting black history in her novels she seeks to unravel and fill the silence and gaps in American history.

Most Morrison’s characters, especially Black female characters are placed in these harsh conditions in order to inspect how they manage to fight back various forms of oppression, what ways and strategies they use in order to find their identity and freedom by their own means. Critic Jeannette E. Riley asserts that Morrison’s novels focus mainly on issues of self and cultural identity through the lives of African Americans (Riley 2003), which allows to see a universal aspect of Morrison’s novels as the search for self and cultural identity could be applicable to any marginal culture, be it Jewish, Caribbean, or American Indian and not marginal cultures as well. I strongly I agree with critic Marc C. Conner’s idea that Morrison’s fiction reveals a “thicker concept of slavery” by depicting “a range of human enslavements” (Conner 2000). Additionally, the fact that there exist various different but valid critical interpretations of Morrison’s novels asserts the idea that her fiction is both universal and complicated. For example, critic J. E. Dunn claims that Morrison’s writing should not be interpreted on the basis of the author’s biographical facts and strong black standpoint by saying that “in this era after the “death of the author” the critical reader must be aware of the problems of conflating the text with the author’s biography” (Dunn 2008; 63). While critic Linden Peach believes that black literature has to be read from African American
perspective since “for African and African American writers, the novel has been an important vehicle through which to represent the social context, to expose inequality, racialism and social injustice” (Peach 2000). I tend to agree with John N. Duvall’s (2000) standpoint that Morrison’s novels “must be historically situated” because most of her fiction serves as insightful revision of African American history, namely slavery or its impact on modern black individual as in *Jazz*. Although being exclusively African American writer, Morrison develops such themes as cultural identity and search for self which can be considered universal. As far as identity is concerned, especially African American identity, Morrison’s novels reveal a double aspect of identity: individual and communal, which is strongly tied to African American tradition, as community plays an important role in black person’s self realization. On the one hand, her black individual characters are depicted as exceptionally strong individuals searching for their own ways of self-definition. On the other hand, they are strongly tied to their community which is the only link to ancestors, past and their African American tradition.

The construction of literary whiteness and literary blackness is another concern discussed by the writer. The problem is that the absence of black experience in traditional American literature is so strong and vivid that there is a vital need to understand that such absence has a great impact not only on the consciousness of blacks as excluded but whites as well. Due to the fact that African American literature was marginalized, Morrison emphasizes that the knowledge of Afro-American literature and the awareness of its culture may revive the study of literature in America. Morrison argues for the need to reread American literature and find the presence and essence of African Americans in it. Morrison’s opposition of Africanness and Whiteness reveals white stereotypic perception of themselves as elevated and superior and their conception of blacks as inferior, less human. However, whites have forgotten to take into account that particularly the presence of the “other” serves as the background against white superiority.

According to Morrison, what is distinctive about the history of the United States, is ‘its claim for freedom’ and ‘the presence of the unfree within the heart of democratic experiment. It is a nation of people who decided that their world view would combine agendas for individual freedom and mechanisms for devastating racial oppression, and therefore, it presents a singular landscape for a writer.’ (A *History of American Literature*; 2004). According to Richard Gray, T. Morrison maps the landscape of America in a twofold manner: on the one hand, she rewrites a specifically *black* history and points to the guiltiness for it of white America’s ‘failure’ to apportion human rights equally. On the other hand, she maps out
a general history of America from different perspective, from the angle of black experience.

(Gray 2004)
4. AFRO-AMERICAN LITERARY TRADITION AND POSTMODERN FEATURES
AS MEANS TO REVEAL BLACK INDIVIDUAL’S QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN T.
MORRISON’S NOVELS JAZZ AND A MERCY

Like the rest of Morrison’s fiction, her two novels Jazz and A Mercy aroused many discussions and critical responses. The novels are rich not only in their content but form as well. Morrison’s innovative and unconventional treatment of Afro-American history of slavery, extraordinary depiction of black woman and man’s identity and personal growth to their independent black self as well as complicated narrative structure masterfully mingled with Afro-American oral tradition pose a challenge to readers and literary critics. Morrison’s novels provoke readers and critics’ conventional and clichéd understanding of such everlasting and essential but often taken for granted issues as race, gender and African American presence and their complicated history in America. Although more than two hundred years separate the stories of Jazz and A Mercy (A Mercy is set in 1680, and Jazz in 1926), the two novels finely address the same essential problems of male-female, mother-child relationship, race and gender issues as well as vital importance of tragic historical past onto the present state of black human being. The novels are also similar in the ways they retell the lives and experiences of African-American people at important and interrelated periods of history: the very beginning of slavery in A Mercy and Harlem Renaissance in Jazz with the focus of impact of slavery on black people’s consciousness living in 1920 urban environment. Therefore, it becomes interesting to investigate whether the impact of slavery upon blacks is experienced the same way when it is only the beginning of slavery and when it is already abolished. These two distinct but interrelated moments of Afro-American history gives a new understanding of how America as a nation and state was created, what was the basis for its becoming a nation and who was forcefully excluded from its history. Interestingly, A Mercy was written sixteen years later than Jazz but it could serve as a preface to Jazz, thus showing the impact of slave trade upon black people. What is most thought-provoking and valuable in the two novels is the narrative voice which is given to black characters what enables the reader to address the same problem form different points of view. Therefore, analysis and comparison of the two novels will help to reveal and confirm the essence of Morrison’s individual literary and aesthetic views as well as reinterpret the history of African American from black characters’ point of view. Black character’s and especially black female character’s voice in the novels are of crucial importance as their views on their own, personal issues of their history and their race have either been silenced or ignored by White writers and
critics. In her novels Morrison gives voice not only to those who invented the African American history in their false and stereotyped manner, but to those who had to undergo the harshest moments of their history without a right to give a say. That is why, through the multiple voices of black characters the reader revisits African American history from the experience and standpoint of those who experienced and lived that history.

Many literary critics (H. Bloom, R. Terzieva-Artemis, C. Brown, W. Lawrence Hogue, and P. Page) have discussed Morrison’s novel *Jazz* in postmodern terms. Morrison has also provided her own standpoint of modernism and postmodernism within black culture and experience: “Modern life begins with slavery… in terms of confronting the problems of where the world is now, Black women had to deal with post-modern problems in the nineteenth century and earlier. These things had to be addressed by Black people a long time ago. Certain kinds of dissolution, the loss of and the need to reconstruct certain kinds of stability. Certain kinds of madness, deliberately going mad in order not lo lose your mind” (Morrison 1988). Later analysis of the novel *Jazz* will show how and why Morrison’s characters experience loss, the state of madness and dissolution. The most prominent feature of postmodern writing in Morrison’s novel is unconventional structure of narrative which is often marked by shifts in time and place as well as stream of consciousness technique and lack of punctuation marks at some narrative points. These features are most prominent in the novel *Jazz* in which there is constant variation and shift in tense and point of view which make the narrative sound nonlinear. In addition, shift from first to multiple narrative voices, stream of consciousness, absence of punctuation marks and repetitive images of music create musical and oral effect of the novel. Although there is the main plotline, the characters’ memories of the past and interfering narrator’s comments deviate from the main plotline thus emphasizing the importance of flashbacks to the past. Such particular nonlinear method of narration creates a specific effect on the novel: through constant shift in past and present the importance of the relationship between past and present is stressed; past is seen as an important precondition of characters’ present state. The analysis of the novel reveals how constant shift to past when characters, Violet and Joe Trace still lived in the South emphasize their lack of identity in big city and stress the need to find the traces of past and their ancestors as an important precondition of present state. Both characters are orphans, therefore, lack true self identity and are in constant search for it. In addition, Joe’s surname, Trace, symbolizes his lack of ancestral identity which is necessary for every person and is especially meaningful in African American culture. Joe’s surname is of symbolic importance and meaning since he has lost his ancestral traces and his migration to the city emphasizes his identical incompleteness which is also emphasized by repetitive flashbacks to his past and the
episodes when he is searching for his mother named as Wild. Joe, being a child names himself Trace: “The first day I got to school I had to have two names. I told the teacher Joseph Trace.” (124) as he believes he is the trace that his parents disappeared: “The way I heard it I understood her to mean the ‘trace’ they disappeared without was me.” (124). The recurrent images of traces and tracks when searching for his mother “He… had seen traces of her in those woods: ruined honeycombs, the bits and leavings of stolen victuals…, those blue-black birds with the bolt of red on their wings” (176), “The light was so small he could barely see his legs. But he saw tracks enough to know she was there.” (177) emphasize Joe’s personal incompleteness and vital need to find his mother to fill the incompleteness. On the other hand, regarding the fact that Joe considers himself being a trace of his parents, reveals that his parents, especially his mother are also incomplete and missing an important part in her life, namely their son. Therefore, I assert that the juxtaposition of present and past play an important role in the novel and helps to stress the characters’ inner state of present influenced by past and its tragic side. Morrison’s characters’ experiences in Jazz assert the writer’s belief that the effects of slavery are still with black people and are a kind of “pathology” because whites tried to reconstruct everything in order to make the system of slavery appear true (Morrison 2008).

