

**Towards a Folkloric Commonality: Adapting Lore of
Assam and the American South**

Thesis submitted for the award of Doctor of Philosophy by

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of Doctor of Philosophy, is entirely my own work and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Date: 13 December 2023

“We are part human, part stories.”

-Ben Okri, *The Joys of Storytelling*

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Abstract

AASHIMA RANA

Towards a Folkloric Commonality: Adapting Lores of Assam and the American South

This project aims to reflect upon how distinctive folklore consists of oral traditions and knowledge that are particular to their places of origin. This is not a controversial claim, but it can also be said that the potential for discovering significant parallels between such distinctive folk cultures is relatively unexplored. To this end, the thesis will focus on the adaptation of folkloric material from two cultures that were brought into being by the forced migration of vulnerable populations to plantations in the American South and the Assam region of North Eastern India. The most fundamental continuity between these communities and their traditions will be shown through how they adapt the role of the trickster figure.

The initial focus will be on how Toni Morrison uses trickster figures, as well as trickster techniques of narration, in her novels *Tar Baby* and *Beloved* and will stress the role of folklore played in reviving cultural identity among African Americans. Ultimately, this also shows how the adaptation of folkloric material into a literary form like the novel need not mean that folklore is left behind, but rather complemented by its adaptation. Morrison's revivification of the folkloric here lays a foundation for comparative analysis with the lesser-known tales created out of Assam plantations. The thesis shows how the folksongs and trickster figures in Assam folklore became a medium for Tea Garden labourers to reconstitute their identities, in a way that is analogous to the rise of the Trickster in the American South.

Furthermore, just as Morrison adapted a means of transmitting folklore from orality into literature while maintaining the auratic qualities of its origins, cinema proves in Assam to be the key medium for simultaneously adapting and renewing folklore. Analogies are productively drawn between how different methods have served these different communities and folklore, and their common structures are acknowledged. At the same time, homogenisation is resisted by retaining an emphasis on the particularity of each place and its stories. This is a study of simultaneous similarities and differences.

INTRODUCTION

Weaving Transnational Strands of Folklore

Written words are a residue. Oral tradition has no such residue or deposit. When an often-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it. (Ong and Hartley 11)

Folklore is a powerfully expressive medium with several complex functions and modalities. It allows for individual expression but also insists that this is done as part of a collective endeavour. As such, it promotes the heterogeneity and interrelationship of social life, suggesting that in understanding themselves, people also necessarily should engage in the work of understanding each other. Folklore is, therefore, the language of a particular folk or people, but it also generates the potential for intersubjectivity across cultures and histories. In this way, it can work to show experiences of social, cultural, and historical realities that might be shared by people in diverse situations.¹ Understood as a totality, folklore is an amalgamation of the art and culture of diverse cultures, races and backgrounds. It exhibits inheritance in every culture but also shows how that can take either distinct or common forms. The overarching aim of this project is to draw on the comparative agency, which implies exploring the potential and established uses of the

¹ Folklore includes myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas. It also includes folk costume, folk dance, folk drama, (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (e.g., fiddle tunes), folksongs (e.g., lullabies, ballads), folk speech (e.g., slang), folk similes (e.g., as blind as a bat), folk metaphors (e.g., to paint the town red), and names (e.g., nicknames and place names) [...] oral epics, autograph-book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (writings on the walls of public bathrooms), limericks, ball bouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes, finger and toe rhymes, dandling rhymes (to bounce the children on the knee), counting-out rhymes (to determine who will be « it » in games), and nursery rhymes [...] games; gestures; symbols; prayers (e.g. graces); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs; house, barn and fence types; street vendor's cries; and even traditional conventional sounds used to summon animals to give them commands [...] mnemonic devices (e.g. the name Roy G. Biv to remember the colors of the spectrum in order), envelope sealers (e.g. SWAK—Sealed With A Kiss), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (e.g., after burps and sneezes), ... festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (e.g., Christmas, Halloween, and birthday) (Dundes 3).

folklore of both African Americans and the people of Assam in North-Eastern India. Comparative analysis will emphasise key commonalities: the significance of folkloric communication in communities of women, how oral traditions express resilience and resistance, and how cultural knowledge is revived and regenerated through both traditional and new technologies of storytelling.² This takes the form of looking at how folklore manifests in the fictions of Toni Morrison and the lessons her work offers in terms of how the use of folklore should, in fact, be seen as a contribution to folklore. Her novels are not commodified objects at the end of a production line, which produces things from folklore; rather, they actively become part of folklore. In a similar way, I will conclude this thesis by looking at a piece of contemporary Assamese cinema that not only emulates Morrison's practice in retaining folkloric modes of transmission but also innovates new ones, altering the shape of inherited knowledge as it goes. I propose a folkloric, rather than a literary, model of understanding these various fictions.

My research collects samples from the oral lore of the Tea Plantations of Assam to promote its significance and to advocate methods by which it might not be lost.³ In this way, even my own thesis seeks to become part of folklore. This explores parallelism between two nations (India and the United States of America) by concentrating on the key elements of folklore interwoven in Assam and the African American community, with particular emphasis on their labour history in the nineteenth century. Assam's Tea Plantations and American Cotton Plantations necessarily generated unique folklores that

² The word community is derived from the Old French *comunité*, which means commonness and everybody. A community is a group of people building a sense of belongingness who share geographically and psychologically identifiable territories with common experiences and beliefs among each other.

³ The project was initially designed with the fieldwork to collect the oral lore from Assam by visiting the Tea Garden and Ex-Tea Garden communities. However, the global pandemic in 2020 made the necessary travel impossible. Consequently, the research was conducted online, where I connected and collected the material from people residing in Assam. The materials collected are from ex-tea gardeners and the Tea Gardens community members. Jayanta Mukherjee translated the material collected.

are nevertheless conversant with one another, generating similarities and differences, concepts and affects. This comparative research attempts to demonstrate the complexity this creates and to investigate how problems of articulation were faced by these communities. The primary orientation is to produce an empathetic understanding of how the workers' perspective is always present in folkloric transmission and that this carries over into contemporary adaptations of folklore from the plantations.

Many strands are necessarily interwoven in exploring the conceptual identification and definition of folklore. The first chapter of the thesis will identify and express the complexity of these threads and begin the work of getting them to bind. Above everything, I want to advocate that folklore is not only a body of knowledge but also a comparative tool. It is not only what we know but how we know it. I identify common structures of communication as well as historical and socio-economical commonalities of context. The second and third chapters show how Toni Morrison's narratives create a path of comparative confluence with other texts, opening up plural and enlivened possibilities of intersubjectivity. I emphasise how folklore is a way of learning about the world and not only a story embedded in local social dimensions. It allows a unique mapping of the world in terms of finding unity in diversity.

The power of folklore is evidently an informing and vibrant influence on artistic production and a vital means of realising modernity's fundamental commonalities and oppositions. Folklore is local and generates a profound sense of targeted affinity to a particular people in a particular place. Yet commonalities can also be seen in how different localities experience folklore. Identifying common structures in folklore should therefore mean something other than homogenising content. Although workers in Assam and Mississippi both suffered, they did so differently. Inhumane living conditions, brutality,

hardships, and extreme exploitation of the labourers on plantations were common experiences to a degree, and so were creating songs of complaint about them. Yet every song is also unique, and the sufferers did not have the comfort in solidarity of knowing that others across the world were going through comparable experiences of anger and disillusionment. Comparative folklore allows us to see, however poignantly, that the potential for such solidarity existed, even if it could not then be realised. What really sets the plantation folklores apart, however, is that so much of the Assamese lore has yet to be preserved or recorded. This is not to say that African American folklore is exhausted, but it has been remade and recommunicated by many artists, filmmakers, sculptors, painters, and writers in various forms. This has given African Americans a continuing sense of agency and urgency about their place in the world. This has not yet happened with Assamese folklore to a large degree, but I argue that it should. For the folklore of Assam to remain alive, in all of its profound emotionality and adaptability, it has to be remade again and again. Morrison's fiction shows how to do it.

Folklore was a tool of survival during the traumatic plantation experience in both locations. Trickster figures are abundant in both traditions, as they always are in various local world cultures because they foreground the idea of survival and discovering the means necessary for it. Yet no two trickster figures are ever precisely the same, not least because their characterisation necessarily evolves out of their particular local context. Every trickster tells us something new. Morrison offers several adaptations of the trickster form; Assamese folklore gives us a girl that takes the form of a fruit.

The diverse means of expression used by the folk on both plantations reflect and authenticate the cultural and social systems which underpinned them. Indentured labourers and sharecroppers shared the common narrative of being subjugated by economic forces.

If they had visible enemies in the form of bosses or owners, they had an invisible one in the form of Western Capitalism. It acts as a spectre within the folkloric imagination of both places: generating perceptions of their regions as lands of no return, feeding apprehension about labour recruiters, financial challenges, and the possibility of social relationships on plantations. In the face of this, all workers could do was invent, improvise, tell stories or sing.

I seek here to respect all genders, ethnicities and cultures; inevitably, there are words used in any account of labour plantations that have a history of wounding and degrading people. I seek to avoid the use of derogatory or degrading terms. When I use the term, African American that denotes a community of descendants of African people whose ancestors had to endure enslavement. After the abolition of slavery, some stayed back on the plantations and became ‘sharecroppers’; some moved to the American North to gain freedom and start a new life as ‘freed’. ‘Black’ is not used here as a disparaging term but is used in the context of responding to hegemonic implications of terms such as ‘white’ and ‘whiteness’, the privileges of power enjoyed by Americans and Europeans in a racialized culture. Also, the word ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal’ is used in the context of the Assam Tea Garden community; it denotes the migrants who moved or were forcefully brought to the land of Assam.⁴ Due to their numerous castes and religious differences, they were re-categorised as Tea Tribes.⁵

⁴According to the Constitution of India 1950, Article 342, concerning the term ‘tribes and tribal’: “The President may concern any State or Union territory, and where it is a State, after consultation with the Governor thereof, by public notification, specify the tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within tribes or tribal communities which shall for this Constitution be deemed to be Scheduled Tribes in relation to that State or Union territory, as the case may be.”

A tribe is a social group of distinct people, dependent on their land for their livelihood, who are largely self-sufficient and not integrated into the national society (‘Vikaspedia Domains’).

⁵ The caste system in India is divided into four primary groups: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Shudras (National Commission for Scheduled Tribes). It is a system of social stratification having pre-modern origins and is today the basis of reservation in India.

Le Roi Jones (Amiri Baraka) in his book *Blues People* (1999) asserts that stories which have been travelling the world through word of mouth enjoy a more profound authority than those stories that took the form of literature:

The African slave (*sic*) might have realized he was losing something, that his customs and the memory of his land were being each day drained from his life [...] the first black Americans had no native cultural references other than the slave culture. (20)

Morrison returns these people to their homes, and today with her help, we listen to those stories. Morrison's use of folklore in her writings also inspires possibilities of translatability. As such, this project aims to recognise the importance of Assam folklore and make it globally available. My final chapter will show how Morrison's exemplary revisiting of the coordinates of folklore in her novels finds comparative expression in Bhaskar Hazarika's film *Kothanodi* (2015), which did unprecedented work in terms of communicating largely unknown aspects of Assamese folklore to audiences far beyond Assam. Rather than borrowing from folklore, Morrison and Hazarika create new folklore out of how they inherited it, instructing us in its reliable power of transformation.

CHAPTER ONE

The Multiple Threads of a Folkloric Reading: Definitions, Issues, Methods, Contexts

1. Defining Folk and Questioning Community

What do we mean when we call upon the idea of a “folk”? An immediate answer might be that it is a homogenous group who create vernacular cultural traditions. The life of such a group is determined and bonded strongly by its traditions, customs and beliefs, and also the many variations of communication and transmission that have been adapted over generations to perpetuate the power of all that knowledge. This folklore needs to be understood diversely through the many ways in which it realises vertices of inherited knowledge and present experience. Folk, or the people of a community or communities, preserve their ‘lore’ knowledge as a possession. They then proclaim the ongoing value of that possession through creation and re-creation from generation to generation. In this way, folklore can be seen as a unified and unifying expressive medium that recognises the heterogeneity and interrelationship of social life and uses language to represent social, cultural and historical reality. Its transmission takes many forms and incorporates various types of performativity, ranging from dance to ritual to oral storytelling. Folklore is a vast subject with the potential to match. Every location in the world manifests its folklore, but at the same time, folklore allows each locality to recognise the patterns and structures of the other.

“Community” is an essential term in this thesis, and it should be acknowledged that it is a contested term with reference to African American Studies. Notably, Adolph Reed argued in *Class Notes* (2000) that overuse of a term like “the African American community” runs the risk of flattening out the real and urgent differences of experience

and class in the name of using a “rhetoric of authenticity” (10). In asking people to perceive the reality of the “African American community”, Reed argues that this should necessarily involve thinking about a historically-constructed “complex population of differentiated individuals” (11) rather than as a mystically organic entity. In talking here about how folklore can sustain and enhance the life of a community, it is in this sense of a complex but connected collocation of people.

Through stories, the experience of apparently different worlds and such “differentiated individuals” can come into confluence. At the end of this thesis, this will be manifested in readings which compare the presence of the folkloric in both the fictions of Toni Morrison and a range of cultural representations that have emerged out of the experiences of indentured workers in the tea plantations of Assam. To prepare for this analysis, the thesis initially explores how folklore informs the fiction of Toni Morrison, and the way in which she revivifies that folklore by drawing on it for both narrative material and artistic design. Through this, she also indicates her debt to the originating creativity generated on the plantations of the American South and how it was the medium of communication for generations of the enslaved and indentured workers who were otherwise denied education and a voice.

Folklore is present in all cultures worldwide; notably, it expresses commonalities. For example, the folktale of a rabbit and tortoise contains the moral education not to belittle anyone or think less of them, and that hard work and determination, going slow and steady, wins the race. This lesson has been taught worldwide through fiction using animal figures, although the particular animal’s features may vary according to the unique details and preferences of respective cultures. Famously, Aesop is usually credited with telling the first hare and tortoise story, which was later recorded in the book *Aesop’s Fables* (1484), providing the counsel that ‘the race is not always to the swift’ (Rakham

64).⁶ A Dutch version of the story tells of a frog and a snail that strike a bet on who will reach the nearby city the fastest. The frog reaches it first, but the gates are closed when he arrives, and he has to wait until morning for the gates to be opened. In the meantime, the snail crawls under the gate and wins the race (Franssen et al.). The moral of this story appears to be to know your local by-laws, and indicates how the meaning of a particular tale might shift according to local circumstances.

The Grimm brothers produced a German version of the story with a rabbit and a hedgehog, where the hedgehog tricks the rabbit by sending his wife ahead (Mrs Hedgehog) to the finish line a day before, where she awaits the rabbit, pretending to be her husband. In 1915, the Anglo-Irish Lord Dunsany wrote a different (and violent) version of the story with a completely different ending. In his version, the animals of the forest have a fight to decide who is the fastest. Hare was thought to be the fastest because of his long ears, and the tortoise to be the slowest, because of his hard shell. The declaration of this instigated a fight between them, and a 500 metres race was set up to stop it. Just like in other versions, the tortoise wins the race. However, when one day the forest catches fire, the message needs to be spread that all the forest animals should run away to save themselves. Due to the title of ‘the fastest animal,’ the tortoise was catastrophically chosen to play messenger, and most of the animals died. The tortoise only won because of Hare’s overconfidence and foolishness; in the case of fire, his speed would have been useful (Dunsany). The context demands flexibility. All these different versions of the tales, with different parables attached, prove that folklore is a global phenomenon. However, it is also a local one, acquiring significance and coding from the place in time and space from which it emerges. Furthermore, if the versions of folklore created among

⁶Aesop was a Greek enslaved from 620 BCE - 564 BCE. He never wrote down the fables, rather he told them orally. All the fables were collected and written down by Demetrius Phalareus in the 4th century. The first printed book was in 1461 Bamberg, Germany (the first English edition was *Aesop’s Fables*, printed by William Caxton, 1484).

communities worldwide reflect their diverse cultures and traditions, a shared foundational method of oral transmission presents commonalities to be studied.

This chapter explores the key terms in folkloric analysis and contextualises them. Toni Morrison's fictions are used in the thesis to demonstrate the presence of folklore as both a body of knowledge and a method of transmission.⁷ To situate this analysis, consideration is given to the role of folklore in literature, and how its various components or narrative strategies remain manifest in literary fiction. Consideration is also given to aspects of psycho-folklore, and how the articulation of fantasy and reality is essential in the analysis of both African American and Assamese folklore. The contextualisation of each key folkloric term will direct the practice of reading throughout the thesis, identifying similarities, differentiations and variously vital modes of transmission.⁸

2. The Uses of Folklore: Speaking Folklore, Writing Folklore

William R. Bascom defines folklore in fundamentally generic terms: "In anthropological usage, the term folklore has come to mean myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, verse, and a variety of other forms of artistic expression whose medium is the spoken word. Thus, folklore can be defined as a "verbal art"" (245). What this definition does not provide is an adequate sense of what folklore generates through its activity and the impact

⁷Toni Morrison, born in Lorain, Ohio in 1931, is unquestionably America's greatest renowned African American author. Her writing and analytical work have already won her a position in and irrevocably altered the shape of the American literary canon. Morrison has garnered numerous literary honours for her contributions to American literature. Morrison received the Ohioan Book Awards for Fiction in 1975 for *Sula* (1973), National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1978 for her third novel *Song of Solomon* (1977). She won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 for *Beloved* (1987) which has also become her most popular, taught, and well-known work. After her sixth novel *Jazz* (1992), she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

⁸ In a community, the people with certain characteristics which they believe are similar to certain animals are given names; for instance, trickery is not only associated with foxes or gluttony with leeches or deceit with snakes or cowardness with rabbits; any person who shows traits of deceit is associated and called a snake. In a similar way, donkeys are associated with hard-working yet stupid animal, sheep with calmness and gentleness and wolves with evil and cruelty; therefore, a man who chooses to do hard work instead of smart work is called a donkey. These characteristics were encountered among the people and chosen to address the people with these traits giving them a satirical evaluation.

it can have upon communities. In “The Storyteller”, Walter Benjamin (1992) wrote that: “[W]henever good counsel was at a premium, the fairy tale had it, and where the need was greatest, its aid was nearest” (101). This testifies how folklore expresses and conserves values and fosters customs and traditions. It also implies how it perpetually enlivens the means of communicating them through adaptive performance and performative traditions. I will argue that each and every community generates its own folklore and is as such unique, yet at the same time, a potential exists for radical commonalities between folk cultures that are highlighted when we consider how they relate to oral tradition. This thesis will also show how new communities can be sustained around the adaptation of pre-existing folklore into new formulations, such as the abiding potential that resides within their structures.

Folklore is a language of emotions and connection among the people who share a certain common thread, irrespective of their capabilities with respect to literacy. If the oral knowledge created by folklore is more vulnerable than its written version, they can nevertheless combine and infuse one another. Taken together, they represent an integral part of a society’s cultural heritage. Collective traditions are authored collectively, and no individual is accountable for any justification. Due to the absence of concerns of authorship and the peculiar forms of social capital that it generates, the community both creates and shares the legends, tales and songs of folklore together. This is further re-created through the generations by the circulation of themes, of ideas, and imitation of aesthetic behaviour such as social desires, ideals and values, by repetitive recitations conforming communal aesthetic and ethical standards. Folklore is a creative commons.

If folklore expresses a community’s unique experience and cultural heritage, it is also universal in some respects, crossing boundaries of language, distance and religion. It proves the value of inheritance and propagates translatability, suggesting a fundamental

unity of expression deep in the structures of humankind. Much of folklore begins with stories of divine power, the creation and destruction of the world and the great events of each respective community's life on the planet. These stories are different, yet they coincide. Supernatural and extraordinary themes are universal in the folklore of each and every country but the language, social values and culture define a community. Therefore, folklore is primarily a concept of community followed by universalisation through its circulation. It first emerged orally through symbols, metaphors and themes and then took on another existence in written forms. Whatever the method, folklore has been passed on to generations through repetitive recitations; if a loss of memory should occur or be enforced, the possibility remains of it being restored through narrative modulations or creative improvisations. Someone, another storyteller, will pick up the thread. Vladimir Propp claims that folklore is not fiction, even if folklore and literature are close to each other. He contends that folklore has a very different relationship to authorship and authority. As literature is written, it can be interpreted through codified principles and practices; to study folklore, however, one needs to decipher the language used in oral transmission, with all of the unpredictability that might bring. The tale takes on a life of its own every time it is told, the literary text necessarily remains fixed in its coding.