Another prevalent feature of this novel is constant reoccurrence of certain ideas or images, especially, the description of the city, funeral or the characters’ past, their memories and emotions on the events. Throughout the narration the images of characters are accompanied by certain reoccurring images which carry symbolic meaning. For example, in Jazz at the beginning of the novel the first paragraphs start with the same idea, i.e. description of psychological condition of one of the main characters, Violet Trace, then the focus shifts to the Dorcas’ funeral as it is interrelated to Violet and her psychological condition, and emphasizes her sufferings, inner struggle with self. Whenever the narration focuses on the Violet’s character, the recurrent image of dead Dorcas’ and the birds let out of cage constantly appear which serve to emphasize Violet’s self imprisonment and alienation. In addition, each chapter has a shift to the characters’ past and the description of city with the great focus of music and dancing which accompany city life. It is notable in the novel that constant occurrence of birds accompanies Violet. When she releases the birds after she had ruined her husband lover’s face during the funeral may symbolize her lost sense and need of caring for somebody. Therefore, constant appearance of bird images throughout the narration stresses Violet’s incompleteness and loss of maternal feelings. Towards the end of the novel, when Joe and Violet are recovering and start living an ordinary life, Violet buys a new bird and recovers herself through this act: “A lot of time, though, they stay home figuring things out,
telling each other those little personal stories they like to hear again and again, or fussing with the bird Violet bought (…) From then on the bird was a pleasure to itself and to them.” (223-224).

The repetition of Dorcas’, Joe’s lovers, face and photograph also play an important role as it appears repeatedly throughout the narration, accompanying both Violet and Joe images but described from different perspectives. For Joe Dorcas’ picture arouses affectionate feelings “If the tiptoer is Joe, driven by loneliness from his wife’s side … her face is calm, generous and sweet” (12). For Violet, on the other hand, the picture of Dorcas arouses rather negative feelings: “But if the tiptoer is Violet the photograph is not that at all. The girl’s face looks greedy, haughty and very lazy.” (12). In addition, throughout the narration the description of Violet always deviates to the episode of Dorcas’ funeral and Violet’s violent act which serve to reveal Violet’s complicated emotional condition, while Joe’s narrative deviates to the shift in past and his search for his mother. When Joe’s narrative shifts to Dorcas, she is often described positively in an admired manner compared to Violet’s negative feelings. Such constant and reasoned deviation from the main plotline serves to show not only the characters’ inner state but their motives for their actions. For example, without Joe’s search for his mother, we could not fully interpret his feelings to Dorcas, which could be interpreted as feeling to his lost mother or never born daughter. When Joe was born he was rejected by his mother Wild. That is why he longs maternal and feminine warmth, affection, and love. The fact that Joe and Violet constantly came back to their complicated pasts shows that they managed to confront the difficulties of past rather than denying or hiding it which would not have led hem to their own recovery. I also believe that nonlinear narration and constant shifts in time foreground the characters’ motives for certain behavior as the event then can be seen from different and richer perspectives. In addition, every character in the novel gives his or her own version of the events which inevitably challenges the reader’s trust in narrator and own participation in novel’s interpretation.

Similar, nonlinear narration is prevalent in the novel *A Mercy*, in which each chapter, although not indicated by the author, is told by seven different characters presenting their personal experience and point of view to the story. Multilayered structure is achieved by means of giving a voice to speak for each character. Each narrative voice tells one’s own story and builds on to the other character’s story so that when we read about Jacob, Lina or Sorrow, we also learn about Florens and other characters. I would not agree with B. R. Myers opinion that *A Mercy* is “a monotonous series of flashbacks, larded with anachronisms” (*Myers* 2009; 104). The critic argues that constant flashbacks to past and multiple voices over the same story do not reveal any essence of the novel. I personally would object to such standpoint.
because such unconventional narrative technique, particularly constant flashbacks and characters’ revisions over their pasts becomes a strong means to reveal how important past is on the present state of black characters. In addition, such method of narrative resembles the community of voices which create their common and individual life stories and weave the whole story towards. Therefore, each chapter becomes a retelling of the same story but from different character’s point of view which serves as an important feature for story’s interpretation. Multiplicity of voices and individual characters’ voice merged with collective speaking in both novels produces call and response effect to the narrative which is primarily an African American feature. Since the same story is being told from different characters’ point of view, the reader is inevitably invited to be active and alert while reading and interpreting the text and give his/her own variant of the story, therefore, as Jazz, A Mercy also becomes a writerly, rather than readerly text, with no definite end which is also a feature of postmodern thinking which advocates for the fact that there is no absolute truth, but multiple truths and meanings. In addition, the constant change in point of view helps to foreground most important problems and ideas of the novel. Therefore, I believe that the narrative layer of the novel contributes to the development of the thematic level in a sense that multiplicity of narration and different points of view not only foreground important thematic issues but provide different perspectives to them thus inviting the reader’s credulity and participation as well as Morrison herself has often asserted the importance of reader’s participation in the reading-writing process: “I have to provide the places and spaces so that the reader can participate. Because it is the affective and participatory relationship between the artist or the speaker and the audience that is of primary importance” (Morrison 2008; 59). By “places and spaces” Morrison means the way she often deliberately omits punctuation marks and adverbs so that the reader could himself/herself could “comment on the action as it goes ahead” and participate in a kind of chorus, become a member of depicted community and give one’s own subjective understanding. It is also important to stress that, according to the writer, oral quality of the book and reader’s participation in the reading process is a distinctive element in African American writing. Nevertheless, I also believe that the speakerly/writerly or dialogic quality of the novel that invites the reader’s active participation in the reading and thus rewriting process is also a postmodern feature.

Another feature that accounts for dialogic nature of the novel Jazz is the way narrator directly addresses the reader and invites not only in interpretation of the novel but living within the novel as well: “What it is is decisive, and if you pay attention to the street plans, all laid out, the City can’t hurt you. (…) You have to understand what it’s like, taking on a big city: I’m exposed to all sorts of ignorance and criminality. (…) Do what you please in the
city, it is thereto be back and frame you no matter what you do. All you have to do is heed the design- the way it’s laid out for you, considerate, mindful of where want to go and what you might need tomorrow” (8-9). By addressing the reader as “you” narrator invites the reader’s participation in both the interpretation of the text and its content too: invites the reader to experience the life of the city as if inviting to become one of the characters. Especially engaging the reader into participation is the last paragraph of the novel *Jazz*: “Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because, look, look. Look where your hands are. Now” (229).

Another primary feature of African American writing on thematic level in the writer’s view is “the presence of an ancestor” in the novel. Ancestor in Morrison’s fiction and worldview is an important element of black life, in her words, “ancestors are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (Morrison 2008; 62). Morrison has once said that “There must have been a time when an artist could be genuinely representative of the tribe and in it; when an artist could have a tribal or racial sensibility and an individual expression of it. There were spaces and places in which a single person could enter and behave as an individual within the context of the community” (Morrison 2008; 56). By this the writer asserts the importance of individuality of human being. However, form African American perspective black individuality can best be traced and experienced only having strong ties with black community and ancestors. Therefore, past and ancestral values play an important role in black person becoming an individual in terms of providing sense of safety, belonging to your community, and passing on traditions and African American philosophy. In her novels *Jazz* and *A Mercy* Morrison tries to show what happens to a black person, and especially black woman when he or she has lost ties with past and their black community. Living in rather alienated city Joe and Violet Trace in *Jazz* and Florens in *A Mercy* have to experience both the alienation of white society and loss of past. The writer intentionally places her characters in complicated situations to show what it means for a black person to be deprived of his/her historical past and black identity and live in present society and how they manage or fail in developing their black identities: either they assimilate with mainstream society or take extreme means to regain their black self-consciousness.

The novels *Jazz* and *A Mercy* reveal that the problem of identity or rather lack of it is of double complexity to African Americans. When black people are deprived of their freedom, cultural heritage and community ties it inevitably leads them to experience the condition of spilt identity. Black people, especially black woman were forced to undergo and overcome a double process of defining one’s black feminine identity: first, they have to find their own
roles in racist, sexist, and stereotype based hostile society and, second, they have to accomplish their individual self-development.