Alan Dundes (1980) proposes a structure for how folkloric knowledge is transmitted orally or in writing: "The opening and closing of a tale or song or myth are polarities containing the narrative. Folklorists are wont to say that folklore is, or is in, 'oral tradition.' Yet many forms of folklore are not transmitted orally at all" (*Interpreting Folklore* 20). However, this narration is also necessarily imaginary. If anything, its authenticity resides in its inauthenticity. Communal learning determines the mode of delivery, and folk-knowledge is diversified into categories through whether it is re-told as a proverb, myth, or song. Dundes' categorisation adds another layer to the study of the

text, demanding consideration of the situation and time in which the knowledge was created:

In an effort to encourage the definition of the various forms of folklore and thus eventually the definition of the field of folklore itself, I would like to propose three levels of analysis, each of which can aid in the task of definition. With respect to any given item of folklore, one may analyze its texture, its text, and its context. It is unlikely that a genre of folklore could be defined on the basis of just one of these. Ideally, a genre should be defined in terms of all three. (32)

For example, there are folksongs that are variously categorisable as festive, ceremonial, and work songs, according to the situation, company, time and place in which they evolved. These can be further categorised between morning and evening songs, male and female songs: “A change in context can apparently effect a change in texture (e.g., a female narrator or audience may cause the substitution of a euphemism for a taboo word)” (Dundes *Interpreting Folklore* 32). Any study of folklore requires a conceptual framework competent to analyse the text or the symbols used through situation and time, the structure of the language, the behaviour of the text and its speaker, and most importantly the overall culture that coordinates everything.

The first thing to consider is that folklore is itself a kind of language. By language, I mean to articulate the way in which folklore is a medium for communicating aspects of people’s experiences that includes their emotions, values and perceptions of reality. Even more fundamentally, it provides a structure for understanding common experiences of crisis and radical change. In such contexts, it provides threads of oral connection for people who might share any kind of commonality, whether based upon geographical location, age, tribe or tongue, sustaining and generating knowledge. This knowledge has been prevalent in its society for a long time, originating in oral transmission and

sometimes finding performative expression in ritual. It only later translates to literature, or other written forms, if at all. Once oral knowledge becomes writing, however, it not only becomes a literary phenomenon but also opens up points of continuity and contrast with other collective traditions and becomes an integral part of a society's cultural heritage.

Benjamin argues that folklore and novels are two distinct forms of storytelling but should both be recognised as modes of fiction. Folklore can be used as raw material for the novel; however, the novel simply does not take from folklore, it also has the flexibility and liberty of contributing to and enriching it further through creativity. By adding new layers and perspectives of meaning and depth, the novel expands the folkloric tradition with new ideas, simultaneously preserving and promoting folklore. Folklore which is shaped by culture and experience continuously evolves and changes through its retellings. Benjamin suggests that folklore and the novel are a larger part of the storytelling tradition; folklore provides rich and complex stories and characters to the novel. There are paradoxes attendant upon this. In one sense, he identifies the figure of the novelist as antithetical to the figure of the storyteller:

The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that recorded by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of others who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounselled, and cannot counsel others. (87)

At the same time, he claims that the novel should not be read as a threat to folklore; rather, they face a common threat:

[I]n fully developed capitalism, there emerges a form of communication which, no matter how far back its origin may lie, never before influenced the epic form in a

decisive way. But now it does exert such an influence. And it turns out that it confronts storytelling as no less of a stranger than did the novel, but in a more menacing way and that it also brings about a crisis in the novel. This new form of communication is information. (88)

If Benjamin affects despair in the face of the tyranny of information, it must be argued that both storytelling and novel-writing can still be significant tools or media to preserve and promote tradition and creativity. Benjamin reads Nikolai Leskov's writings which incorporate multiple features of folklore and folk narratology, drawing complex characters, fashioning vivid descriptions and fostering "liberating magic" (101). Benjamin's pessimism about the possibilities of fiction-making in the twentieth century can be countered by reference to the work of Toni Morrison, who evolved techniques and patterns that conjoined the work of the storyteller and the novelist. Even as she was (rightly) praised for her achievements in the form of the novel, she also signalled the intimate relationship of her work to that of other storytellers and storytelling traditions, the unauthorised voices to which she paradoxically owed her own literary authority. She was not writing as a "solitary individual (87)."

The aim of storytelling is not just entertainment but also serves as a medium for people to express their feelings. It can be read as an agent of healing, as it connects the narrator with the victims of trauma and successive generations to share the burden of historical memory. Morrison took this path to inform people about African American history and to cure and provide relief to those still suffering its consequences. This method works as a kind of healing due to its fostering of connectivity between the narrator and the roots of the group of people who suffered. It is not only stories but also myths, proverbs, and songs used to carry the essence of the oral tradition; as a novelist, Morrison is able to pick up the threads of these materials and offer them back to the

communal memory of folklore. The vernacular language inherited by the enslaved people also plays a remarkable role and is another thing for Morrison to restore. To connect and understand cultural and social identity in the present, revisiting ancestral cultural history is essential. A similar concept can be seen in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), where he defines how African American identity was formed by merging old with new cultural identities (10). Folklore is conserved, but it is not necessarily conservative. Multiple textualities and intertextualities come into co-existence. Oral, ritual and writerly expressions discover a potential for the discovery of new imaginative possibilities even as this preserves a sense of cultural inheritance and acknowledges responsibility for that inheritance.

3. Common Authority, Common Responsibility

As has been seen, the oral knowledge that resides in folklore is the property of the community, and so the communication of folklore is an expression of community rather than selfhood. Anonymity is the earmark of indigenous knowledge and with no claims to paternity or maternity of myths, legends and songs, authority over them is shared by the entire community. The collective traditional knowledge of the community is also a shared responsibility. As the oral transmission of folklore from generations to generations is re-created by repetitive recitations and a consequent diffusion of themes, this also represents the renewed dissemination of ideas and values affirming communal aesthetic and ethical standards. These expressions represent both a conscious and unconscious collectivity.

If folklore has a distinctive communal voice according to the language, values and traditions of a respective community, this becomes potentially universal once it is put into circulation, and an understanding also evolves of how one community's folklore might resemble another. Folklore therefore embodies an intrinsically various dimension of

culture; it is present in different forms of communication, whether verbal, customary or material and allows individuals to enter into creative communion.

There is no apparent room for the literary concept of “the author” in such a context. The collective emphasis of folklore is such that it overrides the idea of there being a single creative intelligence that can claim to preside over reality. Viewing Toni Morrison through the lens of folklore, she appears entirely in terms of her responsibility to her community, and to the collective consciousness and imagination of that community. If the writer plays with archetypal figures and structures familiar from folklore, such as tricksters or fables, this conjuring is part of the way in which communities desire the evolution of their lore over time, not least as a response to circumstances:

The writers, [Maxine Hong Kingston, Louise Erdrich, and Toni Morrison], celebrate myth and folklore as a vital, dynamic, culturally renewing force. Tricksters, who combine tradition and change, make ideal agents for a politically engaged, visionary art. Central to the non-western storytelling traditions on which these writers draw, the androgynous trickster is infinitely changeable, ancient, and yet perpetually new. (Smith J. xiii)

This is folklore’s radical job, adapting to new events, challenges and horrors even as its core content remains familiar. In this way, however, Morrison also requires reconsideration as not only someone who writes about tricksters, but rather someone who is herself a trickster-artist. She is not a writer of literature but a mediator and interpreter of folklore: “Trickster is the mythic embodiment of ambiguity and ambivalence, doubleness and duplicity, contradiction and paradox” (Hyde 7). Further to that, she is also a part of folklore. Celebrating her individual genius for its use of folkloric material is beside the point, and only emulates the language of exploitation which African American folklore so determinedly resists. Morrison is part of the living body of that folklore. Lewis

Hyde *Trickster Makes This World* (2017) argues the myth of trickster provides the means for a culture to query its reality: “[T]hat the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on” (9). Furthermore, he adds:

[Trickster] knows how to slip through pores, and how to block them; he confuses polarity by doubling back and reversing himself; he covers his tracks and twists their meanings; and he is polytropic, changing his skin or shifting his shape as the situation requires. (62)

Similar to the traits of a trickster, Morrison challenged and critiqued societal norms and power structures through her dynamic characters who are presented with hidden depths and complexity. Not only in her writings but also in her interviews she uses irony and satire to address and subvert prevailing ideas on race and gender. She uncovers and disrupts.

4. Fantasy and Reality

However alien it might appear to the experience of folklore in its rough and readiest forms, using the language of psychoanalysis to analyse relationships between the literal and the metaphorical in folklore certainly helps to decode the unconscious content of folk knowledge, if you want to decode it. To provide a simple example, the racist semiotics of colour were transplanted from Europe to the Americas and elsewhere, signifying white as good and black as evil, an evident projection to counter the anxiety that the semiotic attributions should be the other way around. To counter such racist coding, conscious folklore was developed around the phrase ‘black is beautiful’. In her article, Morrison shares:

It was precisely in that spirit of reacting to white values that later, when Civil Rights became Black Power, we came up with the slogan “Black Is Beautiful” —

an accurate but wholly irrelevant observation if ever there was one...the slogan provided a psychic crutch for the needy and a second (or first) glance from whites. ('It Is like Growing Up Black One More Time')

This projection resisted the oppressive language of colour as an indicator of sin and the vicious history attached to that assertion. In turn, this allowed both individuals and communities a pathway from vicious reality to an empowering fantasy which allowed for the 'righting' of that reality. Slavoj Žižek (2008) argues that fantasy is ideological fantasy, an illusion shaped by the ideals and desires that individuals hold in reality. In turn, their experiences of reality are shaped by the ideological fantasy ('The Seven Veils of Fantasy' 7). Such ideological fantasies are not illusions, however, they are the way people are able to experience reality in the first place. This principle radically challenges any suggestion that folkloric tales exist at a tangent to reality. It reminds us that the 'real' horror faced by people in folklore corresponds directly to the horror of their physical experience of the world. Folklore in this context cannot be reduced to an aggregation of fantasy scenarios that provide signs of solidarity or idealised co-operation. Instead, folklore is hard-bitten and authorised by brutal realities. Through fantasies such as 'All God's Chillen Had Wings' (Gates and McKay 103) or stories of 'reincarnation' the enslaved and indentured workers were able to find actual relief from their imprisonment, rather than just metaphysical consolation. They could "really" experience some kind of credible satisfaction and hope, rather than merely wish for it. They merged, integrated and reassembled their relationships in the world of their 'real' and 'fantasy' self. Therefore, only the fantasy, which was created due to the experience of reality, contained the potential to reconstitute the wrongdoings that shaped their identity.

It is impossible to discover decisively the root (or point of origin) of folklore, and it is tempting to see it as only evidence of intangibility and at most the expression of an

unconscious collective imagination. Such a Jungian reading argues that anxieties, fears, desires and many other expressions which are difficult to articulate conventionally took the shape of folklore to find expression and functioned as an escape mechanism (particularly for the enslaved people):

[T]herefore turn to folklore, where we need not get involved in the grim confrontations and entanglements of individual case histories and can observe the variations of the spirit motif without having to consider conditions that are more or less unique. (Jung 400)

On the other hand, a Freudian insistence on the primary significance of folklore to the individual subconscious makes it difficult to decipher the meaning of each folk myth without defaulting to psychosexual decoding of the tale or song:

[W]ith the extensive employment of symbolism for the representation of sexual material in dreams [...] it should be noted that symbolism does not appertain especially to dreams, but rather to the unconscious imagination, and particularly to that of the people, and it is to be found in a more developed condition in folklore, myths, legends, idiomatic phrases, proverbs, and the current witticisms of a people than in dreams. (Freud 114)

Of course, this facilitates a confident reading in one sense. Symbols may carry multiple meanings through the work of communicating tradition; as such, the meaning is not only present in written language, but also in non-verbal culture. These symbols are remembered and repeated in each re-creation (or new version) of folklore. Identifying unconscious internal impulses within aspects of folklore allows scholars to unearth semiotic implications out of the communal environment and individuals' own knowledge of the culture. On the other hand, this is open to the criticism that it privileges a European intellectual construct to 'Whitesplain' another culture. Such an 'explanation' risks the

erasure of difference and closes the door to more complicated and subtle contextualisation of how folklore might work.

5. Literature, but Different

In all of this, the key thing to understand and the process is the phenomenon of difference, even as things might apparently resemble one another. Vladimir Propp's aforementioned *Morphology of Folktale* (1958) suggests that folklore is not the same as fiction, even if folklore and literature are close to each other:

To avoid the error of equating folklore with literature, we must ascertain not only *how literature and folklore are alike*, related, and to a certain extent identical in nature, but also *how they differ*. Indeed, folklore possesses a number of features so sharply differentiating it from literature that methods of literary research are insufficient for solving all its problems. (6)

His anthropological study suggests that folklore is the 'verbal art' that is a part of the whole culture, created and transmitted orally in such forms as myths, legends or stories. Art, dance, belief and music are set aside. In an ethnographic study, however, both the verbal and non-verbal parts are considered equally important phenomena of folklore, which is the term coined to indicate certain behaviours to which different communities (consisting of 'folk') apply their set of rules and attitudes (10).

If folklore has a complex performative life when looked at ethnographically, this demonstrates the possible danger of looking at it from a literary perspective, should the coordinates of that perspective be too narrow? A written text (literature) represents fixity and inscription, whereas oral narratives (proverbs, myths) are regenerated through a new configuration of performance (Ahlström 71). Paradoxically, this resembles the way in which writing has to renew itself through further rewritings and interpretations. The interdependence of folklore and writing is what Bascom describes as a 'literary

adaptation' in his essay 'Verbal Art' (247). Through literature, the oral knowledge of the people is transplanted and remodelled conceptually (often with irony), crossing boundaries between traditions, nations and ethnicities. Culture preserves the imaginative or real historical record by narrating, commenting, re-creating, and challenging received wisdom and logic. Literature enables the mediation and reception of folklore by applying the theories of human communication, cultural evolution and *mimesis*. Effective translations of folklore into literature should mean that the wildlife and history of the tale itself should be retained or renewed. In other words, it should remain folklore, despite the apparent literary context.

A comparative study of folklore and literature will review folk culture with new perspectives, reinterpretation and narrative devices. The variations and complexities that folklore manifests through its transnational journeys across different geographical, historical, social and political boundaries simultaneously allow for interdisciplinary and transcultural study. It combines and explores the relationship between oral traditions and literary texts, the trans-local and transnational, past and present and future. By cutting through national boundaries and comparing two or more similar or dissimilar forms or trends, literary forms of different national traditions no longer exist in isolation. Yet even as commonality is sought after, each culture's work is simultaneously recognised as a separate entity, and different styles and movements also play an important role. The ability of a comparative study to cross the border of language and culture creates a universal structure of oneness but must also resist homogeneity. Each folklore is an embodiment of the real world and has a unique tradition and culture; in comparing folklores, you are comparing singularities, even as you find continuities.

6. Who Owns Folklore?

The term 'folklore' initially originated in Europe during the nineteenth century and was applied to a 'culturally' homogenous group of peasants. Antiquarians in England and philologists in Germany paved the way in this field with the emergence of figures such as the Grimm brothers (Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm), who turned the oral narratives of folk tradition into popular literature (Ben-Amos 4). This interest in 'folk' was developed as a sign of the prerogative power of elite classes to define their 'other' rather than out of intellectual curiosity. Meanwhile, in America, for African Americans, folklore was a vital means of perpetuating a sense of identity and potential community despite the depredations of slavery. The attributes of anonymity, communality and universality, primacy and oral circulation of folklore were all in evidence (Ben-Amos 6). The sharing of knowledge through word of mouth from distinct African communities and local traditions produced a unique tradition of folk-ness. The Europeans who were beginning the work of defining folklore tended to think about 'folk' in European terms. The concept of folk and folklore did not apparently extend to the experience of African Americans, who were struggling in the nineteenth century to be regarded as people, never mind being recognised as a community. Yet from the very onset of the horrific displacements and brutalisation of slavery, their folklore has emerged as a response to the living nightmare of the reality white Europeans imposed upon them. They destroyed African homes and villages and then scattered their inhabitants across the America according to the peculiar viciousness of market forces. Out of this, Africans from disparate parts of their home continent had to discover and improvise strands of community among themselves through the recognition of common stories and common experiences. In turn, new tales and new lore necessarily emerged, as did a new form of "folk":

The black Africans (*sic*) who survived the dreaded “Middle Passage” from the West coast of Africa to the New World did not sail alone [...] these Africans nevertheless carried [...] aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated, and that they chose, by acts of will, not to forget: their music, their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order, and their forms of performance. (Gates *The Signifying Monkey* 4)

If the institution of slavery had sought to wipe clean their memories of their previous cultural heritage, folklore played a vital role in educating both the literate and non-literate enslaved by validating both sacred and secular established beliefs, customs and traditions. In addition, folklore served as a psychological defence against all the repressions imposed upon them. Over time, the relationship of the values and beliefs of the community to an individual shaped by folklore might be temporarily forgotten or changed; however, these still remain implicit in one another. Don Ben Amos stated in his book: “folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought or a kind of art” (5). It has never been unequivocally defined and has multiple meanings by its scope and range relating to aesthetic processes and non-artistic phenomena. These meanings proliferate as further retellings and ritualization are generated over time.

Along with all the forms of folklore, the study of the customs and traditions of people and their culture is termed cultural anthropology or ethnography (Darnell), recording the ways of life of people from a particular community describing the conditions of their kinship, techniques or ways of living, their aspects of religion, social structure and institution of the family. The connective cultural power of folklore also bridges literate and non-literate groups. The reflexive process explores, disentangles and uncovers the structural and interactive aesthetic of the social settings to achieve a properly complex and detailed knowledge of interrelating but disparate accounts and events.

There is no clear evidence where Morrison claims her work should be read as a form of ethnography. She mentions that her aim is not simply to recreate the past through her writings but terms that as “research”. She claims: “It is not an effort to find out the way it really was- that is research. The point is to dwell on the way [things] appeared, why [they] appeared in that particular way” (‘Memory, Creation, and Writing’ 385). Therefore, she works on the ‘memory’ as a ‘willed creation’ and speaks for ‘her’ people; in this, she obviates the distance between a writer and the audience and expresses distrust for conventional paradigms of literature and society. Morrison defines her work and the impact on the lives of African Americans, whom she calls ‘her people’. She demands in one of her interviews to be distinguished as a ‘black female writer’ (*Home* | Toni Morrison | Talks at Google 00:43:41). There is vital communal activity in all her novels, such as in *Beloved* (1987), where Baby Suggs preaches to a group at the Clearing, and when this same community helps Sethe make peace with her re-memory. Another example of an empowering community can be seen in *Home* (2012), where Cee and other women come together and weave a quilt. Later, this quilt is used to bury the remains of the murdered man, which reminds Frank of the violence and bloodshed he witnessed in his childhood. Furthermore, Morrison signals how this communal knowledge has been dismissed under the terms ‘lore and gossip’ by the same dominant culture of white hegemony. In addition, this tradition of group and community values is upheld in the survival of an individual and in finding an ancestor in the creation of folklore.

7. Comparativity and Possibility

Clifford Geertz in his essay ‘Interpretations of Culture’ (1973) talks about analysing culture as “not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning” (5). I contend that the study of one culture’s folklore implies the possibility

of looking at that of another and that the search for meaning should have no boundaries. Such comparative research investigates the complexity of differences and continuities between two communities with an apt sense of ambiguity, recognising differences even as folklore allows for a continuity of conceptual framing. To explore this, I analyse the folkloric impact of narratives and other forms of expression produced by indentured workers of the Assam Tea Plantations in mid-nineteenth century India and then read that alongside the folklore which emerged out of the cotton plantations of the American South at the same time and after. I read these narratives within the context of the words, ideas and lived experiences of the people who communicated them, as well as the places where they lived. This shows how folklore helped them to make sense of their world, providing them with a language and symbolic order, even as they suffered grievously in terms of their material circumstances. Folklore (and its subsequent translation from orality into literature) provides a framework for comparison and understanding survival. If Toni Morrison's work shows one range of possibilities for folkloric transmission, the relatively unexplored and unknown folklore of Assam presents different challenges in terms of achieving an audience, whether local or global, yet each phenomenon is related and relatable under the sign of folklore's restless pursuit of Benjamin 's "liberating magic"(101).

In *Primitive Culture* (1865), Edward Burnett Tylor defined culture as "[T]hat complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (2). He argued that culture is a matter of social learning, being merely significant of how material is transmitted from one generation to another. In his reading, folklore acts as a device of transmission with validation of all the major institutions that constitute an entity called culture. These institutions are religious, social, political and economic; the aesthetic expressions of

culture reflect them interrelatedly. An ethnographic approach further captures the native's account of social phenomena by analysing a range of behaviours shaped by specific social situations. Examining such local meanings aims to communicate the worldview of an inhabitant by studying how the behaviour shaped by a situation intersects with beliefs and values. As Tylor formed his theoretical positions, based on European assumptions about authority and social hierarchy, workers and families in both Assam and Mississippi were forming counter-narratives that emerged necessarily as responses to the depredations Tylor's civilisation had visited upon them. Tylor's association of culture is limited and synonymous with the progression of human civilisation from primitive to civilised, which is universal; however, each community, society, region, and nation have their own unique culture. Furthermore, he dismissed the significance of mythologies, rhymes and stories, stating them illogical and unintelligible and considered them as elements that continue in later stages as 'survivals'. According to Tylor, survivals are:

[L]andmarks in the course of culture [...] On the strength of these survivals, it becomes possible to declare that the civilisation of the people they are observed among must have been derived from an earlier state, in which the proper home and meaning of these things are to be found; and thus collections of such facts are to be worked as mines of historic knowledge. (71)

Tylor expressed that folk elements served a purpose in the past life and have lost their meaning even if they are practiced today. However, connecting the survivors with their lost meaning is crucial to understand the real nature and culture of the primitive mind. For example, primitive minds did not have a categorisation or classification of trees, flowers, mountains, water bodies or rocks. Their counting was limited to the number of fingers and toes, and they were unable to think abstractly; thus, they were immersed in the possibility of singular objects. They defined all natural occurrences such as flood, thunder or rain

based on the emotions of the spirits, God or any other supernatural power as they lack the power to reason. Moreover, in the modern times, Zora Neale Hurston's work acts as a standpoint to know the world of the enslaved and its social relations: "Specifically, they challenged participant-observation – the practice of living among, observing, and recording a studied culture and its member informants – and the resulting text, ethnography" (Jirousek 19). Her study was not based on objective observation, which means observation made from the peripheral distance of a community; rather, she studied the culture by living among them as a participant and gaining experience. Through cultural performances and appropriations, she revitalised the call and response, beliefs in spirits and tricksterism strategies to understand the significance and creation of a community's culture under diverse circumstances. Its meaning is in turn, amplified through cross-reference to the folklore that has been verbally transmitted over generations; at each step, it goes through the process of diffusion, invention, acceptance/rejection and integration. Through reference to the anonymous narratives from Assam, the folk from there can get to know Hurston's people, as do we through exploring the comparison.

Folklore keeps renewing itself, adapting by modifying, if needed, according to the needs of new social contexts or pre-existing cultural patterns. However, these pre-existing cultural patterns can also be modified in accordance to conform to the newly invented folklore; a performer is expected to show creativity. Similarly, a narrator may be expected to modify any well-known tale, song, myth or legend. The spreading of folklore from one community to another, from generations to generations with each subsequent modification and simultaneously crossing the question of acceptance and rejection, is known as integration. Yet this integration does not eliminate differences; rather, it understands them and reflects them.

8. Signs, Society and Structure: Difference and Differentiations

Folklore is a unified expressive medium that acknowledges the heterogeneity and interrelationship of social life; language shows how that folklore interacts with social, cultural and historical reality. It is structurally complex, if familiar. Interpretation maintains transformability, multiplicity and differentiation and suggests the capacity of folklore to transcend contextual realms of geographical, ethnic and linguistic grouping, even as it connects to them. Folklore is the deepest layer of collective memory and is also a form of spiritual union, prompting yet more interpretations, even ones which appear as contradictory dualities.

The existence of oral and written folklore in a language is primarily definable in terms of the structuralist linguistic division of *langue* and *parole*. It exists as speech only at the time of performance, while the rest of it is a set of norms and stimuli collected from a living tradition. Secondly, a shift from diachronic to synchronic occurs, whereby emphasis through transmission over generations shifts from the historical to the contemporary. Lévi-Strauss talks about folk myth as a layered structure that allows us to look upon it as a matrix of meanings, arranged in lines and columns, but in which each level always refers to some other level, whichever way the myth is read (188, 189). Their ultimate meaning lies in the mind that generates them and in the image of the world perceived by that mind.

The semiotic possibilities of folklore were addressed by Alan Dundes in *Interpreting Folklore* (1980) with the opening phrase ‘folklore *means* something’(33). This sentence obviously indicates that one might find meaning in folklore through a reading of it, that any folklore (myths, tales, songs) has a certain meaning or purpose, but Dundes develops the point by arguing that such meaning is always contextualised within social historical basis of a particular people, or folk. Dundes brings semiotics into the reading of folklore to show symbols as central to the projective expression of the folk.

Critically, however, this idea is not just limited to interpretations but broadened emphatically by adopting Vladimir Propp's influential method of structural analysis. In this, the thorough reading of the opening and closing poles of a folk myth/tale/song contains the context of the narration and adds another layer to the text to study with its texture (thought) by bringing along the concept of the situation into focus. In this, the study of folklore requires a conceptual connection to analyse the text and/or symbols within a plurality of other contexts, such as the specifics of time and place, the structure of the language, and modalities of the text and speaker as well. All these elements amount necessarily to what makes culture, contrary to what Tylor argued, and the ethnic identity constructed through folklore confirms the social existence of a community. In the context of Assam, we see the folksongs, which are later known as *jhumur* songs, sung during the harvesting festival with dance and merriment. However, they carry the theme of resistance and raise the question about oppression which exists in the daily lives of tea garden labourers and narrate the story of the life forgotten.

For example, here follows an excerpt from the song "*Ranchi Che Bhejali Coolie*" ("From Ranchi, was sent the Coolie"):

Rachi che bhejal coolie

From Ranchi, was sent the coolie,

Dedalai kalam churi Dale,

And handed pen knives,

Dale Babu Nazara bhaithaise,

The babu places a gaze,

laxe laxe laxe re Dale

Slowly and slowly,

Kur mara chalak chuluk

On every tree, on every branch,

Dale Babu Nazara bhathaise

The Babu places a gaze. (Kali Dasgupta; translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

Through this verse, one can understand and imagine the situation, time and place clearly through words such as *kuli* (coolie), *kalam churi* (pen shape knives), *babu nazara* (Babu's gaze), *kur mara chalak chuluk* (on every tree, on every branch).⁹ The words denote how the labourers (referred to as *coolies*) were under the continuous surveillance of the *Babu* (master). The *Babu* has an eye on every branch of the tealeaves to ensure the labourers are not destroying the tealeaves by careless handling. The labourers are given *kalam churi* to carefully prune the leaves and buds without destroying the rest of the plant. More to that, the *babu* was with a stern gaze to ensure the working of the labourers and that they did not take a break for rest.

Similarly, the African folk song "Sinking of the *Titanic*" narrates the story of Shine, an African enslaved person, who chose a way to live by jumping into the sea instead of listening to the commands of his Captain:

It was 1912 when the awful news got around
That the great Titanic was sinking down.
Shine came running up on deck, told the Captain. "Please,
The Water in the boiler room is up to my knees."

Captain said, "Take your black self on back down there!
I got a hundred-fifty pumps to keep the boiler room clear."

.....

⁹ Pen knives are the pen shaped knives used to pluck the tealeaves and bud carefully.

The old Titanic was beginning to sink.

Shine pulled off his clothes and jumped in the brink.

He said, "Little fish, big fish, and shark fishes, too,

Get out of my way because I'm coming through."

Captain on bridge hollered, "Shine, Shine, save poor me,

And I'm make you as rich as any man can be."

Shine said, "There's more gold on land than there is on sea."

And he swam on.

Big fat baker begging, "Sine, Shine, save poor me!

I'll give you a thousand shares of T and T."

Shine said, "More stocks on land than there is on sea."

And he swam on.

When all them white folks went to heaven,

Shine was in Sugar Ray's Bar drinking Seagrams Seven. (qtd. in Gates 39-40)

Shine jumps off the sinking Titanic to save his life and swims back to land. His escape is honoured as flying, the power he exercises to save his life. Interestingly, as a captive, this is the only power he has! Nevertheless, the white man interferes with even this agency of Shine. He does not want to be drowned along with other white people. Shine, who is also a good swimmer, must save his life as he is an enslaved who must follow orders and think of his master's welfare before his own. Shine mocks white people who own all the luxury but cannot save their own lives to enjoy them, whereas Shine owns the ultimate luxury-

the life which he saves: “When all them white folks went to heaven, Shine was in Sugar Ray’s Bar drinking Seagrams Seven” (Gates & McKay 40).

The belief systems of society are dynamic, integrated and central constituents of culture, especially where the oral narrative is a medium of alleviating anxiety about external aggression through imagination and creativity. Such a narrative is neither static, isolated, nor peripheral. It is not a dictated text but rather expresses an explanation of the world and teaches how to struggle and survive within it. An implication of the function of structuralism was given by Claude Lévi-Strauss’ use of the term ‘paradigmatic’ to signify when variously different meanings can be substituted by a symbol within diverse cultures and cultural traditions (qtd. in Dundes 40). Such substitutions are critical in the African American context, as African Americanness is a largely homogenous category that, in turn, requires adaptable methodologies and theories to study the diverse groups or folks that might coexist under that broader term. Diverse African folklore that, one way or another translated to the Americas can be compared productively, both to indicate likeness (in structure, for example) and difference (in the situation). For instance, Jazz is the improvised and documented version of late nineteenth-century Blues that originated on the plantation from the call-and-response tactics adopted by the field shouts and hollers. There is a likeness in the structure of Blues and Jazz, the main difference between them is that the latter uses a greater diversity of musical instruments while the former was sung on the tunes of a banjo or a guitar and is structured more around lyrics.

Difference is potentially an instrument of both power and enfeeblement. White Europeans defined the enslaved as ‘other’ as a means of dehumanising them and removing them from history, a justification for the continued oppression of a group of people that were considered an uncivilised group in a civilised society, “illiterate in a literate society” (Dundes 4). African cultural heritage necessarily serves as a foundation of African

American folklore, and the extensive presence of black vernacular creativity in America is consequently indebted to an African past.¹⁰ This is what makes African Americans different from other Americans, “other” in a more proactive and projective sense. The retention or reclamation of the African past played a significant role in positively defining the position and character of the African enslaved in American society. African Americans can trace their folklore back to their ancestral societies in Africa, from where they were abducted and to a time and place where they were not the enslaved. In tracing their folklore, they can trace themselves. In helping to understand what they had lost, there was at least also a promise of what they might regain. Ancestral tradition also helped to affirm a sense of themselves as one folk who shared diverse African histories.

This project also recognises the significance of gender differentiation in the folk discourse of African American identity, reflecting the diverse origins and practices of the African American population. The specific vernacular creativity of African America has its roots in diverse African cultures, and those creative traditions that were influenced historically by economic, political and social conditions. There is also a gendered discourse present in African American culture, where female traditions struggle to be recognised, and female identity is denied sufficient expression.

Folklore is always to some degree political. It witnesses the fate of the community that it emerged from, and sometimes it is the only survivor of the devastation that has been visited upon such a community by hostile external forces. Translocation and slavery devastated tribal societies in Africa, so the remaining strands of their folklores were the

¹⁰ There are many African cultures, and African American culture can draw on them all: “[W]e are able to approach African American vernacular creativity as a affiliative process of creativity which has its roots in diverse African cultures [...] African American vernacular creativity as a culturally specific process intimately related to processes of identity and institution formation and maintenance peculiar to African people in the United States” (Roberts 163).

bare means by which the African American community (and communities) could begin the work of realising themselves. This was work for both men and women to do.

Despite African American folklore being dominated by male figures, it is often women who act as carriers of tradition, educating the community and stressing connection to African cultural roots. Thus, both the male and female traditions together perform a form of dialogue under the construction of gender and gender relations. The cultural traditions are majorly performed by the male members of the community while the females are minimised and limited to household chores and quilting (Roberts 158). Their creativity and performance have been reduced completely in folk traditions. However, in both African American and Assam Literature, women revisit history through the medium of folklore. They take on the role of ancestor and preserver of traditions, stressing the values of the community. A similar relation can be seen in the anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993); she argues that females are more connected and associated with the social boundaries of a community than the male members who are mostly involved in migrant labour or other identities related to travel.¹¹ Women represent the idea of conserving a sense of home and domestic spaces that allow them to preserve the ethnicity of the community (249). Tsing reflects on gender differentiation even in the responses to the political aspects of Meratus culture. The leaders of Meratus culture are mainly males and the females are considered or regarded as disadvantaged political actors. However, there are also some ambitious women who take up roles equivalent to the status of any man in the community, for example, in acting as a shaman. The womenfolk of the culture destabilise the asymmetries and constraints present in a community (8). Tsing elaborates this by relating the example of a female shaman,

¹¹*In the Realm of a Diamond Queen* is an ethnography studying the complexities of a culture provides an opportunity to revisit and re-evaluate the notions of culture, tradition, rituals, gender and power. The book studies Meratus Dayaks, a marginal and marginalised group in the deep rainforest of South Kalimantan, Indonesia.

Induan Hiling, showing that females carry textual knowledge and can move beyond the constraints of gender while male shamans are cast as performers. In a comparable way, Morrison in her position as an author plays a textual-shamanistic role where “she surveys traditional knowledge- confirming, challenging, and transforming it with her creative skill” (Tsing 252).

9. African American Making

African American folklore began with creative cultural production in Africa, and it then evolved in the Americas as a necessary response to slavery and its consequent horrors. Folklore has always performed such adaptations in the face of the physical destruction of communities and the struggle of survivors to exist in the aftermath:

Resisting attempts to dispossess them of their spiritual and cultural identities and traditional ways of life, notwithstanding their removal from the geopolitical homelands on the continent of Africa, African people continued to attach importance to communal values, family, and land, members of fictive kin, ancestors, and neighborhood as the foundation for community. (Selassie 8)

Morrison’s works bear witness to this survival and also state the values of the victimised community against those of the external forces that sought its destruction. New enemies require renewed stories and modalities of tale-telling. In this way, the folkloric fiction of Toni Morrison acts artistically, historically and politically as the voice of the devastated village, identifying the necessary things and knowledge that might enable a degree of recovery or nourishment. This folk knowledge exhibits its power to communicate social and cultural identities that slavery obscured and generates a renewed possibility for a vast pearl of interconnected wisdom to be realised. Amiri Baraka explains: “The first born of these [enslaved] Africans in America knew about Africa only through the stories, tales, riddles, and songs of their older relatives” (12). These expressions can be traced back to

traditional religious practices followed by diverse African peoples, reminding us that cultural manifestations also embody belief. Storytelling and folksongs are the primary means of discovery for the decision to explore the history, the absorption of the heritage, and interpretation of the pasts used in the present. As explored at the conclusion of this thesis with a comparative reading of the adaptation of folklore from Assam and the American South, this takes place in disparate locations in history with comparable force and effect.

Prior to that, particular attention is given to how Toni Morrison perpetuates the responsive and adaptive work of the folklore that sustained her community in dark times. Her novels are genuinely ‘novel’, in that they do not exhibit conformity to generic rules and limitations; in this, they show the gritty adaptive quality of the folkloric. Rather than synthesising folkloric material into smooth fiction, Morrison retains the necessary roughness and unpredictability of texture that comes with the infinite telling and re-telling of tales. Her novels retain this quality of oral tales and as such, always suggest the necessity of community, even as she creates distinctive characters and powerful personal voices. Her individuals always have to be understood in terms of community. She poses the abiding question of how black Americans have to realise their unique and particular identity to achieve a real and sustaining understanding of their dignity and image. This work takes place within another limiting context, that of Western discourse within which blackness and black is perversely identified as ‘blank’, or a figure of absence. This can be seen in work such as Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen* (2014) where she mentions numerous episodes of black invisibility, such as an episode where the protagonist narrates an incident in her classroom during an exam, where a white girl cheats by looking at the narrator’s work. The question posed is whether the teacher was okay with cheating, or if the girl was totally invisible to her. Another incident is recalled, where the white friend of the

protagonist was unconsciously or consciously racist by calling her by the name of her black housekeeper. For the friend, both the housekeeper and friend looked alike, their respective names made no difference. The protagonist and the housekeeper's uniqueness of face and difference in personalities were rendered invisible by bias. Whatever progress might be apparent in post-racial America, that blankness and blindness remains present.

Toni Morrison's writings revolve around African Americans and their often precarious communities, drawing deeply from traditions of folklore and oral traditional arts. Trudier Harris remarks:

Morrison replicates the dynamic of folk communities by showing how people interact with each other to shape tales, legends, rumors, and folk beliefs. Instead of simply including isolated items of folklore, she manages to stimulate the ethos of folk communities, to saturate her novels with a folk aura intrinsic to the texturing of the whole. (11)

Morrison traced the origin and evolution of racial difference in America and, through her writings, re-created and re-motivated African culture by demystifying and denouncing the unjust hegemony of whiteness in American culture. Harris traces this tradition of writing in the works of Charles Waddell Chestnutt who draws the structure of superstitions and folk practices, and further the 'tale-telling sessions' from Joel Chandler Harris, which expands further to framed tales of Mark Twain (3). Trudier Harris also mentions Zora Neal Hurston and Ralph Ellison as models of how to write incorporating black folk traditions, metaphors and speech, signifying the conceptualisation of folklore in fiction (6). Their work prepares the readers for "Morrison's extensive adaptations of a variety of folkloristic genres" (7); where Ellison leaves off, Morrison begins her writing tradition. Her novels amalgamate into a complex of remembrance of African culture within the cultural dynamics of America, encompassing slavery, oppression, racism, and other forms

of social inequality. The forced migration of Africans to the New World generated a strange and violent borderland, where a diversity of cultures sought communication and exchange, despite the way in which slavery and white culture sought to obliterate them. Africans in America came from diverse places and still had racial, social, and economic differences to express. African American narratives (both oral and written) became a method of addressing the shifting consciousness and cultural affirmation constituted by the psychosocial transition. Folklore was critical in helping to formulate an aesthetic. Her historical fictions transcend the limitations of previous accounts of the realities of slavery, such as the enslaved narratives.

Previously unacknowledged people from history are selected by Morrison to revitalise the traumatised past. She populates the imagination with people who are otherwise forgotten. In the same way, Morrison seeks to alter the fundamental perception of canonical American literature, which has tended to contain African American characters within white American framings. She queries the dominant cult of American whiteness, and as such indicates its precarity. Against it, she shows how African Americans maintained a culture of solidarity from past to present, and asks for this to become the understanding central to the necessary re-doing of the elements of the past which still require narration. History haunts America, and Americans have to be brave enough to see their ghosts. Morrison shows how African Americans understand this necessary labour, and that only recognition of an insufficiently acknowledged past will bring about any kind of peace. Taken together, their tribal histories form an intellectually and emotionally powerful canon, one capable of resisting the misconstructions of white America's faulty memory. A powerful and nurturing African American model of society helps in building renewed manifestations of self. Responding to folk tradition restores connection to the past and recasts the understanding of the present. The African American

subject enjoys continuous and ever-developing motion. Denied history in the past, the restoration of it to the present generates a plurality of possibilities.