This complicated human condition is especially examined in Jazz in which black character not only melts in the mainstream and racially biased society but undergo individual experiences of loss and split of identity. After Joe’s lover’s Dorcas death, struggles to find her own means to get rid of Dorcas’ memories and gain her own black identity. Violet finds her individual means for identity acquisition even if at first it requires from her to reject her own self and imitate another woman namely Dorcas. At first Violet chooses to distance herself from the society she lives in and act against the social norms in order to find what is lacking within herself so that she could fill the missing parts of herself. Her acts such as destroying dead girl’s face, stealing a baby in the street, and reminiscences of her past serve as her own individual means of examining herself better, what is lacking within herself and what could help her to regain her own black self. Trying to imitate Dorcas, Violet as if rejects herself and her personality. However, she needs to experience this period of denying her self and her past identity in order to what lacks within herself and to regain her black self-consciousness and self-esteem as well as deny the stereotype imposed by whites on black people, especially women which asserts that black people have no value and distinctive personal features. By liberating herself from imposed social stereotypes and norms, Violet asserts Morrison’s standpoint that even famous slogan Black is Beautiful is in a sense stereotypical as it emphasizes the importance of human’s appearance, namely skin color. According to Morrison, person should be valued by what he/she is, rather than how one looks like.

An important character of complex destiny and deprived of identity in Jazz is Golden Gray having a significant name which implies for his complex and confused race and split identity that of white and black person. Golden Gray is a son of a white woman, Vera Louise and a black man Henry Lestory. Although he was brought up as a white man in order to be protected: “She protected me! If she had announced I was a nigger, I could have been a slave!” (172), his quest for his true self constantly troubles him. With his first encounter with his father he expresses his strong standpoint of what freedom, race and identity means to him. Although experiencing unstable racial identity, Golden Gray has a clear understanding of his primary wish- to be a free man, regardless of his race: “I don’t wan to be a free nigger; I want to be a free man.” (173). Golden Gray, although not the main character of the novel, and his quest for freedom and equality asserts Morrison’s idea of the presence of African Americaness in the national context of America. Golden Gray as if suggests doing what Morrison has often asked: “to reject white definitions of Blackness and affirm positive notions of African American identity” (Morrison 378).
By examining African Americans’ search and development of their black identity, Morrison not only examines their behavior, the measures they take in order to survive in dominating society, but she also employs complex narrative technique by means of which she challenges the reader’s understanding of what identity is and how it is constructed by different people and of different cultures. Through multiple narrative voices, Joe, Violet, Dorcas’ and other characters and omniscient narrator’s point of view Morrison poses the question of reliability to the reader so that the reader could a have a more critical view to such questions as what defines ones own identity, how it is constructed, how it is dependent on others’ standpoints and where lies the difference between others’ identities and our own. The search for one’s self in Jazz is enhanced by non linear narrative, multiple points of view, constant characters’ reminiscences of the past also resemble postmodern feature of the novel. Although African Americans’ search for their identity should be discussed from African American perspective taking into account the historical context they live in, their lives also resemble the condition of postmodern person who’s forced to experience the state of split identity and is forced to live in hostile world.

Jazz is rich in its examination of black person’s quest for identity and self-consciousness in urban environment in which black person melts and needs to identify himself or herself as black individual. Constant need to find and define one’s black identity in Jazz is foregrounded by means of non linear narrative in which deviations and shifts from main plotline to the characters’ memories and images of their past emphasize black person’s complex experience living in the city and importance of the past, ancestors and community which are the defining elements in African American culture. However, this feature should be analyzed and interpreted in relation to black people’s migratory experience, racial problems and in the context of Harlem Renaissance since black people in America have not only been regarded as lacking own identity but were racially segregated and marked by social, racial and gender stereotypes. African American migratory experience from South to North plays an important role in African American history and culture and is discussed in the novel Jazz. The main characters Violet and Joe Trace migrate from rural South state to North state in order to find a better life and self realization in much promising city. However, their migration demands much experience from them. The reality in the city is of double or even multiple natures with its possibilities, dangers, and challenges. On the one hand, the city stands for better future for the colored people. The city glows and sounds with jazz and blues rhythms, which has been the defining and significant feature of African American culture during the Harlem Renaissance, when African American culture gained more prominence and acclaim, and jazz music became the main manifestation for African American’s individuality. The reoccurrence
of the blues and jazz rhythms, songs and dancing images throughout the narration enhances rhythmic and improvisational nature of the narration and foregrounds the significance of jazz music in African American culture. On the other hand, the city is a place where racial, class, and gender inequality are so strongly experienced by marginalized peoples or cultures. The city also becomes a dangerous place where distinct African American elements are missing, such as loss of African American cultural identity and sense of community which is so much ingrained in black village culture. Black women abuse also becomes more prominent and experienced by black people in the city: “That was where whitemen leaned out of motor cars with folded dollar bills peeping from their palms. It was where salesmen touched her and only he as though she was part of the goods they had condescended to sell her” (...) “It was where she, a woman of fifty and independent means, had no surname. Where women who spoke English said, “Don’t sit there, honey, you never know what they have.” And women who knew no English at all and would never own a pair of silk stockings moved away from her if she sat next to her on the trolley” (54). “And all the kinds of white-people there are. Two kinds, he says, ‘The ones that feel sorry for you and the ones that don’t. And both amount to the same thing. Nowhere in between is respect” (204). “But I did it. Called the ambulance, I mean; but it didn’t came... because it was colored people calling” (210). Therefore, I assert that the city becomes a challenging and hostile environment in which black self-consciousness, black pride and identity become so invisible but so vitally necessary for black individuals. For example, even the black characters in the novel are depicted as hostile and passive, however, their main means of their manifestation is black music: “Now, down Fifth Avenue from curb to curb, came a tide of cold black faces, speechless and unblinking because what they meant to say but did not trust themselves to say the drums said for them” (54). However, black music in the city is not always valued and acclaimed by white people: “She knew from sermons and editorials that it wasn’t real music- just colored folks’ stuff: harmful, certainly; embarrassing, of course; but not real, not serious” (59). Nevertheless, music plays another crucial part in the novel: it helps to reveal black characters’ individuality and self-realization through jazz and dancing. Morrison believes that traditionally, music has been primary art form of healing for black people. Therefore, music, namely, jazz becomes distinct Afro-American cultural vitality, form of passion, and specific medium in which black characters feel themselves, since jazz has become a hallmark of African American culture: “They believe they know before the music does what their hands, their feet are to do, but that illusion is the music’s secret drive: the control it tricks them into believing is theirs; the anticipation it anticipates” (65). Jazz and blues music in the novel stand not only for improvisation and sensual freedom for African Americans but it is also the manifestation of
African American nostalgia for the past and a reminder of complex presence in America. Since the novel itself reflects a piece of jazz music, it leads to conclusion that it has no definite and ultimate ending, which in a way asserts the feature of postmodern philosophy, according to which, there is no one definite truth or reality. The novel’s end manifests itself as a continuation rather than an end to the story as it invites the reader’s participation in the reading process. In addition, jazz and blues music are characterized by improvisational and participatory features. The repetition of the same ideas or words at the ends and beginnings of the chapters assert the idea that the novel mirrors a piece of Jazz music. Another element that asserts this idea is each character’s improvisational and personal response to the same events and other characters. Interestingly, the very word “jazz” is never mentioned in the novel. However, absence of punctuation marks and repetition of music and dancing images or musical instruments help to create improvisational atmosphere of jazz. In addition the title of the novel is also suggestive and symbolic. However, it contains multiple meanings rather than just a piece of music. First, it stands as a hallmark and distinctive form of African American culture and art. Second, it refers to a specific historical period, Harlem Renaissance, during which black jazz musicians gained immense popularity and acclaim. Finally, the title defines the improvisational and imaginative nature and essence of the book. Therefore, the instances of music in the novel make the novel speak for itself and invite the reader in call-response action. Since Jazz resembles a piece of jazz music it as if instructs the reader how it has to be approached, i.e., read- actively, using own improvisational and imaginative thinking and judgment. It is also important to mention that the inclusion of African American music by referring to particular songs or composers in Jazz accounts for intertextual nature of the novel. According to Critic Rebecca Hope Ferguson, “Morrison’s intertextuality conforms to the model of call and response” (Ferguson 2007). Another critic Barbara Williams Lewis points out that the structure of Jazz “mimics the rhythms and riffs of jazz music” and that such form of the text renders it being open-ended. (Lewis 1997). What is innovative about Morrison’s intertextual feature of her novels is the way she uses African American folktales or jazz music to reinvent them. Critics Trudier Harris and Marilyn Sanders Mobley discussed Morrison’s use of folktales and oral tradition focusing on the ways the writer re-creates them and by “showing how people interact with each other to shape tales, legends and folk beliefs” (Mobley 1990; Harris 1991). Therefore, Morrison’s innovative writing techniques allow placing Morrison’s fiction in a wider literary tradition or context as the writer not only continues Afro-American women’s literary tradition but enriches it with new experimental forms.
In *A Mercy* Morison also employs Afro-American oral tradition both thematically and structurally. From thematic point of view, her characters retell the history of African Americans by means of their memories or tales told by one character to another which have symbolic insights. By means of retelling an old story of bird eggs being left by their mother to “hatch alone” (73) Lina reminds Florens of their complex lives that are similar to birds orphaned in the wilderness. Lina’s stories told orally to Florens serve as her own teaching about the dangers of lives that are so similar to their own: “They had memorable nights, lying together, when Florens listened in rigid delight to Lina’s stories. Stories of wicked men who chopped off the heads of devoted wives; of cardinals who carried the souls of good children to a place where time itself was a baby. Especially called for were the stories of mothers fighting to save their children from wolves and natural disasters” (72). Florens need and wish to hear the stories of “mothers fighting” reveal how important mother’s presence for her is. Lina’s story of an eagle trying to protect her babies in eggs who is attacked by man and is thus “falling forever” is parallel to black female slave’s fate and condition who is forced to suffer both the very cruelties of slavery and its impact on her later life as well as the impact on orphaned black children. Structurally, Morrison gives voices to all characters in retelling of one story thus achieving call and response pattern.