Morrison presents a dialogue between the idea of identity as an essence and that of identity as a construction, merging the personal and the political. Her fictions demonstrate the ideological power of language, reflecting upon how whiteness denied speech to the African enslaved. They then adapted a vernacular adequate to their reality, but it was hard work, and took place over generations. Morrison gives a voice to the silenced, but also indicates the anxiety and excitement that the growth of a voice and a language generates. The categorisation of the 'enslaved' dehumanises and silences. To resist it, you must evolve a language. This restores memory and identity, because then you can tell the story of your past according to your own truth. In Morrison's fictions, the past is always different to what the voice of white authority stipulated. Above all, she stresses the necessity of critical thinking in the face of hegemony; it is not an accident that one of the most heinous and truly villainous characters in her fiction is simply called "schoolteacher".

Morrison's protagonists are often taking on quests, and her female characters do this with special force, seeking acknowledgement in history. The central element of the female quest relies on realising and incorporating the personal and historical narratives of others, and this understanding plays a significant role in the construction of contemporary identity. For example, Pilate in *Song of Solomon* (1977) is an outcast, but also a treasure of ancestral knowledge. The use of African modes of orature builds the gap between the black community's folk roots and the need for an emergent Black American literary tradition, questioning hegemonic concepts of reality and uncovering new perceptions and means of interpretation. Her characters are often portrayed as chronically disturbed, making readers realise how these characters are victims of history, and have to understand

each other's past to recover their own self through collective help and sharing. In this communal and empathetic work, they transfer their past pain and terror orally into knowledge to empower their present and future. Morrison's *Beloved* is dedicated to the disremembered and unaccounted voices (275) of the 'sixty millions and more' (ii) who failed to survive the transatlantic slave trade, or Middle Passage. Fragments of its brutal history, both before and after the Civil War, are presented through the voice of Sethe, not as an individual but as a communal voice.

It is significant that Morrison has spoken of her reliance upon "music as a model for her writing" reflecting especially on the Blues. Music was the most prominent element in her life, her home was filled with Blues and her mother was an opera singer: "I was surrounded by all kinds of music as a girl" (qtd. in Caremella lxix). She further explains that all her family members never learned music but they were able to play any instrument they would pick. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992) are an example of a continuous narrative which sounds and resounds with memories, emphasised on the reality of words where the enslaved found their expression in music:

Black Americans were sustained and healed and nurtured by the translation of their experience into art above all in the music. That was functional [...] Music makes you hungry for more of it. It never really gives you the whole number. It slaps and it embraces, it slaps and it embraces. The literature ought to do the same thing [...] I have always wanted to develop a way of writing that was irrevocably black [...] It would be something intrinsic, indigenous, something in the way it was put together-the sentences, the structure, texture and tone-so that anyone who read it would realise. I use the analogy of the music because you can range all over the world and it's still black. I don't imitate it, but I am informed by it. Sometimes I hear blues, sometimes spirituals or jazz and I've appropriated it. I've tried to

reconstruct the texture of it in my writing-certain kinds of repetition-its profound simplicity What has already happened with the music in the States, the literature will do one day and when that happens it's all over. (181-182)

Blues emerged as a distinct African American art form, rooted in the Mississippi Delta, as field songs and spirituals took on new forms in the minds of evermore experimental and innovative performers, with lyrical content shifting in its emphasis over time to reflect upon the realities of life after slavery. This can be read as analogous to the narrative scope of *Beloved*, which originates in slavery, but moves beyond it. Her style acts out a movement between theme and variation that is relatable with the interchange in the musical tradition of melodies, so the consciousness of one character's narrative perspective transitions to another and simultaneously consciousness goes along. For instance, when Sethe asks Paul D to share his experience, he says: "I don't know. I never have talked about it. Not to a soul. Sang it sometimes, but I never told a soul [...] Maybe. Maybe you can hear it. I just ain't sure I can say it. Say it right, I mean" (*Beloved* 85). This pain is similar to what Sethe too has experienced. She encourages Paul D to share his experience of the time when 'a bit' (made of iron) is forced in his mouth: "how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep you cry for it" (*Beloved* 84) (See Figure 1). The narration moves from omniscient to third person to interior monologue, showing traces of both oral and written discourses. Genres blur as a consequence of these multiple shifts in narration, which also bears the pressure of hidden or absent oral narration. The narration also intertwines with all of the folkloric elements of myth, song and hearsay in a process of re-interpretation to engage imaginatively with an appropriately complex sense of sociohistorical context. This is readable as Morrison's particular artistry, a statement of her literary authority, but it also indicates the creativity and vibrancy explicit in the folklore that she works with.

The novel *Beloved* begins with a geographical fact; the action is set near Cincinnati, Ohio, the year is 1873, in a house at 124 Bluestone Road. A historical fact is provided about the death of the grandmother, Baby Suggs; and the protagonist Sethe whose daughter named Denver is alive. Here, Morrison plays with the reassessment of the text played in contemporary American culture, and the distinct historical and political threads revealing the suspension of absence and presence. Significantly, the novel opens by indicating the absence of an elderly figure or ancestor, a descendant of Sethe's or Halle's (Sethe's husband) family, a foundation upon which to stand and perpetuate their lineage or heritage. This reflects on how America has emptied out history, and that in this house both past and future are absent; this is the ground upon which a ghostly past (Beloved and Baby Suggs) demands to insert itself into the present. To find ancestry and deep connectivity to your community, ghosts have to be welcomed, rather than feared. For example, the ghost in *Home* appears in an iconic zoot suit along with the spirit of the Cee's unborn baby spirit: "somewhere close by in the air, in this house" (*Home* 131). The ghost acts as a guardian who watches Frank on his journey to the South. The moment towards the end of the novel, when Cee and Frank share and accept their traumatic memories of the past, is also the first time when Cee witnesses the ghost smiling. This is read by Frank as an approval of healing: "he could have sworn the sweet bay was pleased to agree" (*Home* 145). As in an oral storytelling, again Morrison takes her readers back to the burial from where the story begins, in the childhood of Frank and Cee when they first witnessed the burial of an African man who had been murdered. Frank excavates the bones and reburies them with respect and love which let the ghost, a zoot-suited man, disappear smiling. Frank has acquired a sense of cultural identity and gives a ceremonious traditional burial to both the dead child and the zoot suited man: "there were worthwhile things that

needed doing” (*Home* 135) Everyone (Frank, Cee, and the ghost) has come back to their respective home.

Beloved's Baby Suggs, whom Morrison calls 'living dead', is nevertheless a source of emotional and spiritual inspiration for the city's black residents.¹² Interviewing with Walter Clemons, Morrison shares the significant position of Baby Suggs as a source of remembrance: "A few people in my novel remember it [...] Baby Suggs came here out of one of those ships, but mostly it's not remembered at all" (75). Baby Suggs continues to be a source of inspiration long after her death. Her memory motivates Denver to leave 124 Bluestone Road and find help. A self-proclaimed preacher, Baby Suggs draws upon the beauty of nature to make the community of the ex-enslaved to recognise the beauty in them. She is the ancestral figure in the novel through whom the story relayed in non-linear order is being united. She taught Sethe and other community members the African traditions and spiritual knowledge which provides a sense of spiritual and cultural community among the freed enslaved. Through her spiritual guidance, the people of the community were able to break through the psychological barriers and gain peace. She is an ancestral figure who guardians and preserves the cultural heritage among the community.

10. The Novel as a Form and African Tradition

We don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore; parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical mythological archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several

¹² In African tradition the ancestors are classified into long dead, recently dead or living dead. Long dead refers to the ancestors who are no more in the memory; recently dead refers to people who died recently; living dead refers to the spirits who are present in the conscious memory. The longer the spirit is present in the memory, the longer their identity and presence will support and guide in the continuity of the life of the family.

ways to do it. One is in the novel. (Morrison 'Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation' 2287)

Recognising the power of the novel to express a distinctive African American identity in a way that could communicate to other communities and identities, Morrison used the form to provide people with the stories that they do not necessarily hear in the family. The genre of novels began with the rise of the middle-class; a novel is an art form that they needed to represent or talk about their lifestyle. This art form is designed to tell people about what they did not know, such as social rules, habits, and customs, and explanation of the behaviours that society approves of such as represented in *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Pamela* (1740), *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and others (2287). Prior to novels, the only exclusive art form to represent Black people was music; the form of folk expression that kept them connected to their roots and helped them heal. This evolved into Blues and was known worldwide, and no more remained exclusive. Yet even as it discovered crossover appeal, it retained a sense of African American particularity. Morrison has indicated a comparable ambition for her work. Even if her fiction is reviewed worldwide and wins awards, she is writing it *for* her own community:

I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for my people, which is necessary and legitimate[...] From my perspective, there are only black people" (LeClair 370, 374).

Toni Morrison has been writing since 1970 about the 'ancient properties' of her people (black men and women) in the New World to invoke a sense of belongingness to the past, the African consciousness among the New World Black diaspora. Folklore in African American writings is also significant for its resistance to white cultural dominance and the discovery of solidarity in that resistance, starting with one's own family and later

branching out to a larger community. Morrison positions the racial struggle of her culture in a new context, one that is specifically inclusive of black women, their experiences, and their potential. With the help of folk culture and folk tradition, seeing them as integral to resistance and survival, Morrison committed to exploring African American reality by invoking African iconography in her works. For example, *The Flying African Myth* in *Song of Solomon* is also read in comparison with *Icarus*, and in *Beloved*, the iconography of lynching is represented through a chokecherry tree.

Morrison's literary roots go back to ancient African mythology to reclaim its core strengths in its oral music and storytelling traditions. The appropriation of this strength by white hegemony complicates this reclamation. A novel is valuable for exploring such complications, so Morrison chose it as her medium. Her way of translating folklore into literature counters the appropriations of white writers like Joel Chandler Harris, who tamed African American trickster tales for publication. In her essay, "Uncle Remus, No Friend of Mine" Alice Walker expresses her disappointment towards Harris's work for stealing part of her heritage, making her "feel ashamed of it" (qtd. in Marshall 59). The most evident cultural appropriation can be seen in the animals illustrated by Harris who appear in European or American clothing. Brer Rabbit wears a tail coat or a sack suit, and other animals are shown wearing day dresses, shirt dresses, work dresses and other European forms of attire. Through this outfitting, characters of African origin are modified into white Southern stereotypes.

Morrison's use of African ways of oral storytelling bridges the gap between folk roots and literary tradition. Her novels are informed by stories she heard from her mother, her tribe and her ancestors and represent an attempt to transform euro-centric cultural discourse. She claims to incorporate a significant characteristic in her writing from African tradition that is the ability to read the story/ narrative in silence, as well as to hear them.

She considers her writings to be distinctively ‘black’, not only because her characters are black, but because of the narrative and discursive features that evoke and reanimate African American culture. In 1986, Morrison asserted that “the reclamation of the history of black people in this country is paramount in its importance [...] and the job of recovery is ours” (Davis 413). She provides spaces and places with the help of punctuation and alphabet in her text for the readers to participate in the narration (Fultz 15). For example, the primer from *The Bluest Eye* has been written in different ways to indicate to her readers the presence of language that has been residing among the African Americans. This primer allowed her readers to identify the dilemma in the mind of a child who believed in the ideology of a happy family, according to white American normativity. However, the child finds it difficult to relate the ideology she has been learning to the experience of her own family, and unconsciously messes up the primer:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. (18)

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy. (19)

Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjaneliveinthegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappy. (*The Bluest Eye* 19)

As Morrison reveals the folkways and legends of her community, versions of which (of course) are also identifiable in Western culture and the Bible, she insists upon Black community cultures as a palimpsest, still present if somewhat suffocated by White civilisation. Her power of churning the history and imagination, blending the folk and

fairy, indicates her as a mythical symbolist, but also one who is prepared to form new mixtures and hybrids of inherited materials.

To embrace the value of one's culture and identity is necessarily associated for Morrison with the community. She often shows characters who fall outside of their communities while they also fall out of themselves. Alienated figures such as Ruth, Hagar, and Milkman in *Song of Solomon* (1977) live voided lives as they are disconnected from their community and do not appear even to be sure what their community is. Morrison tries to help her characters redefine their existence by accepting their identity and individuality; out of that, a potential to reconstruct a community emerges. To do this, Morrison deals extensively with oral history preserved by African Americans and propagated by ancestral figures in their communities, reaching back to the beginnings of slavery and the foundation of the American project.

Morrison's reiteration of oral narratives to justify and define an African American community also means the empowerment of black vernacular English, something apparent in the work of Zora Neale Hurston. The most important feature of her fiction is the call and response technique. This is derived from black storytelling and is generally a significant feature in African American discourse. It serves to connect the speaker and audience, preacher and congregation, and of course, author, character, and the reader. Morrison presents such narratives within newly problematic social and cultural dimensions, affirming that her cultural inheritance is powerful enough to adapt to alternative realities and histories. As such it gives her a means of survival: "the story itself is a primary form of the oral tradition, primary as a mode of conveying culture, experience, and values and as a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, feelings, and attitudes in oral societies" (Emmanuel 123). To reconstitute the reality of her own experiences, she uses folklore to counter the misrepresentations and distortions of history through a white

lens, interrogating that hegemonic discourse. Adaptability and critical intelligence are already a part of the black vernacular tradition, and Morrison's work makes liberal use of this. Oral performance is defined by the adaptability and flexibility of the words spoken, the potential to adjust the text according to social circumstances and how this involves the audience in constructing the final performative text. Morrison follows a similar methodology in the performance of her novels and stories, where tradition offers her creative and intellectual mobility rather than constriction. Reading Morrison requires the understanding that tradition is a lively and enlivening phenomenon, not a matter only of static books on a shelf.

To authenticate her portrayal of the black community, in what Gay Wilentz calls 'oral literature,' Morrison adapts a non-linear technique rich with cultural resources and communication processes drawn from folk traditions.¹³ She brought the character of the oral performance to her writings and chose to give voice to the marginalised in print that has been present in oral form since ages. This can be digressive and unpredictable, as Morrison is drawn to the potential of being indirect. The call and response method of narration in her texts is the key, articulating the importance of the relationship between the teller and its listener, along with inviting the significant involvement of the audience. For example, the opening lines, "*Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941*" (3; italics in original) in *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are delivered by the narrative voice of Claudia. The line initiates the sense of intimacy between the novel and the reader as the community secret is shared. The line depicts the secret ("*Quiet as it's kept*") about the incestuous rape of an 11-year-old girl. Here, Morrison tries to grasp the audience's attention to participate in this community secret's moral and ethical issue and reflect upon

¹³ In oral tradition which is transmitted orally is always modified and does not follow a pattern of re-telling. Therefore, it goes back and forth; a similar pattern is observed in Morrison's writings.

it with the question of *how* more than *why* as the story moves further. Claudia is the traditional storyteller, directing the narration for the audience to contemplate. As discussed by John Callan, the ‘call-and-response technique’ is Afrocentric, where the storytelling is an open-ended dialogue between the storyteller and the listener (qtd. in Ivey 125). In African orature, both the participants and observers act as artists; thus, Morrison refused to follow the author-centred theories and attempted to write ‘irrevocably and indisputably Black’ (389) literature by following the African storytelling technique:

I simply wanted to write literature that was irrevocably, indisputably Black, not because its characters were, or because I was, but because it took as its creative task and sought as its credentials those recognised and verifiable principles of Black art. (‘Memory, Creation, and Writing’ 389)

This call-and-response technique became a key feature in sermons, jazz, speeches, and stories within African American discourse. Episodic narration is used by Morrison in combination with a strategy of fragmentary retelling and uses further techniques inherited from folktales such as repetition, the shift in narrative voice, and parallelism. In the move from the oral to the literary, Issadore contends that the folklore is “modified, altered, enriched, as they are transmitted from one person to another, to such an extent that new types, new combinations are adopted, and true development take place” (166). While maintaining the poetics of tradition, Morrison improvises and invests in a ‘set/original’ text according to the social conditions. Folk knowledge is dynamic, with the ability to nurture and dispossess, deceive and instruct, helping the bereft in search of their self and belongingness.

11. Voice

The iterative concerns depicted in Morrison’s writings are African Americans’ poignant relationship with their ancestors and the knowledge and power they gained. Understanding

her responsibility as an author towards her community, Morrison is vigilant and draws the inextricable link between language limitations and possibilities. She claims, “I was not going to footnote the black experience for white readers” (Wood 5). She carefully challenges the numerous attempts made by white hegemony to exclude Black people from entering discourse, whether through speech, reading or writing. For all that Morrison describes her own project as Africanist, her work has been praised and popularised by ‘privileged whites’ in their ‘white education’, as they are the primary market for literary novels in America. The ironies attendant upon this are never lost on Morrison. She continually queries and clarifies her relationship to her audience and shows a very sharp sense that much of her readership will be white and inevitably uninformed about African American experience. Despite the novel being an art form that “belongs” to literate classes of readers, Morrison enacts her solidarity with people who were denied the right to speech and education. She introduces vernacular English or Black English into her flow of language, understanding how the enslaved people learned by picking up the language from their owners, in the process improvising new modalities of their own, showing “sheer intelligence” (Baldwin 6). Through slavery, a language was created and developed for communication when their (the enslaved) own language was stolen. Morrison remarks that Black English is not editorialised or is a fit for white eyes. To use folklore in the writings was not just for literary purposes; it also served political and social objectives at large (Wood J 6).

From the very beginning of her writings, Morrison has tried to make an alliance with readers, inviting them to associate themselves with characters in her novels who represent how to survive the racialized America, such as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. African American girls might feel like they know Pecola. Morrison expresses her exemplary responsibility as a writer:

What we do as writers and critics is not just important, it is crucial: it is not just informative, it is formative: it is not just interesting, it profoundly shapes the perception of the world as we, and others, come to 'Know' it. [...] the choices we make are not gratuitous; they are most often political, emerging from an ideology that we are not even, not necessarily anyway, aware of. (Tally 1)

She tried to emphasise the voice and sound of African Americans which have been dominated for a long time. Her writings play a significant role in re-writing and deconstructing the racialized stereotypes addressing the significance of being a woman and a black woman in American society. Her focus was to depict the other side of reality in American Literature, where Europeanised American literary practitioners sometimes obscured the presence of African Americans. The community voice of her fiction reflects upon black history and cultural heritage with an appetite for correction and redefinition. She uses visual and oral dimensions to display the reduction of the black identity, race, and reliance into mere caricature throughout history. This unquestionably demonstrates the challenges and confrontation of the struggles to restore the cultural heritage and build a community. Her commitment to recovering black history is certainly unveiled through her writings as she speaks in the present and crafts the envisioned future by unpacking the black lives individually and collectively. The writing aims to build the positive self-image that racism destroys.

This represents an idiosyncratic form of cross-generational mothering values for a whole community, and not just an individual family. She shows African American heritage as a parallel but unique culture. It is apt to resist stereotype, oppression and Western epistemologies, even as it bestows empowerment and liberation. The novels act as a tool for retrieving the communal experience of being on the margins. This communal effort is also encouraged among the readers, who are asked to pick the pieces from the

story that keeps unravelling, to join in the work of recovery. For example, *Beloved* is a combination of repetitions, re-memory, and multiple shifts in narrative voices implying the use of oral narrative techniques in a community, revisiting the cultural traditions, and collaborating with the readers/ audience. Her writings mirror the oral tradition of vernacular English, within which the readers fill the loopholes/gaps based on their communal knowledge. The voices of Sethe and Paul D engage in a meaningful and intimate detailed exchange by retelling the history through their memories, and Baby Suggs retells it through the stories and tales that are passed in a manner of the oral tradition of call and response. The story is constructed by the participation of both readers and the characters, who narrate the story in flashbacks from the present to the past.

In 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature'(1988), Morrison debates how the canon of American literature presents African American characters in states of distortion, denying them a fundamental truth. She even challenges her own authorial voice that extends the characters' conversation to the real world, questioning the hegemony of American historical narratives. Thus she speaks about the 'unspeakable that has been historically marginalised', and the need to bring it to the centre. Her characters are gentle reminders of suppressed and forgotten stories that must be delivered clearly, significantly sustained, and preserved to carry forward ('Unspeakable' 2300). The writings generate audaciousness in freedom of thought and hope among the readers, and the subjective voices offer an ironically reliable narrative through the fictional characters of the nation's historical past. As indicated in *Playing in the Dark* (1992), she divides the word "responsibility" into "response-ability": "Writing and reading mean being aware of the writer's notions of risk and safety, the serene achievement of, or sweaty fight for, meaning and response-ability"(xi). Thus, her writing significantly forces the readers to 'respond' as it is essential and valuable to her 'ability'

as a writer. The denial of issues of race, gender and nationality distorted the identity of Africans in American history; her fictional characters therefore try to reach out to the real world, in the form of readers: “It is about reconstructing the memory and its context” (Noudelmann 11). Psychological experiences are recreated through the medium of language in the readers' minds to communicate the suppressed experiences. Her characters yearn for physical and psychological freedom, which is preceded by oppression.

Morrison used common and uncommon language as tools of empowerment and identity construction, a powerful medium for the survival of the voiceless. Thus, language is the root of creating and sustaining identity. Her attempt to create “holes and spaces so that the reader can come into it” (Tate 127) is to make her narration a communal and collective act of participation and sharing, where orality is one of the critical imaginative elements. Morrison encourages her readers to avoid reading her texts through the lens of ‘white’ (Euro-Centric) theories such as postmodernism, post-structuralism and others. To this, Barbara states that reading Morrison’s texts under the purview of ‘white’ theories is a refusal to acknowledge the significance of the cultural heritage presented. Morrison affirmed this in an interview: “I’ve spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the white gaze was not dominant one in any of my books” (*Toni Morrison Refuses To Privilege White People In Her Novels!* 00:04:52- 00:05:30).¹⁴

To probe deeper and explore the neglected/ hidden patterns, Morrison incorporates myths and folktales to address the ‘universal assumptions’ with respect to the minority and marginalised that have been overlooked throughout. Therefore, she seeks an analysis through the lens of the culture, tradition, and language milieu to understand the ethnic identity and rootedness. According to Trudier Harris, she blends fiction and folk

¹⁴ Morrison responded this in the context when a reviewer of *Sula* asserts her to realise her responsibilities, be mature, and write about real confrontation for black people that are the white people.

approaches to highlight and throw light on the African American literary heritage. Thus, she “transforms historical folk materials and creates literary folklore” (7) and writes out of the specificity toward race, gender, and nationality. Therefore, creating a disturbance and resistance against the white metanarrative, the inclusion of storytelling tradition preserves African existence.

12. The Ancestral figure

[African people] suffer from racial vertigo that can be cured by taking what one needs from one’s ancestors. (‘A Slow Walk of Trees’)

According to Morrison, ancestors are the benevolent guardians and protectors of people. Knowing about one’s ancestors also gives a sense of belonging to oneself and provides a medium through which one learns about the broader history of its community and religion. The elders of the community are critical figures in terms of preserving community history through oral storytelling, just as African tribes did and do the same thing. This project examines the prevalence of such ancestral figures in Morrison, a phenomenon she herself addressed in her essay ‘Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation’:

There is always an elder there. And these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (2289)

Morrison is particularly invested in women as ancestral figures, as guardians and protectors, persons with rich cultural knowledge because they did not experience the same opportunities for flight as their male counterparts did. Women could not enjoy such mobility, but it also mean that they could store knowledge and wisdom in ways that nobody else could:

Like something is either lost, never to be retrieved, or something is about to be lost and will never be retrieved. Because if *we* don't know it (what our past is), if we women don't know it, then nobody in the world knows it—nobody in our civilisation knows it... But if we women, if we black women, if we Third-World women in America don't know it, then, it is not known by anybody at all. And I mean that. Then nobody knows it. And somebody has to tell somebody something.

(Shange 48-52)

She reminds her readers that if women had not been left behind, then who would have witnessed and narrated the story of their courage and rebellion? And the stories would have been lost forever.

An ancestral figure herself, Morrison adapts oral knowledge into writing to generate awareness among the current generation and preserve it for the future; simultaneously, she attempts to maintain a sense of the authority and communicability that the oral knowledge possessed. She seeks to keep the authenticity and roughness of folklore, mindful of the danger that this might be lost in 'becoming literature'. Her narratives demonstrate how the 'self' is inextricably linked to the culture by crafting her characters' relationships with their communities and families. These are examined in the following chapters, where *Jadine*, *Son*, *Beloved*, *Sethe* and *Denver* will find their 'ancient properties' and 'individual freedom'. They are the product of a society and a culture and are influenced by various forces that emerge due to cultural dynamics in a world that is profoundly fragmented by race, class and gender lines. Morrison keeps folk knowledge authentic and healthy by using disruption in her narrative representations, refusing to smooth her materials into narrative forms that are too easily processed. The transmission of folklore from one medium to another necessarily involves dilemmas of representation and authenticity, and this is true of the plantations of both America and Assam.

13. Trickster and Trickster-Creators

A vital phenomenon of comparative folklore is the trickster figure, a mythical figure that retains human characteristics, manifesting mostly as a boundary crosser who transgresses both physical and psychological boundaries, dwelling at the crossroads or between the worlds.¹⁵ Sometimes they are considered as wanderers and other times as folk heroes who are central to a culture, yet marginalised. They are found in folklore, religion and mythology around the world. Trickster is an enduring archetype that appears in a massive diversity of mythologies: he is Hermes in Greek, Krishna in Hindu, Eshu in Yoruba, Coyote in Native American and Loki in Norse. As Lewis Hyde puts it, “Trickster is everywhere” (Hyde 11). Trickster challenges the status quo and creates a new world, either by his bravery, foolishness or his power of trickery, disrupting conventional boundaries to transform existing cultures or bring new ones into being: “[Trickster] sometimes drawing the line, sometimes crossing it, sometimes erasing or moving it, but always there” (Hyde 8).

Hyde’s *Trickster Makes This World* (2008) talks about the relative lack of female tricksters in the world because of the dominance of patriarchal society. He further mentions that even if there are female tricksters present, such as in the Native American lore of the Hopi and the Tewa, they do not perform alone. There the female Coyote trickster figure performs alongside the male Coyote and most of the stories are built around the latter (Hyde 8). Some folk stories have a female trickster due to the role reversal of the male trickster, but again this suggests the priority of maleness. Morrison demands consideration as a writer who directly engages with this perceived “lack” of female tricksters, projecting her female protagonists and her own writerly practice into the gap.

¹⁵ The first account of the trickster figure appeared in Julien Hall’s essay “Negro Conjuring and Tricking” in 1897.

Morrison contradicts the gendered notion of a trickster that Hyde suggests, suggesting that mischief is attainable to all. Her female tricksters perform as social agents, dissolving norms and facile binarisms relating to the role of women. Rather than only identifying women within the home-safe environment of nurture, she also puts them out into the world, setting them on adventurous paths, counter to their assumed destiny: “[W]hat choices are available to black women outside their own society’s approval” (*Sula* xiii), Morrison’s trickster figures seek to actively pursue what these “choices” might be.

In *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), Henry Louis Gates, Jr introduces the concept of “Signifying” through the divine trickster figure of Yoruba mythology, Esu-Elegbara (5). He argues how such signification can bring about the destruction of an oppressor’s ideology or kingdom by using his own weapons. He presents the trickster figure of ‘Monkey’ (the enslaved) to dismantle the ‘Lion’s kingdom (oppressor) by using his tool of ‘language.’ Gates includes the reading of Zora Neale Hurston, Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker in his book; however, he only briefly includes Toni Morrison’s *Jazz* (1992), addressing her ways of playing upon the Signifying through her narration. Yet Morrison’s works are models of tricksterish interpretation and persistently use elements of West African traditions. Just like the Monkey in the story of Signifying Monkey uses language as a tool to Signify the Lion, Morrison uses the language in her writing to Signify literature of Whiteness.¹⁶ She celebrates the traditions of the folk from her ancestry and her descendants and ensures the relevance of her words to the people who nurtured the African American traditions: “The winner is a Signifying Monkey, a polytropic language master whose method with the Lion is (the joke goes) to “trope a dope,” stupefying with swift circles of signifying” (Hyde 273). Standard signifying is destroyed, and new concepts and

¹⁶ To distinguish black usage, the concept of signifying drawn from African American oral tradition is denoted by a capital S (Signifying), and for white usage, a lowercase s (signifying).

meanings are created out of the creative chaos. For example, in all her works, Morrison plays on the name of the characters with Biblical connotations which differ from conventional white perspectives, such as Pilate, Ruth, Hagar, and Sethe. Morrison affirms that the centre of the language (here standard English) does not contain the ultimate power; rather, there is more power on the periphery due to its flexibility and plurality, thus having the potential to be used as signifying in the black discourse.

Interestingly, both Morrison and Hazarika play the role of a trickster as artists, highlighting the possibilities of folklore in the modern world and raising questions over things subtly accepted or hidden in culture: “trickster *creates* a boundary or brings to the surface a distinction previously hidden from sight” (Hyde 7). The role of Morrison as a trickster-creator has been mentioned in previous chapters, and even Demme’s role in directing the film can be viewed comparably, as he depicts the characteristic of ‘boundary crosser’, ‘creative idiot’, ‘doubleness and duplicity’ (7). He adapted the story from the novel and crossed racial boundaries to direct the film. His film highlights the atrocities faced by enslaved Africans yet could not find a way to signify the folkloric aspects of Morrison’s narrative design. Hazarika’s film re-tells Assamese folktales and modifies them to make the viewers question the aspects of the culture and rituals that they inherit. He deliberately eliminates the pretext from all the tales and moulds them to create a new narrative environment for the original folktale, and as such navigates his way through fundamental oppositions in folk-life between good and evil, right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

In many ways, Hazarika is both a creator and destroyer through this film, as he creates a world that highlights the possibilities of restoring faith and hope with rationality but questions radically the beliefs and dogmatic practices present among the Assamese population. In doing so, he invites the viewers to reflect upon the prevalence of such

practices elsewhere. He destroys the normalised version of a maternal figure, highlighting how the mother figure can be evil and monstrous and could go to any extent to fulfil her appetite. The reincarnation of Tejimola into a plant (in the end scene) depicts the fluid nature of a trickster, but again Hazarika keeps it liminal and does not tell the complete folktale. Like a “trickster who relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes” (Hyde 19), Hazarika traps his viewers to question their instincts and morality and whether they are enjoying the brutality committed by these mothers or if they, too, want to restore their faith in hope and survival. He proficiently eliminates the pre-text and subtext from the original folktales to unmask the beliefs followed and practised by the folk that might conceal such horrendous acts.

Furthermore, we can also read *outenga* and Tejimola as trickster figures in the film and the folktale when they showcase their power of reincarnation and fluidity of their presence.¹⁷ *Outenga* is the fruit with human senses of hearing, thinking and listening and keeps following its mother but reincarnates into a girl as soon as Devinath burns the shell.¹⁸ This indicates the presence of a spirit (perhaps a ghost) in the fruit, similarly to the presence of a baby spirit in the Sethe’s house. Assamese folk believe that no matter what a woman gives birth to, there is life present in it, be it a fruit or an animal. When Keteki learns to start treating and caring for the fruit as her own child and worries when it goes missing, Devinath practices a ritual to release the human child entrapped in the fruit. Here we see Devinath also as a trickster figure who lays a trap for the *outenga* to release the trapped human inside it. As Hyde mentions, tricksters often seek to trap others into trapping themselves: “Trickster commonly relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes” (19). Just as Hyde argues that “[t]rickster is cunning as to about traps” (20),

¹⁷ As discussed in Chapter 3 and 4.

¹⁸ *Outenga* sings a song when it gets lost and feels abandoned.

Devinath understands that there is a human spirit trapped in the fruit as he asserts he has travelled a lot and has seen such miracles in the country. He is a boundary crosser who travels from one place to the other. However, he fails to protect his own daughter, who is tortured and eventually killed by her stepmother.

Devinath is intelligent enough to lay traps for the *outenga*, “but not so cunning as to avoid them himself” (Hyde 20). On one side, he protects the girl trapped in the fruit, but on the other, he could not save his daughter. *Outenga* can be compared to the ghost of Beloved (both are girl children with mothers who have been outcast by their communities), who also reincarnates into a girl once Paul D pushes the ghost away. To remove him from his self-acclaimed authority and protection or belonging towards Sethe, Beloved takes human form and makes Sethe emotionally dependent on herself. During the first attempt of Devinath to liberate the human child, the fruit can hear the plan and sharply does not fall into the trap set by him. However, Devinath later prepares a trap to liberate the human child by not revealing the plan in front of the fruit, showing a tricksterish capability on his own part. Their respective communities declare both Beloved and *Outenga*’s mothers as evil and outcasts. Yet both learn to accept their daughters in the form they are, a ghost for Sethe and *outenga* for Keteki. In the moment when both mothers accept their fate and make peace with their lives, the trickster changes its shape and reincarnates into a new figure.

14. Judgement Tale and Trickster Tale

There are two categories of African short stories known as judgement tales and trickster tales, both of which Morrison adapts to her modes of narration within different societal and thematic frameworks. Both forms of tale follow the process of social storytelling, inviting the reader’s perspective individually by introducing multiple voices in the form of dialogues and community, and do not offer a conventional conclusion. Judgement tales

are morally ambiguous, raising a dilemma among the audience as the narrator refuses to conclude and leaves it open-ended. The narrative of this form is a collective debate and involves the participation of each listener/ reader; thus, constructing meaning becomes a communal process as it invites multiple perspectives. The narrative of judgement tales performs on two levels, where the first level raises the ethical, moral, and legal issues concerning the protagonist. The next level instigates questions for the reader or audience and seeks their participation in the reasoning, as well as the critical judgement and ultimate resolution of the dilemma. The aim of this category is to address the audience directly and allow them to gain the identity of a particular group through the emotional and intellectual labour that the tale involves. Storytelling is a communal process, and involving audiences from every community implies multiple voices and perspectives that result in collective debate and observation.

Morrison's work in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997) integrates the constituents of the judgement tale, such as structure, theme, and the purpose of the narration. She asks the readers to acknowledge the questions/ situations in the context and respond to their consequences. *The Bluest Eye* deals with the dilemma(s) of Pecola Breedlove's life. Her life has several dilemmas, one of which was introduced to the readers with the first sentence narrated by Claudia "*Quiet as it's kept*" (3). This sentence informs the readers about her life's tragedy with the questions of the terrible consequences. The other dilemma of her life was the notion of beauty with respect to the ideals of white beauty that turns the self-esteem of the Black community into self-loathing, particularly among the young black girls. The character of Pecola unquestionably accepts the white beauty standards and yearns for the 'bluest eye' throughout the novel.

The novel reflects the reality of black women's lives through the eyes of a young black girl in blandly white America: "[The] specific local bodies, histories, and cultural productions have been eradicated by commodity culture" (Kuenz 426). Morrison reflects upon this consumerist normativity by rewriting the black experience significantly from the perspective of women's voices emerging from the struggle with colonisation. The protagonist Pecola Breedlove unquestioningly accepts racial self-hatred because she does not have features that fit into white cultural concepts of beauty and believes in the societally conventional thought that 'black is ugly and white is beautiful.' The novel's narrative enlightens the audience with alternative cultural knowledge and beliefs by questioning the dominant culture's perceptions and values. The characters' subjectivities get reconstituted due to the presence of multiple voices coming from several sources, such as the narrator, participants, the listeners, and the community, before making a judgement. The narration starts with the voice of Claudia, who is a commentator throughout the narration. The 'oral narration' from Pecola's mother is in the first person, and the fragments of dialogues from different sections of the community are represented by the three whores, Soaphead Church, community gossip, Junior and Geraldine, and Morrison's reflection on the story are present as an omniscient narration. In one sense, this is a communal voice, but it takes on an unusual form.

Beloved empowers the readers with the distorted narratives of the characters and the unwritten history that is different from conventional narratives of the Civil War, creating an altered vision of the age-long problem of racialized violence. By concentrating on the interior lives of her characters and bringing 'unspeakable things' into a narrative form, the novel was concerned with how to "fill in the blanks that the traditional slave narrative left" (Zinsser et al. 93). Morrison therefore effectively re-imagined the past of her community to re-experience the aftermath of slavery. Moreover, this re-shaped the

community's destroyed selves. The dilemma in the novel posed to the readers is about Sethe's infanticide, and whether Sethe did right by killing her daughter although she did not have any right to do it. Paul D voices this concern: "What you did was wrong, Sethe. There could have been a way. Some other way" (*Beloved* 194). This dilemma invites the audience to re-read the brutal reality of the unspeakable experience of slavery and judge for themselves. A singular act of radical violence such as Sethe's demands to be understood within the context of the totalising violence of white hegemony and slavery.

Morrison calls on her readers to participate in her characters' lives by contemplating the ethical, moral, and philosophical aspects of her narration. Along with this active involvement, the reader is also expected to deal with the structural disjunctions that Morrison puts in the way of seeking an easy conclusion. Here, Morrison again achieves the goal of the African call-and-response oral tradition, creating a pattern of discourse between the writer/narrator and audience/ readers. Following another characteristic of oral tradition to layer the narrative, the shift between the third person's omniscient narration and the first person's stream of consciousness, Morrison uses *tale-within-a-tale* featuring black rhetorical rituals that release multiple voices to create a complexity of perspectives. To introduce an isolated event of history within the text, the story is designed in circularity, where one event leads to recalling another; further, that takes the reader back to some different event to connect. This creative and complex structured narrative makes the readers understand the *why* and *how* of the tale on an ethical and moral level. The creation of mosaic in the narration, with these layers of characters and their histories, as well as the use of non-linear and frequently shifting chronology, brings the reader and the protagonist onto the same page to try and find meaning. Morrison turns the authority of judgement, interpretation, and resolution over to the readers. This

authority further asks the readers to acquire an understanding of folk identity by immersing themselves in the patterns and trials of the black oral tradition.

The Trickster tale is popular among many ethnic African, Native American, Nordic, and Asian cultures. The trickster tale and the character of the same name both play a significant role in the myths, folktales, and folksongs in a culture. A trickster is a mobile archetype that can be represented as a God, possessed of the power of creation and destruction, or a fool or a prankster. However, a trickster is always defined by their freedom and ability to survive. Trickster can therefore be a compendium of opposites, but also is a folk hero who appears towards the end of the tale, guiding the listeners to overcome the fears and failures the story instigated. Trickster outwits their opponents who are physically and socially stronger within the periphery of humankind: “They are both folk heroes and wanderers on the ages of the community, at once marginal and central to the culture. Tricksters challenge the status quo and disrupt perceived boundaries” (Radin xxxiii).

Morrison has produced tricksters in a variety of guises, in *Sula* (1973), *Tar Baby* (1981) and *Beloved* (1987) where they have a bi-cultural identity (combining African and African American culture) combating all sorts of oppression within the focal point of politics and retention of the language in American society. For example, during slavery, when folklore was the only medium of cultural exchange, the enslaved people came across the similarities between the trickster figures of Hare and Rabbit that manifested respectively in Native American and African folklore, sharing many common insights. Later in the African American context, the trickster figure with common features evolves into Brer Rabbit. In Morrison, the trickster figure is played by a female to offer new perspectives on both racial and gender stereotypes. Morrison also plays the role of a trickster through her own writing process, similar to how confusion is created by often a

comical figure that results in their ability to transform their appearance and change their identity. In addition, they are preservers of the culture's values and traditions and create a continuity to pass the values.