To conclude, although Morrison is regarded as being primarily African American writer who mostly employs and develops Afro-American literary tradition, some postmodern literary features are also present in her novel *Jazz*, such as unconventional, non-linear narrative structure which helps to create the relationship between present and past as interrelated to each other and important in black characters’ lives. In addition, non-linear and repetitive manner of narration resembles the improvisational nature of jazz music as many critics assert that the novel follows the structure of jazz music. The repetitive images of music and dancing also contribute to musical nature of the book which by some critics (Caroline Brown, Joe Sutliff Sanders) regarded as animate human being speaking to the reader. Musical structure of the novel also becomes the means by which the past and present interrelate and reveal the secrets and experiences of the characters’ past. Finally, the two novels reveal that the process of development of black person’s identity is enhanced and is revealed by employment of Afro-American and postmodern writing techniques. The novels reveal that search and quest for identity was a complicated process for African American people that required much effort and various social and psychological struggles in order to achieve it. As far as African American literary features are concerned, I tend to believe that the writer follows African American mode of writing, such as collective speaking, inclusion of African tales or myths, and occurrences of black grammar, in order to reject white literary modes and white
mainstream language. Because in order to write specifically African American literature and revisit one’s own history, the writer must reject the language of the dominant culture which created a form of oppression for both African American literature and its criticism. Following African American literary traditions Morrison proves the essence and power of this tradition: it is only their own black language that is most capable to express their black point of view and understanding of their history, because the oppression experienced cannot be expressed by means of mainstream linguistic form. Therefore, I believe that particularly the collective speaking and black characters’ language is the most effective means to retell their own history and it asserts my former statement that Morrison masterfully and successfully combines both African American literary form and content. Black language in Morrison’s novels functions not only as means of communication and passing on black history but it also reflects black culture, its life, and way of looking at life. Finally, language for black slaves was and has been for Afro-Americans the major means of artistic and aesthetic expression and form of survival that manifested itself throughout all periods of history in spirituals, slave narratives, writing, poetry and jazz and blues music.

5. T. MORRISON’S REVISION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SLAVE HISTORY AND BLACK CHARACTER’S UNCONVENTIONAL REJECTION OF NEGATIVE RACE AND GENDER STEREOTYPES IN JAZZ AND A MERCY

Slavery of African Americans and its impact upon black people, especially black women is one of the prominent themes in African American women’s literature and Morrison’s works too. Although slavery was abolished in the US in 1865, slave trade not only continued but more importantly African Americans were forced to experience the trauma of slavery upon their lives and their identities which were either rejected or depicted from negative point of view by white dominating society. African American men and women had to reconstruct their lives again from the very beginning. It is important to note that black slaves, both men and women were deprived of their historical, cultural and identical sense and were enforced with white slave owners’ own derogatory and stereotyped thinking. It is essential to revisit African American history, reject those negative images and show Afro-American history from black character’s point of view with the focus on black individual’s
own means for identity quest and self. Morrison has pointed out that the official version of history has erased and distorted African American presence. Therefore, African-Americans have to recover their stories, voices and their presence in American context. Novel, in Morrison’s view, is a powerful means of restoring African-American presence and self-definition. By restoring and revisiting their own history, black people thus recover and regain their own black self-consciousness. Morrison mostly focuses on the importance to revisit African American history and shows how horrors of slavery are ingrained in the psyches of black people even after they had gained freedom. The writer also tries to show that the notion of freedom is a complicated one for African Americans. Being deprived of freedom they have to struggle within themselves in order to understand and shape their own perception of freedom. The theme of slavery in Afro-American women’s and Morrison’s literature is often discussed in relation to such themes as motherhood, womanhood and black family’s or community’s ability to survive under harsh historical conditions. During slavery black slaves were suppressed by white owners’ beliefs that black people belong to their masters and cannot survive without the dominion of their masters. Slaves were treated as objects rather than human beings and underwent both physical and emotional sufferings. Additionally, various white based stereotypes were imposed upon black women in order to justify White slave owners’ brutal sexual exploitation of black slave women. Morrison’s novel *A Mercy* serves as revisiting of black slavery in America from the point of view of enslaved ones and reveals unconventional treatment of this harsh historical moment. *A Mercy* is set in the early years of slavery, in 1680s. The writer believes that any civilization, America as well was created on the basis of institutionalized slave labor. The novel finely addresses the problem of community disruption which was enhanced by slave trade and Ku-Klux-Klan: “By noon, just as they had decided to make a run for one of the canoes moored in the lake, men in blue uniforms came, their faces wrapped in rags. News of the deaths that had swept her village had reached out” (54). During the slavery the black slaves were also deprived of their sense of community. Consequently, women were deprived of ability to fulfill their roles as mothers as their children were taken away from them and were forced to live in a disrupted community with no family and African values. The traditional model of African family was destroyed under severe conditions of slavery. The destruction of family model had an enormously negative impact on black individual’s identity, sense of security and self-esteem. Therefore, black women slaves experienced double hardships during slavery, such as sexual and physical exploitation and emotional trauma that could hardly be ever treated. In her two novels *Jazz* and *A Mercy* the writer demonstrates that the destruction of black family or community was the most terrible and illegal act that destroyed the psyche of many of African Americans. The
terror of this brutal act is revealed in her novels through black characters’ experiences living in disrupted families or communities and the individual ways the black people tried to regain the sense of belonging to something that is theirs.

Motherhood and mother-child relationship play an important role in African American culture and is often seriously addressed in black women’s literature in relation to the theme of slavery. Black mother characters play an important role in Afro-American women’s literature as black mothers pass on Afro-American family values and traditions to their daughters and empower their daughters with the knowledge needed to survive in white dominated and hostile society. Famous black feminist critics bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, Lisa C. Rosen, and Andrea O’Reilly assert that motherhood is a central theme in African American women’s fiction. Morrison in her novels shows the essence of motherhood and in black characters’ lives who are deprived of the sense of motherhood or mother child relationships. Morrison’s novels not only reflect her own individual treatment of black history but also serve as a continuation of African American women’s tradition in the ways she addresses the themes of motherhood and mother-child relationship. The role of mother is significant in both Jazz and A Mercy and plays an important role in the lives of those characters who were deprived of relations with their mothers due to harsh historical conditions of slavery. In the novel A Mercy Florens’ mother against he own will decides to sell her daughter to another white slave owner Jacob Vaark in order to save her from brutalities of other white slave owners. The mother hopes that her act would help her daughter escape from what many black women slaves had to suffer: abuse, rape, giving birth against their will and other forms of brutal behavior. Therefore, Florens’ mother considers Jacob’s acceptance to buy Florens as an act of mercy and in the very last chapter tries to explain Florens the motives of her act: “There was no animal in his heart. He never looked at me the way Senhor does. He did not want” (191), “Take you, my daughter. Because I saw the tall man see you as a human child, not pieces of eight. I knelt before him. Hoping for a miracle. He said yes. It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human” (195). Florens’ mother tries to explain her daughter how her decision to sell her might protect her from dangers of men that she had experienced herself. To my mind, Morrison has carefully and masterfully arranged the narrative structure giving possibility to speak for almost all characters. When all characters give their own voice to the same events this allows a better and more vivid insight of what life for enslaved and free ones was like, whether all the characters felt and experienced the same feeling, whether all of them needed togetherness and community they tried to create and how each of them saw and felt each other. Especially affective is the final chapter told by Florens’ mother, referred to as minha mae, who revisits the history of slavery from the point of view of
black slave woman and black mother when the slavery is only in its beginning. What allows Morrison’s fiction to be named as revision of black slaves’ history is they way she gives subjective voices to the enslaved ones reveal their emotional and psychological depths. Following Afro American literary tradition of slave narrative Morrison explores black women’s experience through black female slaves’ memories and traumatic and painful experience: “Neither one will want your brother. I know their tastes. Breasts provide the pleasure more than simpler thing. Yours are rising too soon and are becoming irritated by cloth covering your little girl chest. And they see and I see them see” (190), “I don’t know who is your father. It was too dark to see any of them. They came at night and took we three including Bess. (…) There was no protection. To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below” (191). Remembering and retelling her experience as a black slave, Florens’ mother denies the existed stereotype that black slave women were “able to produce children as easily as animals”. She also reveals the veiled truth of slavery: black women were forced to breed in order to foster the productivity of slavery. Rejecting her daughter Florens’ mother also denies the image of obedient black female slave and reveals herself of being strong and capable of making a decision. In addition, mother’s decision to sell her daughter also stands as black woman’s form of resistance against slavery and her ability to resist the commonly accepted controlling image of faithful, obedient domestic servant, or mammy image, who knows her “place” and accepts her subordination. On the contrary, her act denies this stereotype and defines her as strong individual, even though her behavior reaches the extremes and is opposite to social norms. I agree with critic Ruth Franklin’s statement that “the horror of the central tragedy in A Mercy- the mother forced to choose between her children- is not limited to the world of slavery.” The critic rightly compares the horrors of slavery to Holocaust, and totalitarianism saying that “there is surely no more universalizing experience than motherhood, which unites women regardless of their origin and their circumstances” (Franklin 2008; 39). Therefore, it is right to say the problems that Morrison examines are both deeply Afro-American and extending to universal experience as well.