The trickster in Morrison's novels is represented as a rebel against the conventional limitations throughout the historical changes as they foster ancestry and traditional identity. For example, in *Sula*, a folk anecdote is woven throughout the narrative that centres around the struggles of the black community against prejudice and racism. The traditional 'nigger joke' is played in the novel where the black neighbourhood is called "the bottom" (*Sula* 3). The 'Bottom' inscribing the socio-economic relationship between the whites and blacks reveals the white society's failed promises under racial politics and social control. It was an aspiration of formerly the enslaved people to create an identity and homeland in America that stands for the change and power of their oppressed beings. Morrison deliberately located 'the Bottom' on the hill overlooking the Medallion, a white town in the novel, suggesting the higher power the Blacks hold as long as they hold, the higher morality. The novel reflects the contrasting images of the Bottom and Medallion and how they both try to find the missing pieces from their respective lives in the lives of the other. As the former focuses on the family and community, it thus looks for economic benefits enjoyed by the latter. Furthermore, similarly, the white people living in Medallion look up to the people of The Bottom to relish the values and love of a family and community which they lacked. Despite the name The Bottom, they were looked up for something that was absent among the people of Medallion. The interrelation carried in the novel does not specify one trickster figure; instead, it relates to everyone in some way like a collective community identity. For example, even after the death of Sula, the narration goes further, similarly to her absence from the community for the past ten years and still carrying her presence within the text.

The trickster proposes a multivalence of perspective, just as the narrative structure of the judgement tales provides a range of ethical choices or dilemmas. With this form of structured narrative and a character depicted as a rhetorical agent, the author gives no formal closure to the readers. Ambiguities remain and instigate the reader to dig/construct a more profound meaning, bridge the gap, and mediate between the dual worlds of ethnicity and culture. The transgressive nature of the trickster defines and maintains a culture by reaffirming communal values through the seemingly paradoxical activity of being in constant conflict with their community. As Lewis Hyde describes trickster as: “at one and the same time creator and destroyer, giver and negator, he who dupes others and who is always duped himself [...] He possesses no values, moral or social [...] yet through his actions all values come into being” (Hyde 10). Tricksters do not limit themselves to the binary oppositions created by the society of black and white, inside and outside; they work away from such binaries by accepting and rejecting them simultaneously; and sometimes creating a new situation.

Morrison declares her interest in recapturing and re-presenting the *griot* tradition from Africa in an interview with Nellie McKay (1983), where she says, she wants “something out of an old art form in [her] books” that includes an ‘open-ended quality’ more realisable in oral performance than in the novel form (3). The tradition of telling personal and local narratives is an act to free the voices from the margins and proceed toward liberation. Her writings act as a critical gaze on the complex African American experience by exploring the dimensions of black narrative and the history created and constructed by Africans in the New World. Folklore enabled the disempowered African Americans to find the voice to recount their stories and memories and decide their own fate in White America. The memory of the past is constructed in a folkloric method which provides the authentication of real experiences faced by African Americans. This is not

just an activity of ‘recalling’ a memory but rather represents a dimension of consciousness that further affirms identity. The purpose of reclaiming and reconnecting by engaging in archetypes to cross socio-political realities is enabled by using folklore that generates empathy and cultural continuity. Morrison coined the word ‘Rememory’ for this, suggesting how a combination of memory and repetition are involved in re-creating and coping with the painful existence through the characters’ consciousness.¹⁹ In this, she focuses particularly on the psychological and social effects of apartheid, slavery, and racism. For example, in *Sula* the creatively healing function is enacted by memory. Similarly, the potential of memory to reintegrate and heal after accepting one’s past is depicted in *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby* respectively through the characters of Milkman and Jadine.

The memory of workers in the tea plantations of Assam who migrated from different parts of Central India similarly kept their memory alive through songs. These songs, which are now used mainly during festivals, play an important role of informing the new generation about the hardships and poor working conditions their forefathers have been through. Ironically, the lyrics are of pain, sorrow and horror, but are sung during the festivals and celebrations. These also involve nature as a key element, as it is affirmed that nature was the only thing that kept them strong. Here again, folklore was and is the primary means of discovery or exploration of one’s history and heritage which has the potential of interpreting the past’s uses in the present. This ultimately helps in understanding the construction of a contemporary identity, wherever we are in the world.

In *Beloved*, storytelling is also a communal process where Baby Suggs, who remembers the past (memory), bridges the gap to the present by reciting the stories as a

¹⁹ Morrison coined the term ‘Rememory’ in *Beloved*: “[w]hat I remember is a picture floating out there outside my head. [...] Right in the place where it happened. [...] if you go there you who never was there if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you” (43).

communal activity for people who are emotionally and physically battered, such as Paul D, Sethe, and Denver who have failed to incorporate themselves with the present world. For Morrison, confronting one's past, the painful history, is a communal healing process which can be felt, heard and seen. To this process Morrison asserts folklore is the best medium to find consolation and revive one's cultural heritage. With *Beloved*, she argued that

I am trying to insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. Not only to write about a woman who did what Sethe did, but to have the ghost and the daughter return as remnants of a period that was unspoken. There was a silence within the race. So, it's a kind of healing experience. There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back and deal with them. (Patton 38)

Affronting the "unspeakable", Morrison uses the language and symbolism of spiritual traditions, myths, and rituals, to include black belief systems in her narrative. This allowed her to fulfil her goal of tracing and renewing the significant constituents of black identity, their roots, and their life, and to save the African identity from erasure and oblivion. For example, in *Song of Solomon*, the Song of Solomon helps Milkman identify his ancestral roots and gain his individual self. They so exemplify the relationship of an individual character's bond to the communal beliefs system. For example, in *The Bluest Eye*, the myth of white standards of beauty is enacted to address the chaos of African American life. However, it is Pecola who suffers under the created myth of beauty standards.

Morrison shows how folktales, songs, rituals, and myths nourish and heal individual lives with the food and medicine of communal coexistence. She mixes folklore with fact, intermingles history and imagination, and stirs magic with root medicine as a mythical symbolist to construct a strong and complete identity, the restorative healing

required after the brutal wounds of slavery. Women come to the fore as the essential feeders and healers in her books, figures who reconstruct their lives by providing nourishment and spirituality to find a balance in both the physical and spiritual world. This is not imaginative speculation; African American women have historically always had to fulfil such roles. Her perspective on American history comes from initiating a re-reading and re-writing of it through the lens of the enslaved people, their experience, and how her characters discovered their sense of belongingness with the New World. The narratives of her works are an amalgamation of the raw experience of herself and others that reflects the complex rootedness of culture in combination with a sense of the depth and breadth of migration experiences. The orientation of the stories is the recounting of experiences of human reality that are embedded in the narration itself.

In all her narratives, Morrison tries to establish an alternative reality, a space for everyone to experience knowledge and history that is prohibited to them in a conventional sphere. She aims to speak of a past that is largely absent or repressed in the present world, to take recurrent journeys in order to produce and accept the knowledge with the help of ancestral characters. This is her attempt to push all the limitations associated with the oral narratives into written traditions to preserve and revivify African American history. During the time when courage and conviction were required most in a community, this folk presence gave coherence to Black people in the New World.

Characters in Morrison are portrayed as disturbed, even though many years have passed since the trauma of slavery; she wants to engage her readers to recover their own self-identity and unite the community, fostering collective help and sharing. Questions of segregation against integration arise within her narratives, based upon the refusal of white culture to acknowledge the African presence in American life, something that led all African Americans to be conscious of their dignity and image. As a result, culture,

folklore, myths, and rituals become highly significant as representations of self and racial consciousness that Black individuals can connect to, gaining an identity that Whiteness denies them otherwise.

Preserving and fostering one's culture, identity and sense of belonging is an individual yet communal process in Morrison, as the past is the manifestation of familial and communal bonds. With an understanding of one's ancestral roots and cultural heritage, Morrison's writings promote a union with the community. Her texts are dreamlike with the intonation of black oral tradition, and she represents the identity dilemma within her characters, who carry the often-avoided but unignorable weight of history, that certainly shows the disconnection with one's identity in their every act. For example, Milkman in *Song of Solomon* is unaware of his identity, refuses to accept Pilate as his family, and is more inclined towards achieving the American dream. During the novel, he gains knowledge of his community and identity with the help of a folksong, which relates the tale of flying Solomon. Milkman finds his identity only after he is able to bridge the gap between his southern black culture and his acquired American values. The oral folk tradition transfers the pain and terror of the past into the knowledge of the present, recollected and preserved to be shared with new generations to empower the present and future. The novel therefore highlights and expresses two realities through intermingling. It acts as a medium to restore the powerful and wealthy language (vernacular English, language of the freed enslaved) but not elaborative and expressive (as they were denied to read and write). It reactivates the rich folk knowledge of the impoverished past (its gossip, myths, songs, and rituals) and is preserved and shared widely with the (usually) middle-class reader and makes them reflect on how their own cultural moment seems poor and lifeless by comparison. The present reader desperately

needs the folkloric hyperactivity of what African Americans spoke and dreamed, even as they suffered.

15. Conclusion

Benjamin expressed his concern over how modernity has led to the incommunicability of shared experiences and how the world is moving towards organising itself around the communication of information rather than experience. Due to this rapid distribution of information the aesthetics and experience of storytelling is diminishing. Yet, Morrison has revived the essence of storytelling through the medium of novels. Morrison's novels counter Benjamin's pessimistic definition of the novel, which says that it "neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it" (3), by the performance of modes of writing that revived and preserved the tradition, culture and folklore of African Americans. Her novelistic form is a vital revisit and reorientation of novelistic possibility as her writings are embedded with oral cultural traditions. The health of the novel lies in its participation in the folkloric.

This chapter lays a foundation for reading the folkloric elements of the chapters to come, beginning with the texts of Morrison and then moving to the folk songs collected on the Assam Tea Plantations. The importance of the trickster figure is seen transatlantically and transglobally (moving between Africa, America and India). Morrison sees personal and community memory in regards to calling out one's ancestors to guide them and protect them as a healing process and infusing force of life in an individual. What she discovers in folklore provides a model for artistic and critical practice anywhere, but especially in places where people need to reclaim and rediscover their history.

CHAPTER TWO

Tar Baby: “Dusting Off the Myth”

Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny. (*Playing in the Dark* 52)

Toni Morrison persistently advocated that her works required an Afrocentric reception. She defines Africanism as not just everything coming from Africa but also all African experiences in America that originated in the violence of the transatlantic slave trade. For African American generations who experience disconnection from the supportive complexities of identity, roots, heritage and traditional values, it is existentially vitalising to discover them, whatever the means. In Alice Walker’s short story “Everyday Use,” for example, Dee is ashamed of her particular family history and does not want to be associated with it, adopting the African name Wangero. For her, the traditional family quilt, woven with the histories and stories of her African family ancestors, is a significant artefact, but in a broadly historical and symbolic sense. She never actually contributed to the work of making the quilt, unlike her sister Maggie, who engages with the quilt in a more intimate way. Dee (Wangero) thinks of “us” as the entire African American community, but Maggie seems to conceive of it more as family. Walker uses the contrast between the two sisters to explore the cultural capital of ‘heritage.’ Dee wants to claim heritage as a form of ‘folk art’, seeing the family’s worn benches, butter churn and quilts as primarily aesthetic objects. Yet her father, uncle and grandmother, for the practical work of living, made these respectively. They were defined by their use value for the people who made them and, critically, the people they made them for. The mother ultimately insists that Maggie should keep the quilt that Dee covets, primarily because

both Ma and Maggie know and love the women who collaborated in creating it. They understand what went into the weaving and stitching process behind making the quilt, unlike Dee, who sees it only as an interpretative text. Arguably, the quilt is priceless to both sisters, but in radically different ways. Dee is not wrong to stress the significance that she sees in it, but at the same time is blind to how she will turn it into a form of trophy, an object immobilised in history rather than a subject living through it. Walker's narrator finally rejects such museumification and opts for generational continuity and renewal over nostalgic appreciation. The most important thing is to keep things alive rather than merely preserve them.

This story is also instructive for how Toni Morrison (born in 1931, thirteen years before Walker) approaches the problem of culture and inheritance in her work. Morrison similarly focuses on the significance of heritage within the context of community building and renewal. She seeks to present the particular details of experience and culture that have been erased over time and need recuperation. This informs not only what she writes but also how she writes it. The imaginative labour of telling stories enables the audience into the possibilities of exploring their own life text. Morrison uses African techniques of storytelling and orature to bridge the gap between the folk origins of the Black community and the Black American literary tradition, inviting readers into such exploration. Molefi Kete Asante defines Afrocentricity as a critical perspective "which means, literally, placing African ideals at the centre of any analysis that involves African culture and behaviour" (6). In this way, Morrison is an Afrocentric storyteller who presents her community's complex fables and traditions, demonstrating how hegemonic White discourse (in its most habitual forms, from the Bible to the Western Canon) has erased or disguised the Black tradition to the extent of irretrievability. Furthermore, beliefs differ radically within the African American community and cannot always be reconciled.

Instead of producing a monolithic folklore, an Afrocentric method needs to be heedful of difference and to acknowledge the enormous diversity and fascination of what has been obliterated or damaged. Novels do not present “universal” norms but specific lives, histories and cultures. A writer like Morrison can best represent and build the African American community in her writings by imagining a world in which it can be realised in all its complexity. She has to lay the ground upon which recuperative stories can flourish. This can be compared to the way in which William Faulkner represents and builds the community of Yoknapatawpha County in his writings, making a place that feels real and full of imaginative potential at the same time. Morrison advocated such a sense of regionality in fiction, its capacity to represent a particular culture and bring it out to the rest of the world: “Faulkner wrote what I suppose could be called regional literature and had it published all over the world. It is good ... because it is specifically about a particular world. That’s what I wish to do” (LeClair 124).

Morrison’s writing is remarkable throughout for its multi-dimensional perspective upon the black (African American) experience in white America. She particularly emphasises how knowledge of skin colour leads to the formation of a specific race or colour consciousness in all her characters. Morrison’s *Tar Baby* explores the struggles of identity that come from being othered and thereby distanced from native heritage. It reflects on the essence of heritage by re-narrating and re-defining the transcultural versions of the tar baby story and simultaneously summoning tricksterish dimensions to her characterisations.²⁰ According to Morrison, white society (and the canonical literature it produces) necessarily regards the African community as unfree. In the dialectical logic of society and culture founded on slavery, there is no such thing as freedom without the enslaved people. This underlines the reality that “Africanism is inextricable from the

²⁰ The tar baby story is reclaimed and relocated in its African and Indian bases.

definition of Americanness” (*Playing in the Dark* 65); without slavery, America would not be America.

1. “The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story”

Joel Chandler Harris first presented the tale of the tar baby as one of the tales in his books *Uncle Remus: His Songs and Sayings* (1880) and *Uncle Remus* (1881). Harris was an American journalist who created Uncle Remus, a fictional character “with a sentimental attachment to a plantation memory” (Hemenway qtd.in Harris 8). He confessed to folklorists that all of his material had been appropriated from the enslaved people: “[N]ot one [tale] nor any part of one is an invention of mine. [I]t may be said that each legend comes fresh and direct from the negroes” (17).

The tar baby became an exemplary text for researchers interested in the cultural traditions that the enslaved people had brought from Africa to America in the late 1800s.²¹ Any understanding of the tar baby must account for the frequent replacement and alteration of participants, props, and events that happen when the story is told repeatedly. Joel Chandler Harris was persuaded that just like other tales, the tar baby legend originated in Africa, and he saw its place within larger networks and contexts of folklore. He demonstrated this in the introductions to the *Uncle Remus* books by comparing the stories he collected in Georgia to stories collected by Wilhelm Bleek and Charles Hartt in South Africa and Brazil, respectively (Wagner 3). Analysing the similarities between these different countries, Harris concluded that all the tar baby folk stories were connected to

²¹ “As early as 1877, William Owens was prepared to affirm what seemed obvious: that stories like the tar baby were “as purely African” as the “faces” of the people who told them. Summarizing this prevailing wisdom in 1914, Charlotte Sophia Burne noted the importance of the “African slave trade” to the “dissemination of folk tales,” citing as her main example the “Tar-Baby story,” which was known to have been “inherited” by the “coloured population of the United States” from the “tribes of Angola and the Congo.” Writing in 1933, Alice Werner makes the same point. Not only “the Tar-baby” but literally “every story in ‘Uncle Remus,’” she proposes, “can be shown to exist in a more primitive shape in Africa, and among people who cannot be suspected of having imported it from America or elsewhere” (Wagner 4).

the African diaspora representing “the global perspective of the race” (Wagner 3). In addition, Alice Werner claims that not only “the ‘Tar Baby’ [...] but every story in *Uncle Remus*, [...] can be seen to appear in a much more simplistic way in Africa, as well as among people who cannot be identified as having imported it from America or somewhere else” (223).

Briefly, the folktale involves a tar baby, Brer Rabbit (symbolic of the weak overcoming the strong through trickery) and a fox (sometimes a farmer or a bear).²² Harris, in his book *Uncle Remus: His Songs and His Sayings*, divided the folktale into two parts, two different folktales, ‘The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story’ and ‘How Mr. Rabbit was too sharp for Mr. Fox.’ The fox sets a tar baby on the side of the road to trap Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit sees the tar baby while passing by and greets him: “Mawnin! sez Brer Rabbit, sezee- ‘nice wedder dis mawnin’, sezee” (58). The tar baby does not respond: “Tar-baby ain’t sayin’ nuthin”(58) to which Brer Rabbit gets angry and annoyed: “Youer stuck up, dat’s w’at you is” (58). After continuously trying to talk to the tar baby and getting no response, he starts to punch the tar baby repeatedly: “Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis, en blip he tuck ‘er side er de head. His fis’ stuck, en he can’t pull loose” (58), and gets himself caught in the tar and is completely affixed. Now while the fox calculates the appropriate punishment, Brer Rabbit begs and cajoles the fox not to punish him and throws him in the briar patch: “I don’t keer w’at you do wid me, Brer Fox, so you don’t fling me in dat briar-patch. Roas’ me, Brer Fox, sezee, but don’t fling me in dat briar-patch” (63) and he will do whatever the fox asks for. To this, Brer Rabbit is successful in its plea, and the fox is tricked and immediately throw him into the briar patch. Brer Rabbit laughs at the fox and escapes to the briar patch, which is his ‘home’, where he was born and bred: “Bred en bawn in a briar-patch, Brer Fox—bred en bawn in a briar-patch!”

²² The spelling Brer means brother. This is used by Harris.

(Harris 64). The significance of this folktale is that Brer Rabbit is the trickster who tricks the fox and escapes, as he is aware of the fox's cruelty. Moreover, his acceptance and remembrance of where he belongs, his cultural roots or home, helps him and gives him freedom.

Furthermore, this 'stick fast motif' of the tar baby story is present in the different versions across the world. In the Indian context, there are three different versions of the tar baby story, each with a similar 'stick fast motif'. The first parallel between the 'Wonderful Tar Baby' can be found in Buddhist *Jataka Tales* by Dr Joseph Jacobs (qtd. in Brown W. 228). The popular or most read folktale is the story of the 'Price of Five-Weapons.' The Prince, future Buddha, born in the family of the king of Banaras. He was rewarded with five weapons upon learning the arts and crafts from a renowned teacher in the kingdom of *Gandhara*. On his way back home, the Prince had to cross a forest, which was ruled by a demon known as 'Demon with Matted Hair.' Before entering the forest, the Prince was warned by a man: "Please do not enter this forest; an ogre named Sticky-hair live here; he kills every man he sees" (Burlingame 42). However, the Prince does not stop and makes his way into the forest. He comes across the demon who is as huge as a palm tree and threatens the Prince: "Where are you going? Halt! You are my prey" (42). To this, the Prince answers that he is not afraid of the demon and will shatter him into pieces just with his poisoned arrow. He aims and strikes the demon with his arrow, one after the other. To his surprise, the demon stood unaffected and all the fifty arrows were stuck in his matted hair. The Prince tries to attack the demon with his other weapons such as sword and club but fails. However, the Prince is not afraid of the demon; rather he proudly said:

Master ogre, you have never heard of me before. I am Prince of Five weapons.

When I entered the forest infested by you, I took no account of bows and such - like weapons; when I entered the forest, I took account only of myself. (42)

After this, the Prince attacks the demon with his right hand and his hand is stuck. He strikes him again with his left arm, followed by the right and left legs. However, due to the sticky hair, the prince's hands and legs are stuck on the demon; and the demon is unharmed. At last, the Prince warns the demon that he will turn into powder and hits the demon with his head. Nevertheless, Prince's head also is stuck, his whole body dangling to the demon's body. To Demon's surprise, the Prince remains still undaunted and unafraid, which makes the ogre think him of something greater than a man and strong-willed like a lion. The demon asks the prince why is he not afraid of him or death? To this, the prince replied that death is certain and will definitely fall upon someday. Furthermore, he tells the demon that there still is one weapon with the prince which lies inside his belly, a thunderbolt. He further informs the demon that if he eats the prince the thunderbolt will explode inside him and he too will be destroyed. After listening to this, the demon lets go of the Prince. The Prince is the future Buddha who is known for the weapon of 'Knowledge' which resides in his stomach. The folktale of Prince of Five-Weapons ends with a parable:

The man whose heart clings not,
Whose mind clings not,
Who cultivates the Exalted States
To the attainment of Nibbana,
Shall, in due course, reach
The Destruction of all Bonds. (44)

The sticky motif story has a parallel in all the versions of a person or thing with sticky substance, who is attacked five times only to get stuck further. The ‘Prince of Five-Weapons’ or ‘Demon with Matted Hair’ folktale contains the moral by Buddha that a man’s most powerful danger is ‘fear’, ‘fear of death’. If a man is fearless then certainly nothing can destroy him.

2. Revisiting Folklore

‘Folklore’ is a collective term for ‘those traditional items of knowledge that arise in recurring performances’ (Abrahams 194). Often, they are pieces of experience or lore that generations have transmitted through repeated oral transmissions. The tar baby legend is a striking example of a legend that has been transmitted across the African diaspora. Foundational studies, such as James Weldon Johnson’s *Native African Races and Culture* (1927) and Melville Herskovits’s *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) have highlighted its significance comprehensively and systematically. Herskovits asserts, “The story was a primary example of the “cultural luggage” that Africans brought with them to America” (Wagner 5). Morrison eloquently carries the tar baby legend forward in her fourth novel, where she introduces the tar baby as a ‘female, a lady’; she is a mother figure, a woman who has the power to hold things together. The role of an ancestor has been crucial in all her writings; similarly, the dedication in this novel is to all the women, mothers, grandmothers, and great-grandmothers in Morrison’s life who are directly and indirectly connected to her roots and heritage.²³

Morrison has always sought connections to African folklore and mythology. Her novel *Song of Solomon* (1977) “comes out of a black (*sic*) myth about a flying man” (McKay 418) and she told LeClair that the germination of *Tar Baby* came from her

²³ “For Mrs. Caroline Smith, Mrs. Millie McTyeire, Mrs. Ardelia Wofford, Mrs. Lois Brooks—and each of their sisters, all of whom knew their true and ancient properties” (*Tar Baby*, Dedication)

investigations of a tale about a tar lady in African mythology (372). Even if the story's origins are not entirely clear, these borrowings from African folklore are deliberate and conscious.²⁴ Morrison shares her idea of working with and around folklore and myth:

In the book, I've just completed, *Tar Baby*, I use that old story because, despite its funny, happy ending, it used to frighten me. The story has a tar baby in it, which is used by a white man to catch a rabbit. "Tar baby" is also a name, like nigger, that white people call black children, black girls, as I recall. Tar seemed to me to be an odd thing to be in a Western story, and I found that there is a tar lady in African mythology. I started thinking about tar. At one time, a tar pit was a holy place, at least an important place, because tar was used to build things. It came naturally out of the earth; it held together things like Moses's little boat and the pyramids. For me, the tar baby came to mean the black woman who can hold things together. The story was a point of departure to history and prophecy. That's what I mean by dusting off the myth, looking closely at it to see what it might conceal. (LeClair 372)

She further shares that such tales (all the folk tales) were literally "always part of the folklore of my life" (LeClair 372). In an interview, "In Depth: Toni Morrison" on February 4, 2001, Morrison further enlightened her readers with the idea of using African symbols and customs: "Once in a while, the links are intentional, when I'm trying to feed into a community that is older than the one that blacks cobbled together in this country and the diaspora" ("C-SPAN Book TV"). Morrison utilises traditional methods of visual, oral and musical communication that had been suppressed or denied, as strategies for the recovery of "discredited" knowledge. The retrieval of indigenous memory from Africa is

²⁴ "The tar baby exists in literally hundreds of versions derived over several centuries on at least five continents. Since the 1880s, collectors have claimed that they heard the tar baby 'over and over' in the field, leading some of them to speculate that the story was 'omnipresent' in the world culture" (Wagner xi).

undoubtedly one of Morrison's cultural goals, yet it is the anchoring of her perspective in a "race-specific yet race-free writing" (*Playing in the Dark* xiv) that attaches a literary form to the necessities of racial diversity. Following African traditions of storytelling both thematically and structurally, Morrison's *Tar Baby* incorporated both the Western African myth of *Anansi* and a version of 'The Wonderful Tar-Baby Story' folktale.²⁵ This enhances the magical aesthetic of the novel due to its allegorical interpretations and adapts it to a contemporary setting, bringing the reader into a fusion space. Her strategy of using the myth and its retold version challenges the hegemony of whiteness, building a new relationship with the readers to make them aware of the active presence of alternative models of cultural authority, the need to realise neglected history and revitalise the African American identities.

Morrison disarticulated African American experience from its place in a system of unfavourable connotations in the cultural imagination of "Africanist" discourse in the United States and had a due sense of the dangers inherent in such work: "My vulnerability would lie in romanticising blackness rather than demonising it; vilifying whiteness rather than reifying it" (*Playing in the Dark* xi). By clearly overlaying her narrative, she directs the readers towards the comprehension of how original knowledge has been suppressed, almost removed, by the language of slavery, exploitation, and hegemonic discourse. In the tradition of African women storytellers, Morrison creates a narrative that confounds perceptions of reality and leaves readers with a dilemma that they must address to complete the novel successfully.

The novel *Tar Baby* revolves around two African American characters, Jadine Childs and Son (William Green). Jadine is uninterested in her roots, while Son appears to

²⁵ *Anansi*: translates to spider, is a character from Akan folktale. A trickster figure who is a West African God.

acknowledge his identity and heritage. Jadine is an orphan who was adopted by her Uncle and Aunt Childs, who work as servants to a wealthy white family, the Streets. The latter paid for Jadine's education at the Sorbonne and private school. Son is from the tiny settlement of Eloë in Florida and arrives by chance at the Caribbean Island of Isle des Chevaliers where the Street's estate is located. The Streets welcome Son, as he fills the gap left by their son, Michael, who has not visited them in a very long time. Son and Jadine form a relationship, despite (or because of) considerable tension that exists between them. They leave the island to find a place, which they can call home. In this search, they visit each other's native places, New York and Eloë, which ignites the underlying tension between them regarding their vastly different experiences of reality. Towards the end of the novel, they part ways, Jadine goes to Paris to live her city life, and Son journeys to a mythicised island shore populated by blind horsemen, descended from the first Africans forcibly brought to America. This island is the briar patch for Son; the novel ends with "Lickety-split. Lickety-split" (*Tar Baby* 309).

The novel is an adept form for Morrison, speaking in the contemporary situation of the need to recreate for black Americans "those classical, mythological, archetypal stories" of the diasporic past ('Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation' 2287). Her use of popular black and folkloric elements is necessarily strategic; it does not reinstate a perception of the foundational, fixed, and autonomous subject of tradition but rather depicts a concept of a multi-located black subject for whom authentic positions have to be discovered out of the precise narration of histories of survival. In her fourth novel, Morrison addresses the issue of disconnections among generational black women where the focus remains on identity. She shares the idea behind the large geographical shift away from the United States to a Caribbean Island in the novel: "But with its island of spirits and talking trees, *Tar Baby* is more timeless phantasmagoria than identifiable present

reality” (Hoby). The naming of the novel is borrowed from the legend where the myth is dusted off for the readers to become a woman, and not only a doll made up of tar as popularised by Harris and Disney’s *Song of the South* (1946).

Tar in Morrison represents the black women who are deeply rooted in their ancestry, identity and culture and are deeply willing to hold and nurture everyone who belongs to their heritage. There is a magical element to the novel’s geography. The island Isle des Chevaliers populated by blind horsemen is a mystical place, where the men (blind Africans²⁶) navigate the island sightless: “three hundred years ago, had struck slaves (*sic*) blind the moment they saw it” (*Tar Baby* 6). It is considered as a place for ‘pure’ Africans, first descendants of the enslaved people who escaped from the slave ships (it is the place to which Thérèse directs Son, believing him to be pure of his heritage just like herself). Another magical place is created by Valerian Street, the self-imposed exile to *L’Arbe de la Croix*, a luxurious mystical greenhouse where he lives with his wife and two servants: “[T]he most handsomely articulated and blessedly unrheterical house in the Caribbean” (*Tar Baby* 9).²⁷ He controls and manipulates his paradise by allowing Son, the intruder, to stay and sit with his family at the dinner and supports the education of Jadine. He ignores the underlying tensions with his wife and his relationship with his son Michael and appears to be a benevolent human, distancing himself from notions of capitalist and imperialist exploitation. Yet he is defined by his appetite for control, which even extends to his administration of nature through his greenhouse:

The men had already folded the earth where there has been no fold and hollowed her where there had been no hollow, which explains what happened to the river.

²⁶ According to the myth, (narrated by Thérèse in the novel) that when the island first came into sight, the enslaved Africans became blind. They are now considered ghostly or spiritual figures who roam on the island with their ‘mind eyes’. In addition, their descendant who reaches this island becomes partially blind too.

²⁷ *L’Arbe de la Croix* means The Tree of the Cross

It crested, then lost its course, and finally its head. Evicted from the place where it had lived, and forced into unknown turf, it could not form pools or waterfalls and ran every which way. (*Tar Baby* 7)

His attempts to create a perfect paradise is arguably successful, but there is an underlying chaos and prevailing tension to which he is blind. His paradise is created by the Haitian labourers over *Isle des Chevaliers*.²⁸ The ‘broken hearted river’ (human interference with nature) is represented as a grandmother who has lost her memory, somebody who just sits there, and has turned into a swamp known as *Sein de Vieilles*: “a shrivelled fogbound oval seeping with a thick black substance that even mosquitoes could not live near” (*Tar Baby* 8).²⁹ Notably, this man-made paradise is a subtle indication by Morrison of the historical truth of dislocating Africans from their land and nature to a different land under the purview of civilisation. This bright capitalist land full of wealth and prosperity stands tall; but beneath it lies the swamp, the dark mud, the darkness, and the horror of brutality conducted on the Africans. The dehumanising acts performed on the enslaved robbed them of everything: language, culture, history, identity, ancestry, and knowledge. By remembering and dedicating her novel to all her ancestors and the women, she attempts to raise hopes of renewal. As women hold things together and represent the ancient properties, the swamp is a place where nature and ancestral spirits come together.

This black substance is ‘the tar pit’, ‘the holy place’ from where Morrison begins the legend of the tar baby who holds things together. This swamp or tar pit educates Jadine about her ancestry and its demands. It indicates her entrapment between Black and White culture, European and African American modes of life, and the pressure of her past, something she was fleeing for all her life. Valerian Street erects his man-made paradise

²⁸ English translation of *Isle des Chevaliers* is *Isle of Knights*. Valerian’s candy manufacturing resembles the way sugar trade was conducted by Europeans in the Caribbean.

²⁹ *Sein de Vieilles* means old women’s breasts, translated by Morrison as ‘witch’s tit’ (*Tar Baby* 8)

directly on top of the holy site, ignorant of its significance and influence. His paradise seeks to obliterate all other modes of reality. In this way, this works as an allegory for the White American project, robbing Africans of their identity and culture in the name of building somebody else's civilisation. The man-made island becomes the place for the temptation, entrapment, fall and salvation of all the characters in the novel (Lepow 365). Moreover, along with these phantasmagoric elements, Morrison included and carried forward folkloric elements from each of her previous novels. For example, she carried the 'Western beauty standards' from Pecola to Jadine, who became a successful fashion model; she brought the myth of the flying man from Africa to the legend of the tar baby; and Sula's defeated independence is also achieved by Jadine but at the cost of disconnection.

3. Morrison's Retelling of "Tar Baby"

For Morrison, tar 'lady' stands for a black woman, a powerful mythical symbol, who can hold things together with her collative power. Through the medium of her novel, Morrison revisits history and prophecy. It revolves around and addresses the prevalent prejudices and conflicts within the white cultural context. She also focuses on the African cultural legacy to reveal the facts about slavery and its aftermath by re-conceptualising the notion of 'black art'. Particularly, Morrison is attempting to recreate and preserve her community's cultural traditions, an endeavour that necessitates our understanding of the "black cosmology" inspired by African culture. For example, the components of African cosmology are depicted in two episodes. Firstly, when Jadine is stuck in the quicksand swamp, the elements of nature literally come to life, representing an ancient African woman, and later when Jadine meets Aunt Rosa, the elderly woman in Eloe. Aunt Rosa's concern and connection reflect community cosmology, where she automatically assumes some kind of kinship with Jadine. The moment when Jadine feels troubled and is unable

to sleep, for she does not have a night dress and feels warm, Aunt Rosa enquires politely, “You all right, daughter?” (*Tar Baby* 254). This concern and care occur naturally with the sense of connection towards people of one’s community.

The novel is weaved on the reiteration of connection with one’s past, ancestry and roots and that can only be achieved with the family and community. Morrison begins the novel by dedicating it to all the female figures in her life and all the sisters and daughters, whom she calls the ‘ancient properties’. This signifies her deliberate attempt to proceed with all the folk knowledge and the cultural values she had learned from her ancestors and is willing to continue the transmission of the same to the future generation. Knowing one’s people is to know oneself and having an identity that is rooted in a culture with pride and dignity. Therefore, she addresses her connection to her roots and history and takes a step into the fictional world to re-narrate the folklore.

In her preface for the Franklin Library edition of *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison claims that she did not ‘re-tell’ the folktale; rather: “I fondled it, scratched and pressed it with my fingertips as one does the head and spine of a favourite cat- to at the secret of its structure without disturbing its mystery” (O’Meally 196). Morrison’s use of animal imagery emphasises the connection between humans and nature and how the two are significant in African tradition. Furthermore, she emphasises the extensive dehumanisation of African Americans who were the enslaved and consequently requires comfort as mitigation for the terror they experienced. Her fondling of the folktale indicates how gently she presents the secret of the tale incrementally to her readers rather than revealing it all at once. She ensured that the mystery carefully remained intact while providing the readers with the space to decipher the tale. This can be seen elsewhere in *Song of Solomon* when Milkman decodes the children’s rhyme, which has a deep connection with his ancestry:

Then they all dropped to their knees and he was surprised to hear them begin another song at this point, one he had heard off and on all his life. That old blues song Pilate sang all the time: “O Sugarman don’t leave me here,” except the children sang, “Solomon don’t leave me here.” Milkman smiled, remembering Pilate. Hundreds of miles away, he was homesick for her, for her house, for the very people he had been hell-bent to leave. (*Song of Solomon* 265)

Morrison’s use of the folktale from African tradition and culture symbolises her saying that she did not address it (the tradition and culture) from a distance. Instead, she kept it closer and caressed it with all the inherent risks of entanglement and engagement. Her re-writing of the folktale is based on the authority of her own memory. She relies on that, rather than “the literature and the sociology of other people to help [her] know the truth of [her] own cultural sources” (O’Meally 196). The novel becomes a medium to depict Black consciousness without white intervention, a way of bringing folklore back into consciousness so that folklore might continue to grow.

The tar baby story and other folk tales became culturally significant in the lives of people on the plantations. They were tales of enjoyment, moral instruction, and, perhaps most importantly, stories symbolising the master and the enslaved, oppressed *versus* oppressor relationship. The most important aspect is the question of ‘how’ the reader comprehends the story and how the story works for the individuals who tell it, and what it means to them. Morrison reinterprets the traditional tale with all its symbolic features of New World (African American culture and tradition) survival and kinship to construct a separate and new image. Her version involves recalling specific Old World (African culture and tradition) values and ideals, as well as the need for comprehensive survival in a modern world where, among other things, existing racism serves as a remembrance of the violent and exploitative history of the Americas.

In contrast to Morrison's comfortable act of "fondling" the tale into life, Zora Neale Hurston famously compared her own society (African society) to a "tight chemise" that she could not see through while wearing it. Hurston adds that stories of "Brer Rabbit's capers" were absolutely no surprise to her; however, their complete sense was easier to understand when presented in depth from a distance (Wegner 16). Hurston's analogy asserts that every culture must be interpreted in terms of its own beliefs, with the eerie coincidence that all these assertions are often hidden to cultural insiders since they are so common that they have been brushed aside or overlooked through overfamiliarity. Hurston acquired these principles from her mentor Franz Boas, and Clifford Geertz, a symbolic anthropologist in the 1960s and 1970s, later expanded these principles. Geertz claimed that customs and practices needed to be interpreted considering the symbolic significance they held for members. He asserts that culture is indeed a narrative that people "tell themselves about themselves" (Wegner 16).

The idea of nurturing and maternity is represented by Morrison as tar in the novel. Jadine is struck by the appearance of the African woman in Paris, who makes her feel "lonely and inauthentic" (*Tar Baby* 45) because the woman wears her heritage proudly. The woman in canary yellow: "[t]he skin like tar against the canary yellow dress" (*Tar Baby* 42) with three eggs representing fertility, motherhood and abundance which Jadine lacked made her feel ripped of her identity. She describes her as having 'skin like tar'; this eventually makes her insecure and questions her uncertain concept of beauty, whether it lies in 'whiteness' or not. The woman makes Jadine realise that she lacks womanhood from her heritage; she is not only an orphan (lonely) because she lost her mother but a 'cultural orphan' because she renounced her history and past. The spitting of the woman and the insulting gesture made Jadine: "derailed her – shaken her out of proportion" (*Tar Baby* 44). This is the first time when Jadine and readers are introduced to the 'tar' to

which Jadine is struck. To break free herself from this angst of feeling 'inauthentic', she visits the island to feel 'authentic' or get validation from her people, Sydney and Ondine. While on the island, Jadine is further caught in the tar in the swamp of *Sein de Vieilles*: "Mud I guess, but it felt like jelly while I was in it. But it doesn't come off like jelly. It's drying and sticking" (185).

Later in the text, Jadine gets stuck in the mossy land and start to sink into it inch by inch up to her kneecaps. The 'tar lady' reappears, and the swamp becomes the 'holy place'. She holds the tree (the trees in the swamp have ancestral woman spirits, "the women hanging from the trees") (184) tightly and closely as a partner and assured herself to count till fifty and pull herself out of the swamp.³⁰ Here, the readers see the woman in Paris, along with other women, representing womanhood, metamorphosed in the swamp and tree. The women on the trees looks down on Jadine; at first, they feel happy to restore the lost young child, but later, they realise that she is struggling hard to get out of their hold. Jadine appeared in contradiction to what they wanted; she did not want to connect to womanhood, "to be something other than they were" (184). The woman from the trees reminded her of the woman in yellow and her dead mother: "They were delighted when first they saw her, thinking a runaway child has been restored to them. But upon looking closer they saw differently" (184). It appears that the women in the swamp let Jadine go, but as the nature of the tar, she is stuck further into the tar psychologically rather than physically. The incident represents a critical depiction of Jadine's additional need to escape from black female essentialism, to break free herself from the pit (tar pit). She prevented herself from becoming one like/among the swamp women, even as she felt the

³⁰ K. Zauditu-Selassie mentions in his book: "For the Yoruba, places where land and trees converge with water are thought to be sites of great spiritual energy, as is any place where two natural forces come together (100) [...] The river's transformation becomes the sacred location for the *Ajé* or Great Mothers" (101)

lure of their power of community. The tar reappears when she visits the black society in the town of Florida, Son's hometown, Eloë.