However, for Florens this experience of being sold by her own mother is understood and experienced differently and through her own spectrum of feelings and experiences. The act of being sold by her own mother has made a crucial impact onto Florens’ psychology and consciousness. The episode of he mother’s eyes haunts and troubles Florens all the time: “But I have a worry. Not because our work is more, but because mothers nursing greedy babies scare me. I know how their eyes go when they choose. How they raise them to look at me hard, saying something I cannot hear. Saying something important to me, but holding the little
Due to slavery she did not have a possibility to be protected, taught, and instructed how to challenge racism and sexism. Although Florens did not experience as much as her mother did during the slavery, the impact of slavery still forced her to carry the psychological and emotional burden which manifests in her confusion and strong dependence to men or Lina who became her closet person and foster-parent: “My plan for this night is no good. I need Lina to say how to sheltering wilderness” (49). In addition, she constantly experiences the search of her mother and often sees the act of selling in her dreams: “That is a better dream than a minha mae standing near with her little boy. In those dreams she is always wanting to tell me something. Is stretching her eyes. Is working her mouth. I look away from her” (119). Therefore, Morrison purposely uses unconventional narrative technique to give an individual voice of each character in every chapter as it is hard and but impossible to understand the behavior and motives only from one character or narrator’s position. Unconventional and unexpected black mothers’ acts are typical in Afro-American women’s and especially Morrison’s fiction, which can be misunderstood or misinterpreted as inhuman by white readers. But exactly such acts help to reveal what measures have to be taken by a black woman in order to protect their children, especially daughters. Additionally, it stresses the impact of slave experience upon black woman’s destiny and reveals black woman’s ability to survive by their own measures in the harshest conditions. Such black mother’s act poses a question to the reader: where lies the cost and measure of mother’s love? Additionally, the author shows the scope of negative effects on Florens’ psyche and understanding of the world. Being deprived of maternal love and care, she passionately seeks love and naively accepts any male attention paid to her: “A boy and a dog drive goats past us. He raises his hat. That is the first time any male does it to me. I like it” (44). And although Lina having experience tries to protect Florens as her own daughter, Florens will develop her own independence and feminine identity through her own exploration and experiences.

The importance of maternal feelings to black woman’s identity and the theme of motherhood are also examined through Sorrow’s character in A Mercy, who at the beginning of the novel stands out as an exceptional outcast being named Sorrow by her servants: “Don’t mind her name,” said the sawyer. “You can name her anything you want. My wife calls her Sorrow because she was abandoned. However be that, she will work without complaint.” (142). The act of white servant’s imposing a name to black woman reveals the complicated condition of black women slaves: they were not only physically exploited, but they were deprived of their names and thus, identities. However, Sorrow finds her own means of self-development. She is constantly talking to her imagined self- Twin, which shows the state of her split identity. Nevertheless, the awareness of being pregnant and maternal feelings is the
most important change in her life which enables her to recognize and value herself: “Sorrow’s jaw dropped. Then she flushed with pleasure at the thought of a real person, a person of her own, growing inside her” (145). (...) she was convinced that this time she had done something, something important, by herself. Twin’s absence was hardly noticed as she concentrated on her daughter. Instantly, she knew how to name her. Knew also what to name herself” (157). Sorrow’s maternal experiences reveal how important mother-child relationships are to both child and black mother who regains her self-consciousness, rejects the imposed name Sorrow and identifies herself as Complete after giving a birth: “Twin was gone, traceless and unmissed by the only person who knew her. (...) She had looked into her daughter’s eyes; saw in them the gray glisten of a winter sea while a ship sailed by-the-lee. “I am your mother,” she said. “My name is Complete.”(158). Morrison in this novel stresses a crucial difference between being given the name and consciously naming oneself Complete which conveys completeness, autonomy and sense of acquired own identity. The writer asserts that when black people are brought from Africa their names are gone, which is very problematic, because their name is not only theirs it also refers to African family and African tribe. Being deprived of such cultural and historical heritage leaves a “huge psychological scar” on black person’s psyche. Therefore, the author suggests that “the best thing you can do is take another name which is yours because it reflects something about you or your own choice” (Morrison 1981).

Similarly, black female slave Lina was also deprived of her identity not only because she was enslaved and sold under harsh conditions but she was also renamed and baptized according to the wishes of the whites: “They named her Messalina, just in case, but shortened it to Lina to signal a sliver of hope. Afraid of once more losing shelter, terrified of being alone in the world without family, Lina acknowledged her status as heathen and let herself be purified by these worthies” (55). Lina has lost all of her ties to her family which has affected her sense of self and need to establish the relationship with someone. The memories of her burned village together with people constantly remind Lina of the experienced trauma of her ancestors and vital need for them and their history that has been burned directly. Due to the brutality of white slave owners Lina was forced to feel shame and guilt of having survived, however, not free at all: “The shame of having survived the destruction of her families shrank with her vow never to betray or abandon anyone she cherished. Memories of her village peopled by the dead turned slowly to ash and in their place a single image arose. Fire. How quick. How purposefully it ate what had been built, what had been life” (57). The advertisement according to which black slave women and Lina were sold and bought reveal white slave owners’ standpoint to black people: they were treated as objects offered to be
sold. The content of advertisements that focuses mainly on women’s skin color and ability to work humiliated black women and stripped their self-esteem and dignity. Black women were forced to believe that they are only worth for being sold as labor force, nothing else, no femininity, no beauty were added to them. Black woman was valued for only what she could or could not do rather than for what she was. Even black woman’s literacy and sensibility was valued as a feature of goods rather than accepted as a feature of human being: “A likely woman who has had small pox and measles. …A likely Negro about 9 years. …Girl or woman that is handy in the kitchen sensible, speaks good English, complexion between yellow and black. …Hardy female, Christianized and capable in all matters domestic available for exchange of goods or specie” (61). Lina is depicted as an exceptionally insightful and experienced black woman who having experienced the hardships of enslavement is aware of the fact how dependent they all are to each other living the wilderness when there is nothing else to bound a them for “they were orphans, each and all” (69). Although being enslaved, Lina clearly understands how important for people’s survival external bonds are. She understands that her white masters had failed believing that they can survive in a wild place all alone relying only on their pride. Lina’s experience of being completely alone and deprived of her own family and history show how important these bonds to person’s survival are, even for white masters too: “Sir and Mistress believed they could have honest free-thinking lives, yet without heirs, all their work meant less than a swallow’s nest. Their drift away from others produced a selfish privacy and they had lost the refuge and consolation of a clan. Baptists, Presbyterians, tribe, army, family, some encircling outside was needed” (68). For black enslaved females left alone in wilderness the situation in Lina’s view was even more complicated: “None of them could inherit; none was attached to a church or recorded in its books. Female and illegal, they would be interlopers, squatters, if they stayed on after Mistress died, subject to purchase, hire, assault, abduction, exile” (68). Through Lina’s voice Morrison gives the possibility for all African Americans to say their understanding and experience of what it means to live in America, which is their home, but in which they are forced to feel as aliens: “You and I, this land is our home,” she whispered, “but unlike you I am exile here” (69).

Similarly to A Mercy in Jazz Morrison also examines the dramatic impact of the absence of mother-child relationships to Violet and Joe Trace. The absence of such relationship is stressed through the characters’ lives in the city. The loss of parents and need for them manifests through characters’ alienation, violent and aggressive behavior. Moreover, Violet’s suffering is enhanced by her inability to have her own children: “The important thing, the biggest thing Violet got out of that was to never have children. Whatever happened, no small
dark foot would rest on another while a hungry mouth said, Mama?” (102). “Arriving at the
train station back in 1906, the smiles they both smiled at the women with children, strung like
beads over suitcases, were touched with pity. They liked children. Loved them even. (...) Years later, however, when Violet was forty, she was already staring at infants, hesitating in
front of toys displayed at Christmas” (107) (...) “…mother-hunger had hit her like a hammer.
Knocked down and out. When she woke up, her husband had shot a girl young enough to be
that daughter whose hair she had dressed to kill” (108-109). However, it eventually leads to
regained ability identify oneself as black male or female individual. The moment when Violet
reflects on her violent act, live in the city related to her past and identifies herself as “that
Violet” or Violent is a crucial point when Violet undergoes the experience of split identity and
is starting to regain her identity: “She buttoned her coat and left the drugstore and noticed, at
the same moment as that Violet did, that it was spring. In the City” (114). Although Morrison
usually examines black woman’s search for identity, in the novel Jazz she also stresses the
importance of black man’s need and search for identity. During and after slavery African
Americans, especially black women were forced to suffer various forms of oppression, such
as rape, abuse, beauty stereotypes, poverty, social inequality and others. Therefore, African
American men and women had to find their own ways and survival techniques for their own
freedom and understanding for their black self. Morrison in her novels Jazz and A Mercy also
examines how African Americans struggle for their own identity and freedom and what
means they use to regain their black self-consciousness. An insightful reading reveals that the
writer probably wants to stress not the very act of violence (Joe’s murder of Dorcas) but the
preceding events and experiences that lead to that act. The very novel is not about the murder
or slashing of the dead face. It is about how people address the act of violence, both those
who committed it and the surrounding people. Also, it is about how people live and view
death as well as what events and psychic or moral experiences precede and follow the death in
the context of Black Migration period and Harlem Renaissance. Therefore, more important
are the preconditions and consequences of violent act rather than act itself. Joe Trace explains
to the reader that his relationships with Dorcas were necessary for him to feel better, to feel a
change in his life. Joe recollects some crucial stages in his life, as he calls them “changes”
which were in fact crucial moments in the history of African Americans, such as burning
cities by Ku-Klux-Klan or migratory experience through which he was searching for his own
self, and relationship with Dorcas was one of those crucial moments to him: “I couldn’t talk
to anybody but Dorcas and I told her things I hadn’t told myself. With her I was fresh, new
again. Before I met her I’d changed into new seven times. The first time was when I named
my own self, since nobody did it for me, since nobody knew what it could or should have
been” (123). “The second change came when I was picked out and trained to be a man. To live independent and feed myself no matter what” (125). “Eighteen ninety-three was the third time I changed. That was when Viena burned to the ground. (...) That’s where I met Violet” (126). Joe’s reminiscences of his experience as a New Negro in the City emphasizes how complicated and devastating was black person’s experience in the City, when the burden of past memories never leaves person alone. Such complicated black man’s experience reveals his own complicated motives for his act of shooting a girl: “Don’t get me wrong. That wasn’t Violet’s fault. All of it’s mine. All of it. I’ll never get over what I did to that girl. Never. I changed once too often. Made myself new one time too often. You could say I’ve been a new Negro all my life. But all lived through, all I seen, and not one of those changes prepared me for her. For Dorcas” (129). (...) “How did I know what an eighteen-year-old girl might instigate in a grown man whose wife is sleeping with a doll? (...) Convince me I never knew the sweet side of anything until I tasted the honey” (129). “In this world the best thing, the only thing, is to find the trail to stick to it. I tracked my mother in Virginia and it lead mea right to her, and I tracked Dorcas from borough to borough. I didn’t even have to work at it. Something else takes over when the track begins to talk to you, give out its signs so strong you hardly have to look. (...) if the trail speaks, no matter what’s in the way, you can find yourself in a crowded room aiming a bullet at her heart, never mind it’s the heart you can’t live without “ (130). What was important for Joe in his short affair with Dorcas was his sense of feeling independent and the possibility to make his own free choice: “Dorcas, girl, your first time and mine. I chose you. Nobody gave you to me. Nobody said that’s the one for you. I picked you out. (...) I saw you and made up my mind. My mind (135). The relationship with Dorcas was a necessary experience and time for Joe to be able to identify himself and make his own choice. The fact that a black person has made his/her own choice regardless social norms or others’ views already indicate for self-consciousness and acquired self identity. Similarly the analysis of Florens’ behavior and her free choices to behave in the ways she sees necessary rather than following somebody’s advice also indicate her regained self- identity: “Look what she did when things changed abruptly: chose to go her own route once the others had crept away. Correctly. Bravely” (78). Joe, Violet and Florens making their own decisions reveal how important the decision making on your own for black man and woman’s acquisition for identity is.

The research demonstrates that black woman’s personal growth and development of identity were inevitably influenced by slavery. Due to harsh conditions of slavery Florens was deprived of maternal care, she had no possibility to be taught values from her own mother, which demanded her own means of survival and personal growth. The problem of
enslavement stretches its boundaries to more universal aspects as well. For example, female characters in *A Mercy* are also enslaved in terms of love, passion and emotions: “What is you meaning? I am a slave because Sir trades for me.” “No. You have become one. Your head is empty and your body is wild. Own yourself, woman, and leave us be” (166). This Florens’ conversation with her beloved Blacksmith shows the impact of physical slavery on black woman’s life: black woman is not only deprived of her freedom and independent life but also of her possibility to express her love and passion freely. On the one hand, black woman’s strong feelings force them to act differently from what is normally expected, but on the other hand, emotional and passionate enslavement becomes a means and part of black female’s own identity and personality. Due to black slavery, black women underwent exceptionally complicated experience. Being raped and humiliated for a long time they had to find their own ways to express black female identity. Black slaves’ daughters, especially orphan daughters also were not aware of family models and had to suffer from imposed stereotypes. Therefore, black woman had to find their own means of their own development. Florens’ open and free investigation of her and man’s body as well as her growing sexual desire and hunger for love reveals her own growth and development towards her black feminine self. Morrison’s treatment of her characters openly expressed and experienced sexuality emphasizes author’s wish and ability to break the formerly existing stereotypes of black woman. Black woman’s body has long been regarded as sexual object of sin and filthiness. And for a black slave woman herself it was hard to undergo and overcome the imposed negative stereotypes and psychological as well as physical scars of rape trauma. Therefore, the appreciation and value of one’s own body and sexual desire can be treated as black woman’s ability to regain her feminine consciousness and self-esteem even if it requires overcoming the imposed stereotypes by white dominated society and ones own fears. The feature of black woman’s unconventional means of self realization and self development are very typical to Morrison’s writing. Florens in *A Mercy* also employs her own means of self identification which challenges and stands against white stereotyped image of black woman. Florens is depicted as fully open to love, passion and sexual desire which serves as her own means of development towards her feminine self. Florens’ character not only emphasizes black woman’s strength and independence but it also challenges white stereotype based literary criticism which advocated for the stereotyped image of black woman as too sexually active, or even having animal-like features. In fact, this stereotype developed from white slave owners’ brutal treatment of black women who were treated as sexual objects rather than human beings. Florens in *A Mercy* is depicted as exceptionally strong, independent and open to risks young black woman who is depicted in black female development stage towards her
own black feminine identity. She openly expresses her hunger for love and passion: “My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost” (5), “You probably don’t know anything at all about what your back looks like whatever the sky holds: sunlight, moonrise. (…) The shine of water runs down your spine and I have shock at myself for wanting to lick there. (…) Before you know I am in the world I am already kill by you. My mouth is open, my legs go softly and the heart is stretching to break” (43-44). On the other hand, this is the stage when her whole body and consciousness is dependent on man which is the result of slavery and disrupted black community in which black women are deprived of their mother’s protection and of possibility to create their own families and be dependent on their own lives: “Lina points. We never shape the world she says. The world shapes us. (…) I am not understanding Lina. You are my shaper and my world as well. It is done. No need to choose” (83). Seeing this, Lina, former slave, tries to play a maternal role and protect Florens by saying “You are one leaf on his tree,” Florens shook her head, closed her eyes and replied, “No. I am his tree” (71). Florens’ reply reveals both, her inexperience and independence as well as venturous character. Florens often talks alone, but in an independent and self-assured voice. She addresses her voice and thoughts to Blacksmith, whom she adores and thus reveals her self of freedom to express her feelings the way they are. Therefore this Florens’ break of silence by means of her own language and expression reveals her own sense of freedom as a black individual woman. Through her monologues Florens openly expresses both, her passion, fear of danger, and need for protection which she expects from a man: “My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost. Nothing frights me more than this errand and nothing is more temptation. From the day you disappear I dream and plot” (5).

The writer constantly changes narrative point of view in the novel and this allows examining Florens’ personal change and growth from other characters’ point of view too. For example, her personal development is noticed and examined by two slave men Willard and Scully which shows that her alteration affects the people surrounding her. What Willard and Scully notice in Florens’ character is her acquired strength and inaccessibility which as if vibrates around her: “Strangest was Florens. The docile creature they knew had turned feral (71) …if he had been interested in rape, Florens would have been his prey. It was easy to spot that combination of defenseless, eagerness to please…Clearly, from the look of her now, that was no longer true. The instant he saw her marching down the road- whether ghost or soldier- he knew she had become untouchable. Thus her change from “have me always” to “don’t touch me ever” seemed to him as predictable as it was marked” (179).
Black woman’s personal growth is also closely interrelated with black community and ancestral values. Belonging to community is an essential feature in African American tradition. Critics such as Lisa Cade Wieland and Cynthia A. Davis maintain that black community and family are the key elements in African cosmology and African American women’s writing and plays crucial role in black individual’s life and understanding of self. The sense or absence of community and family values is also prevalent in Morrison’s novels. To show how black people manage to survive and live together in the wilderness when no outer element be it tribe or religion or ancestor’s presence exists is one of the primer preoccupations of Morrison’s fiction. In the novel *A Mercy* the writer examines a little society of black men and women and white people as well and reveal both the necessity to belong together as one community but stand out as individual too. There is always created tension for each character: the tension of belonging to community and vital necessity to be individual. The characters are therefore both representative, as they are vulnerable in terms of having nothing to protect them except each other, but they are depicted as different too. Florens is depicted as individual and she experiences this tension between the necessities to be individual and loved one and the importance of belonging to community: “I am happy the world is breaking open for us, yet its newness trembles me. To get to you I must leave the only home, the only people I know” (6). Throughout her physical and emotional journey Florens towards the end of the novel stands out as strong, self-assured and independent young woman who has found something important personally to her: “See? You are correct. Aminha mae too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love. None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last” (189). Although the absence of her mother still haunts and troubles her, Florens wants to assure her mother of having become stronger and as if inferring he mother’s need to protect her children: “I will keep one sadness. That all the time I cannot know what my mother is telling me. Nor can she know what I am wanting to tell her. Mae, you can have pleasure now because the soles of my feet are as hard as cypress” (189). In the last chapter given for Florens’ voice she stands out and speaks as having acquired her independence and completeness. She has overcome a certain revelation and her own understanding of what the world is and of what her life was and is like now: “But my way is clear after losing you who I am thinking always as my life and my security from harm, from any who look closely at me only to throw me away. From all those who believe they have claim and rule over me” (184). If in the beginning and throughout the novel Florens openly shows her dependence on man, now she bravely challenges man’s perception of her as wild and strong woman thus revealing that she regained her self-esteem and independence: “I
am nothing to you. You say I am wilderness. I am. Is that a tremble on your mouth, in your eye? Are you afraid? You should be” (184).

The experience of slavery has also inevitably affected black enslaved people’s understanding of freedom. Being deprived of it, black slaves had to create their own understanding of what freedom is and what it means to them. The depiction of black free man, blacksmith, in *A Mercy* is an important means to examine freedom among enslaved people. Blacksmith’s freedom has a huge impact on the little community he lives within. Florens openly expresses her attraction to his freedom: “You are my protection. Only you. You can be it because you say you are a free man from New Amsterdam and always are that” (81). The presence of free black man among slaves helps them to examine their own understanding or lack of understanding of freedom as Florens does: “I don’t know the feeling of or what it means, free and not free” (81) which may indicate that she defines herself as neither free nor enslaved. However, Florens through her journey to blacksmith reflects on her own understanding of freedom and relates it to making her own choices: “…I wonder what else the world may show me. It is as though I am loose to do what I choose (…) Is that how free feels? I don’t like it” (82). Although doubtful at first, it already reveals her developing personality.

However, blacksmith not being enslaved understands slavery differently from the rest. Florens remembers him saying that he sees “slaves freer than free men. One is a lion in the skin of an ass. The other is an ass in the skin of a lion. That is the withering inside that enslaves and opens the door for what is wild” (187). Blacksmith’s understanding of enslavement extends its notion to a wider and more universal meaning, namely that enslavement has many forms and may manifest differently among humans. For example, I believe that white slave owners were in fact enslaved in terms of morality and humanity. While black slaves, being enslaved physically managed or at least tried to overcome the trauma of enslavement through complex phases of self definitions and the revision of their own history.

The presence and challenge against controlling images imposed on black women is another key concern in Morrison’s novels. Until Black Arts Movement and Black Feminist movement in 1970s, in White dominated society and white literature black woman was depicted from negative point of view ascribing derogatory images to her, such as Jezebel, obedient servant or Mammy. P. Hill Collins and bell hooks were particularly preoccupied with black women’s oppression and former existed negative stereotypes of black women in both American white literature and multicultural American society. The critics believe that in order to regain black self-consciousness and identity black women had to reject white definitions of blackness and affirm their own positive notions of black consciousness and
identity. Morrison in her novels *Jazz* and *A Mercy* breaks the existed negative stereotypes of black woman. In fact, the writer rewrites African American history which serves as a means of rejecting white myths of African Americans’ and their history. In addition, critic Johnie M Stover asserts that Morrison’s novels are an exemplary of feminist readings since the writer challenges social and cultural norms of gender, race, and class. It does not, however, mean that she depicts black female characters only from the positive side. On the contrary, the writer reveals various aspects of black female characters by placing them in extremely complicated situations and thus allowing them to develop as black individuals and get rid of imposed race and gender based stereotypes. In the novel *A Mercy* the writer reminds the readers how dangerous and powerful negative stereotypes to the self-consciousness and identity of a black woman were and to what extremes black women were forced to go in order to survive or protect each other, especially their daughters. For example, an episode in *A Mercy* reveals white stereotyped belief that black girl is a devil. Therefore, her mother is forced to cut her legs and renew the bleeding in order to prove that her daughter is human being; otherwise, she would not bleed: “This is my daughter Jane, the Widow says. Those lashes may save her life.” (127) “So I know it is Daugter Jane who says how can I prove I am not a demon and it is the Widow who says sssst it is they who will decide.” (128). By depicting such crucial scenes of what black women had to suffer during and after slavery, Morrison not only revives the history of black slavery but also achieves one of her most important preoccupations: she forces the reader to examine the consciousness of both the enslaved one and the ones who enslaved others, i.e., white slave owners. The writer reveals what happens in the mind of those who impose negative stereotypes on blacks. Imposing a negative feature on black slaves was the easiest way for slave owners to assert their white superiority and excuse white men of their rape acts and brutal treatment of black women slaves. By imposing derogatory or animal like features on blacks, white people contradicted to their own Christian values. By examining Florens’ body white people ridicule and scorn their own humanity and Christian values and enslave themselves into the constrains of stereotyped thinking based on human race and skin color: “One woman speaks saying I have never seen any human this black” (131). “Eyes that do not recognize me, eyes that examine me for a tail, an extra teat, a man’s whip between my legs. Wondering eyes that stare and decide if my navel is in the right place if my knees bend backward like the forelegs of a dog. They want to see if my tongue is split like a snake’s or if my teeth are filling to points to chew them up. To know if I can spring out of darkness and bite” (135). The depiction of white Christians examining black people reveal Morrison’s idea that the evil living within white people is oriented towards blacks and shows how black and white people understand, accept
and deal with evil: black people manage to live with the evil exposed on them and find means of survival, while white people’s reaction to evil is always destructive one. The quoted episodes of white racial prejudices assert Morrison’s belief that “we (black people) do not regard evil the same way as white people do. White people’s reaction to something that is alien to them is to destroy it. That’s why they have to say Black people are worthless and ugly” (Morrison 1974; 8). Florens’ personal observations about white people and their racially biased standpoint reveals Florens’ ability to understand what stereotype and negative image is being imposed on her. Being aware of it she stands out as strong self-conscious young woman and denies another existed stereotype that black slaves were illiterate. What is most important, her understanding and awareness of what is being imposed on her shows that she is not only strong enough to resist these stereotypes but also her strong sense of her own self which is independent and irresistible of others’ attitude. The way black female characters perceive their lives and the world they live in is another means to reveal them as black female individuals rather than black objects.

In addition, black women’s relationship with one another also plays an important role in the process of black woman’s positive and individual self-definition. Morrison is one of those black women writers (A. Walker, T. C. Bambara) who address black female relationships in a serious manner. Black women’s relationship with each other becomes their distinctive means of recovery from racial and sexist oppression and self definition because they share common experience and common values. As Mary Helen Washington has pointed out “one distinguishing feature of black women’s literature is that it is about African-American women. And their friendships with other women- mothers, sisters, grandmothers, friends, lovers- are vital to their growth and well-being” (1987). Black women’s relationships are especially revealed when black women have to survive on their own without men. Morrison in A Mercy even breaks the stereotype of hostility between black and white women. When white character Rebekka’s husband dies and she is left only with her black female servants, Lina Sorrow and Florens, all women, especially Rebekka and Lina understand that need to find their own ways of survival without men: “When the Europe wife stepped down from the cart, hostility between them was instant. The health and beauty of a young female already in charge annoyed the new wife; while the assumption of authority from the awkward Europe girl infuriated Lina. Yet the animosity, utterly useless in the wild, died in the womb. (…)They became friends. (…)Mostly because neither knew precisely what they were doing or how” (62). Additionally, both women had a common feeling of fear for men and only togetherness was their form of protection and survival: “Although they had nothing in common with the views of each other, they had everything in common with one thing: the promise and threat of
men. Here, they agreed, was where security and risk lay” (115). Similarly in Jazz Violet Trace befriends Dorcas’ aunt, Alice Manfred and through this friendship gains more self-confidence. Through her friendship with Alice Violet understand how important it was for her to alienate herself from society, undergo her own quests for herself and become open to other people, especially those whose fate is similar to hers as Alice Manfred. Violet’s alienation from society helped her to understand what is missing within herself, while her reconciliation with herself and the surrounding people helped her to fill the missing parts of herself. It was only Alice Manfred with whom Violet could discuss and reflect on her violent act and whole life. It was also lice with whom Violet remembered the power of being accepted, forgiven, and understood. It is also during the conversations with Alice when violet notices herself laughing from relief rather than crying: “Violet was the first to smile. Then Alice. In no time laughter was rocking them both (...) Violet learned then what she had forgotten until this moment: that laughter is serious. More complicated, more serious than tears” (113). No other characters in Jazz engage in such long, meaningful and intimate conversations as Alice Manfred and Violet Trace. Their conversation thus resemble the pattern of Afro-American oral tradition- Call and Response pattern, which becomes significant not only in its formal manifestation but its healing and reassuring nature too. Their conversations assert the nature and function of call and response pattern in African American culture: “systems of languages within the Black English Oral tradition are systems that call for the participants to reaffirm their cultural roots, community, and themselves” (Atkinson 2000; 22). Therefore, Violet’s conversations with Alice become a healing process to both of them that encompasses not only their past traumas but their common heritage- their black language. It also leads to a conclusion that Black language has healing and reaffirming nature. Although Morrison does not regard herself as being exceptionally feminist writer, such elements as the theme of motherhood, black women’s relationship and black woman’s development from objectified slave woman to subjective self places Morrison in the context of Black feminist thought especially in the ways she confronts and breaks race and gender stereotypes.

In conclusion, Morrison’s novels Jazz and A Mercy challenge the questions and theories of African American history. Morrison’s individual treatment of African American history leads to understanding that America was built on the basis of slave trade and exploitation and for a long time was misinterpreted by excluding the enslaved black voices. Morrison managed to revisit African American history by giving possibility to collective and individual black voices and have certainly placed African Americanness in the historical context and discourse of America. Therefore, Morrison’s novels are both aesthetically and politically powerful.
Also, the experiences the characters in *Jazz* and *A Mercy* had undergone assert Morrison’s idea that the struggle to forget one’s past is fruitless. Therefore, the characters chose the right way to survive: they experienced a painful process of rememory of their complicated and distorted history.
CONCLUSIONS:

The research demonstrates that Morrison revisits Afro-American history by revealing the essence of black collective and black individual’s voice and by deep and open examination of Afro-Americans’ subjective experience as slaves or children of the enslaved ones. The writer achieves this by employing non linear narrative structure and multiple points of view, evocative conversations, and constant shift to characters’ or their ancestors’ past.

The writer employs not only African American literary traditions such as collective narrative voice, inclusion of African tales but she also employs postmodern techniques, especially in the novel *Jazz*, such as stream of consciousness technique, unconventional and nonlinear narrative structure and the examination of black characters’ split identity. The techniques employed (nonlinear narration, multiple narrative voices, and interchangeable viewpoints with changes in space and time) assert the idea of speakerly texts to her novels which can be regarded as both African American Call and Response pattern or postmodern feature referring to R. Barthes’s idea of writerly texts.

In addition to this, the writer challenges and rejects negative racial and gender stereotypes imposed on black women slaves, such as mammy, Jezebel or obedient servant by depicting black woman as rebellious, developing, sensitive and independent personalities whose psychological and emotional state is particularly complicated and deep. Moreover, both black men and women are depicted as developing individuals searching for their black identities and self-esteem. In Morrison’s novels black women become the major characters whose unusual behavior, strong sense of independence and self-esteem pose a question to white mainstream social norms: what is the right behavior? Or are there any right forms of behavior at all? And who is responsible for black or any person’s fate- person oneself or dominating society?

The writer revisits African American history through the examination of black slave’s moral and psychological experiences and extends the idea of enslavement to its broader sense showing that enslavement can manifest in its many forms, such as emotional, sexual or psychological enslavement as a complex state of person who is in the phase of his/her identity quest. More importantly, the author tries to show the devastating impact of slavery and derogatory racial stereotypes on the psyche of both, the enslaved and the servants.

The experiences and suffering that the characters in *Jazz* and *A Mercy* had undergone assert Morrison’s idea that the struggle to forget one’s past is fruitless and that past had an enormous impact on black person’s life. I believe the characters chose the right way to survive: they experienced a painful process of rememory of their complicated and distorted
history. The writer deeply examines black individual’s quest for identity by demonstrating that past, slavery and negative stereotypes shaped and determined black individual’s perception of his/her black identity at any historical period, be it the beginning of slavery as in *A Mercy*, or a modern period of Harlem Renaissance as in *Jazz*. This conclusion asserts the formulated hypothesis that slavery and past formed and determined black individual’s perception of self-consciousness and identity.

Finally, Morrison places black history, slavery and African-American women’s literature in wider American context: by revisiting African American history she revisits whole American history from its dawn to modern times throughout the two novels showing the importance of the presence of blackness and strong ties between present and past. Through her storytelling the writer creates a vital historical link between present black generations and their ancestors who were black slaves. In doing so the writer offers black people a possibility to have a connection to their history and rethink the history, which is theirs, understand and realize themselves better as African Americans in America.
SANTRAUKA


Antroje darbo dalyje apžvelgiama juodaodžių moterų feministinė kryptis ir jos apraškos juodaodžių moterų literatūroje. Būtent juodojo feminizmo atsiradimas aštuontajame dvidešimtmečio amžiuje dešimtmetį padėjo įsitvirtinti juodaodžių moterų literatūrai, iškelti viešumon ir paneigtis egzistavusius literatūrinius ir visuomeninius juodaodžių moterų žeminančius stereotipus, tokius kaip pasileidėlė, paklusni vergė darbininkė ar motinėlė, mylinti savo baltųjų šeimininką.

Trečioji dalis pristato rašytojos netradicinį požiūrį į juodaodžių istoriją Amerikos kontekste gilinantį į rašytojos intervju, kritiką, bei eseistiką, kurioje autorė pabrėžia Afro-Amerikiečių istorijos iškreiptumą ir neaiškumą dėl baltųjų primestos stereotipinės ideologijos. Būtent todėl juodųjų istorijos perskaitymas juodųjų akimis yra būtinas, o pagrindinė to išraiška, autorės nuomone yra būtent rašymas.

Paskutiniojoje darbo dalyje atskleidžiamas Rašytojos netradicinis požiūris į vergiją ir juodaodžių istoriją per vergų ar jų palikuonių išgyvenimus, pasakojimus, netradicinius poelgius ir sprendimų pasirinkimus dviejose romanuose. Būtent netradicinis be savitas ir drąsus juodaodžių moters vaizdavimas padeda rašytojai paneigti neigiamą juodaodžių įvaizdį ir pavaizduoti juodaodžių moterų visapusiškų asmenybės, mylinčią, geidžiančią ir geidžiamą, samprotaujančią bei kovojančią su primestomis socialinėmis normomis ir istorijos neteisybe.

Magistrinio darbo pabaigoje prieinama prie išvaizdo, kad T. Morrison savo kūriniuose naudoja ir atvirai atskleidžia vergijos istoriją, bei juodaodžio tapatumo paieškas, bei juodaodžiių moterų vaizdavimo būdus paneigdama ilgai egzistavusius neigiamus stereotipus bei išskeldama naujų problemų: rasizmo ir vergovės poveikį paties vergo ir baltojo vergvaldžio rasisto sąmones bei savo suvokimui. Autorės kūrinių aktuali bei skauda tematica ir sudėtinga įvairialypė rašymo technika leidžia patalpinti Morrison kūrybą platesniame Amerikos literatūros kontekste, o skaitymo įtakos skatina procesą leidžia romanams priskirti kritiko R. Barthes rašomų arba kalbų šaltinių bruožus. Todėl rašytojos kūrinių atveria naujas interpretacijas ir kritines įžvalgas. Peržiūrėdama Afro-Amerikiečių istoriją autore kartu suteikia paskatą ir kitokiam visos Amerikos istorijos peržiūrėjimui, nes kaip parodą romanai juodaodžiai ir jų istorija yra neatsiejama dalis visame Amerikos kontekste.
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