When in Eloë, Jadine encounters the 'tar women' during a night in her windowless bedroom. First, she meets Aunt Rosa, who builds a kinship with Jadine and takes care of her like a daughter. Later, but not in a dream, Jadine is inhabited by a group of women that only she could see. She knows some of them, others she had only heard of and some were unfamiliar in front of her:

Cheyenne got in, and then the rest: Rosa and Thérèse and Son's dead mother and Sally Sarah Sadie Brown and Ondine and Soldier's wife Ellen and Francine from the mental institution and her own dead mother and even the woman in yellow. All there crowding into the room. (*Tar Baby* 260)

Jadine undergoes a constant conscious struggle against these women, which comes back to her when she contradicts the "exceptional femaleness" of the swamp women. All the women are here to confront Jadine for her negligence and refusal of her roots, womanhood, motherhood and responsibilities of being a daughter. The conflict is seen when the women flaunt their one breast each to Jadine, and the woman in yellow flashes the 'three eggs' to which Jadine feels claustrophobic and scared. She says, "I have breasts too" (*Tar Baby* 261). However, she is unable to defeat the women as it is not about having breasts; rather, the breasts are a symbol of motherhood, nurturance of one's identity, roots, ancestry and community, which Jadine lacks, having "forgotten her ancient properties" (308). Therefore, her breast was just an organ and not a symbol of being a woman and fulfilling the responsibilities of being one. Among the women, Jadine sees her dead mother and *Nanadine* (Ondine), reflecting the mother-daughter conflict. Jadine completely neglects her surrogate parents (Ondine and Sydney), and her responsibility to take care of them. Ondine takes over to confront Jadine about her self-centeredness and role of being

a daughter: “A daughter is a woman that cares about where she come from and takes care of them that took care of her” (*Tar Baby* 283).

However, the readers also see Jadine resisting throughout with the tar, getting herself stuck deeper and deeper until Ondine confronts her about being a woman, a daughter and not to pay her back for the sake of her being a mother. Jadine releases herself from the tar by dismissing the ‘identity’ of a woman imposed/ expected from her. She answers: “There are other ways to be a woman, Nanadine. Your way is one, I guess it is, but it’s not my way. I don’t want to be... like you” (284). Notably, in the legend of the tar baby, the rabbit is released and goes to his briar patch; however, with Jadine, her briar patch is Paris, her westernised identity, and her complete dissolution of community ideals, which leaves readers with mixed emotions of knowing Jadine’s triumph, unresolved identity. Her rejection of her ‘parents’ implies her rejection and disorientation with her roots which results in her ‘identity’ as weak, barren and distorted. She lacks the ideals of being a mother and daughter, being either white or black. This confusion of being ‘parentless’ and ‘cultureless’ continues with Jadine; despite this, she decides to choose her own self over any culture or ideals of being a woman: “I want to get out of my skin and be only the person inside — not American — not black — just me” (45).

4. Tar Baby as a Trickster

A trickster is a figure that completely disregards classification. It is both bad and good, blasphemous and holy, wise and foolish, female and male. In her essay “Trickster: On Inhabiting the Space Between Discourse and Story,” Anne Doueihi claims that trickster poses a severe problem for Western scholarship because “a character apparently so secular and at times almost evil could constitute part of a sacred mythological tradition” (283). This ambiguous character is considered by Jung to be “a forerunner of the saviour” (qtd. in Radin et al. 203) who is ruled by the unconscious and thus reflects the void, a concept

coined by Jung with trickster-figure attributes in consideration. In *Tar Baby*, the figure of the trickster appears as both a helper in enduring the unbearable as well as the narrator's tool for trying to rewrite history.

In *Tar Baby*, Son plays the role of the trickster, trying all the methods and improvising actions necessary for survival. In contrast, Valerian plays the role of Brer Fox, a white master who uses Jadine to trap Son. Jadine is the tar baby, the European-educated woman (with African descendants) on whom Son is 'stuck on' psychologically and erotically. The more he struggles to escape the entrapment, the more he is stuck. Trickster Son ultimately finds a way to escape to his home, his roots, and his briar patch to save himself from the tar baby Jadine.³¹ Son and Jadine struggle throughout to coexist due to the two divergent poles of cultures and history, standing for two ultimately unbridgeable perspectives. The tale of the tar baby has indeed been represented in terms of situation and metaphor with a symbolic meaning tied to characters and objects in the current environment of the novel. The representation of the Old World and New World is mirrored through their relationship, depicting the struggle between the past and present, assimilation and rootedness. This further dramatises struggles active within African American culture, which is tangled up with both Western values and African culture.

Portraying all the features of a classic trickster, Son is a nameless outlaw, a catalyst, and an expert storyteller; he has a different face for everybody, a story for each different situation, and he does not stay within the confinements of social norms. He uses his trickster powers to avoid imprisonment, and for eight years, he kept on changing his identity and name; consequently, he barely remembers his original name, and it was not

³¹The spelling Brier is used by Harris and briar is used by Wagner. This thesis will follow spelling Briar as used by Bryan Wagner in his book *The Tar Baby: A Global History* (2017).

recorded on any social security cards. He deals easily with people from all social levels across the boundaries in borrowed silk pyjamas and suits, ranging from the wealthy white businessperson and landowner Valerian to Thérèse, the mystic islander who completely refuses to acknowledge the presence of White Americans.

Further, the associated cultural values with the representation of a tar baby as both Son and Jadine display some features. They debate throughout, debating continually to find out the best possibilities for African Americans to achieve independence from the hegemonic White culture in America. The tar baby is assumed to remain hooked into shifting environmental preferences as it moves from place to place, exemplifying the culturally unique ideals associated with specific places and people. For example, Son keeps his African-ness and finishes rejecting the construct of White society. At the same time, Jadine, on the other hand, does not connect with Africanness and feels a sense of otherness in Son's hometown Eloë, Florida. Due to her disconnection from her African roots and traditions, she leaves for Paris, which she considers her home and where she feels a degree of belonging.

Son also promotes the preservation of cultural legacy by adhering strictly to conventional roles in African American culture. He believes in the nurturing power of the community and one's family; he despised the fact of an African American woman bearing a white man's child. He tries to rescue Jadine from rootlessness and helps her to realise and accept her roots and culture. This impulse can take on a violent aspect, which is principally represented by Morrison through their sexual relationship. She is frightened by looking at his skin for the first time, describing it as "dark as a riverbed" (*Tar Baby* 113); it reminds her uncomfortably of her own other black self-but also awakens her to it. Son later mocks Jadine's rootlessness by telling her about her own alienation; he reminds her of the situation when anyone asks her where she belongs or where she comes from,

and she replies by giving the names of five cities or towns where she has lived. He confronts her about her cultural confusion, the way she adorns the black sealskin fur coat and rejects the black culture; she thinks of blacks with a stereotypical mindset. For instance, when Jadine warns him if he tries to rape her, Valerian will feed him to the alligators. To this remark, Son looks at Jadine with pity and disgust: “Rape? Why you little white girls always think somebody’s trying to rape you?” (*Tar Baby* 121).

In contrast, Jadine believes achieving success in white society is the only (admittedly paradoxical) way to recognise one’s African American cultural background. Her negative perception of African American culture thus mirrors white assumptions and values. Her entire life was spent as a white woman, her job involved working with whites, and the white educational institution where she studied made her forget her roots and original identity. She appreciates Picasso’s appropriation of African masks over actual Itumba masks and “Ave Maria” over gospel music. She abandons African values, for example, ridiculing African welfare mothers who do pottery and crafts, mocking them as awful. This snobbery stresses her alienation from the people of what should or could be her African American community. Jadine’s hopes and dreams were focused on the white culture, like her successful modelling career and not embracing motherhood or family hood while being detached and isolated from her inner self: “Jadine has embraced white stereotypes along with white culture” (Moffitt 16). Through her, Morrison attempts to satirise the black women who fall prey to the Western culture, who refuse to discover the remains of their black selves and adapt to breathe into the realm of new life. The character of Jadine teaches what is ‘not’ supposed to be done as she lacks bonding, that is womanhood, motherhood and family hood. The tale *tar baby* acts as a reflective remembrance and cautionary tale that defines the lives of the people who reject their cultural heritage in the pursuit of self-fulfilment.

Son, Jadine and their tensions are metaphors for the more significant conflict of all African Americans as they continue to seek their place in the modern world while trying to retain their traditional roots. Morrison tries to inform the readers to struggle against all the 'tar' that might entrap them, and everyone must find their own briar patch. The traditional practices of the all-black community town of Eloë in Florida are the origin of Son's being. The town is fictitious, but also a deliberate attempt by Morrison to emphasise Florida, where the fugitive enslaved ran to escape slavery from the plantations of Georgia and Carolina. The town appreciates ethnic and familial connections and emphasises the significance of places of origin among its people. Eloë has its own rebels and heroes, as well as its customs, morality, integrity, and communal outlaws. The community people strongly believe in the past and the truth of myth, and they think that no acts in the present can be separated from past deeds. The members of the community know each other and live together as they are all a part of an extended family. Son faces tension as he distances himself from the South and heads to New York in search of material possession. The Caribbean was a place that represented more misery than survival. On the Caribbean Island, Son becomes an anonymous outsider. He abandons his hometown (Eloë), where he has a distinct identity and name, in pursuit of money and to escape his past, a murder conviction. Coleman points out that "there does not seem to be enough [in Eloë] to maintain Son's breadth of spirit and desire. Although Son ran away because of Cheyenne's murder, one can also see that he left Eloë because its provincialism and slow ways did not fulfil him" (67). Once he leaves his native place, he is gradually influenced by American norms and notions and thus thinks he successfully got away from his past reality, where he killed his wife, Cheyenne. The entanglement of Son in Jadine's love also separates him from the black culture of his home for a while.

When he travels to New York, he encounters a racial divide. Jadine tries to save him from what he perceives as white people's disapproval of black people's primitivism. She actively works to educate him and asks Valerian to cover the costs of his schooling and jobs. Nevertheless, he objects to her attempt because he despises being dependent on the whites, the world's predators. Jadine is viewed as a "model of industry and planning" of her materialistic ambition (*Tar Baby* 270). Like the other African Americans he encounters in New York, Son is disconnected from black culture and trapped in the materialism of the white world. He feels culturally lost himself. When he realises how fake the white world is, his cultural duality dissolves. Ultimately, he realises in New York that he has a comfortable identity of his own because he is rooted in Eloë's rich heritage. He can escape there, just as generations before others escaped the plantations.

Different forms of belongingness, whether to briar patch or safe home, are displayed through Son and Jadine, who have radically different perspectives on New York, but at the same time, they complicate it as well. Living in New York is challenging, despite it having a large African American population, because its relentless business culture diminishes any potential for connection and warmth, and Son does not connect with the place as a home. On the other hand, Jadine believes that "if ever there was a black woman's town, New York was it" (223). She recognises that capitalism might represent an avenue of realisation for her, but Son is able to sense and hear a 'silenced and veiled' crying in New York. He only finds peace in the briar patch of Eloë (191). Contrarily, New York is a liberating briar patch for, but a trap for Son. Florida frightens Jadine as much as New York horrifies Son. He benefits from being enmeshed in the black myths and legends of Eloë because the folklore frees him from the shackles of materialism. Son feels complete, stable, relaxed, and functional because of his reliance on Eloë's folk values.

Ultimately, towards the end of the novel, on the island of the blind horsemen, the knowledge of myths and legends sets him free:

Tar Baby marks the final step of immersion into the black folk world. Son achieves his truest nature by becoming one, [...] with the tales themselves. Like the horsemen, he has been blinded by the prospect of enslavement, but also like them, this very handicap gives him freedom and power. (Byerman 215)

Son rises as a powerful black man with a strong bond to nature and folk values. Even though his desire for a bright future continually draws him away from the South, he can understand and acknowledge his heritage; so, everyone decides on the co-ordinates of their own briar patch, depending on the acceptance of reality over illusion and the remembrance of cultural roots that one defines and locates. Morrison's strategy is to show the limitation of each totalising view and solve the two opposed social webs that are the 'mama-spoiled black man' and 'culture-bearing black woman' of Son and Jadine, respectively (*Tar Baby* 272).

5. Questioning the Motives of Trickster: Jadine and Son

Traditional tales like that of the tar baby manifest a potential politics of refusal because they resist conformity to the uniform constructs imposed on them by other narratives. Henceforth, by radically questioning the entrapment of the original tar baby folktale and complicating the meaning of 'tar', Morrison crafts Jadine with a complex viewpoint on her ability to express the rich paradoxes of inhabiting interconnected worlds that have not always intersected. To focus on her quest to find a path through the pressures of nationality, oppression, and resistance, *Tar Baby* uses regional expressions such as the significance of motherhood, womanhood, neighbourhood and community instead of isolation, capitalistic ideals and individualism. The novel includes interracial and intraracial dialogue, with the former questioning the American worldview and the latter

putting a successful black middle-class acquisitiveness against the folk community of Eloe's dialect. Jadine is trapped in an identity conflict of her own; she refuses African models of womanhood and her cultural history. In one sense, she is a tar baby because she is only a simulation of herself and needs to be released. Constructive bonding is signified by tar and represents the things and values that people of colour in the African diaspora require for cultural cohesion. Jadine implicitly needs this too. Yet she displays an ambiguous relationship with tar, and the contrast between the dense, adhesive nature of the tar and the free movement of the trickster creates the central tension in the narrative. Her anger and terror at being covered in the tar, and the tenacious struggle she performs to come out of it, indicate the pain and effort of her more profound struggle where she is affixed in the aspects of her identity, heritage, and culture.

Jadine is one of the most powerful iconoclasts in Morrison's novels, evolving herself as another form of trickster who discovers the agency of her own voice and will, even as she traces the traditional character of a tar baby tale as an unspeakable object. The traditional tar baby does not have the capability to speak, but its 'essence' is powerful, definable and understandable to others. Jadine appears to be a tarred outcast, but she also inherits the power of a visionary and can see beyond the limits of society, reflecting an explicit disaffection towards the status of the women in the folk community. She refuses to confine herself within the limitations of the web of society and follows the urge to flee. She denies the imposed identities of being a woman, and an African American, according to all the women she meets, further refusing to accept the gendered role segregation she faces at Eloe. This desire to define herself is unrestricted by gender and race, and she performs the role of both a trickster and the tar baby by rejecting the restrictive definitions of black womanhood and tastes of 'male' freedom, thus illustrating the consequences of her social and cultural misbehaviour. She searches for her identity

but can never entirely intermingle with her African roots as she rejects all - tar, blackness, femininity, and fertility of a woman.

Morrison overlaps her characters through tricksterism. Son is a trickster figure, a Brer Rabbit, and a victim too. In one sense, he initially appears as a figure, which corresponds to conventionally racist preconceptions and misconceptions about black men that were expressed during slavery and afterwards, as if Morrison wants to show him through a white gaze before he can acquire his own proper reality. For instance, Son is introduced with words: “a black man with dreadlock hair” (78), someone whose intentions are only to rape, kill or steal: “I know he’s been here long enough and quite enough to rape, kill, steal– do whatever he wanted” (99). Yet if he is made to appear ignorant, untidy, and sometimes animal-like, he is also genuine and, most importantly, respectful of his black ancestors’ principles. Son is referred to as a ‘black’ by Margaret when he is discovered hiding in her bedroom and is described as a subhuman, an outcast. The wit and power addressed with his blackness make him frightening to her, not least because he reflects the violence of her own assumptions back to her. Son infers the silence, which is accompanied by ‘masking’, and tries to rescue himself and Jadine without perpetuating the conventional co-ordinates of how American culture (the dominant culture) regards to African American culture (the marginalised culture). The episode where Son forces himself sexually on Jadine “to breathe into her the smell of tar and its shiny consistencies” (120) relates intertextually to how Brer Rabbit gets stuck in the tar baby while trying to punch it. He thinks he is superior to her in terms of teaching about folk culture, values, and manhood. Son tries to force the smell of ‘tar and his dreams’ onto her, his dreams that are deeply rooted in folk imagery from his home where he belongs, his briar patch in Eloe, Florida. Yet in forcing this upon her, he also becomes trapped within the role of a violent

oppressor. This difference between Jadine and Son reflects the merging of dualistic paradigms and cross-cultural realities.

Love and relationships are always complex and distorted in Morrison's writings, always susceptible to the psychic disturbance caused by historical racism and leading to rape, infanticide and murder. Morrison shares with Jake Bakerman:

Love is always passing us by, always passing us by [...] and always the ego interferes: some pride, some sort of arrogance [...] and it just slips through our fingers. And there's some reason why we don't hang in with a husband or sweetheart or what have you. Something comes up, and we frequently just cannot rise above it. And I think that is simply more true than not. (60)

Son's only apparent recourse in dealing with frustration and opposition to his desires is violence as if it is all he has been taught. In the episode where he is informed about Jadine leaving with a white man, his immediate reaction is to smash everything, including the white man and the place where they first met and made love. Morrison writes through the lenses of African American tradition, but her writings reflect her understanding of the brutal tragedy faced by Africans and people of African ancestry and the affective rupture it caused.

6. Dilemma Story

Morrison does not give solutions or answers to the conflicts she creates among her characters. Instead, following the structure and style of dilemma stories, she opens new possibilities and demands new interpretations. She allows her readers and her characters to take a free fall that is way beyond preconceived notions and limitations. The tar baby legend she uses to symbolise the positive cultural potential is not only the African woman who holds things together but also a trickster who lays traps, has an appetite and is a boundary crosser. Morrison questions the 'original' (or popular, known by the majority)

tar baby story where it (tar baby) is presented as an “unspeakable” object, and his (tar baby) thoughts and will are not put into consideration. As John Irving asserts, this is “a novel deeply perceptive of the black’s desire to create a mythology of his own to replace the stereotypes and myths the white man has constructed for him” (1). She also blurs the gender boundaries of the tar baby; she specifically mentions that there is a ‘tar lady’ and a ‘holy place’ in African mythology, but she also creates Son as a tar baby. Jadine gets stuck on Son. She first attacks Son when in *L’Arbe de La Croix*, and second time, when she attacks him with both hands in New York. Her act of physically attacking Son makes her more stuck on him and his ideology of African-ness. Furthermore, in the novel, the role of tar baby and trickster is reversible; for example, when Jadine is stuck in the swamp, she is a trickster (Rabbit) there; however, when she is in the car with Son, her anger is ‘unspoken’ similar to the tar baby.

Morrison also creates a ‘tar’ through her writing. She creates a trap for the readers by luring them into passing judgement upon the characters, only to then query the legitimacy of such verdicts. Furthermore, her writing critiques dualistic reasoning, a limiting worldview since it ultimately isolates the person from the “other.” *Tar Baby* critiques dualism- sexism, racism, and class differentiation; it confronts the world on edge mercilessly. Interestingly, Morrison uses Paris as a briar patch for Jadine, not New York (which she initially thought was her home). France was an alternative home for African Americans where they did not face any kind of racism for France being ‘colour blind’. In addition, there were equal opportunities and freedom, unlike the United States' rigid racial system; exiled revolutionaries and artists such as Josephine Baker, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, and Loïs Mailou Jones found their home in Paris. Jadine travels to Caribbean Island, New York, and Eloë to find her comfortable space, a conducive atmosphere she can call and feel at home, but she does not find it in any of these places.

She chose Paris to be her home, where she is free to live her life and identity as her own self and is not ‘threatened’ by the identity imposed on her by the night women and Ondine. Similarly, Son is cradled in Eloë by his family and friends and the cultural and folk values they express. After his exile from Eloë, he feels lost and disconnected from Eloë. He fails to maintain the connection with his people in the town and runs away from the town, his family and his responsibilities. Just like Jadine, he too tries to find a home he can share with her. He goes to New York and Eloë with her but fails to find a home. Only through the help and guidance of Thérèse, who acts as a surrogate mother to Son, he ultimately finds his freedom and a place to call home, *Isle des Chevaliers*, although without Jadine.

In her essay on ‘Trickster’ in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopaedia*, Cynthia Whitney Hallett describes Morrison as a trickster figure herself. Morrison does indeed construct her tales, twisting the anticipated, deceiving us, teaching us, and changing our perspective (354). Similar to *Anansi*, “[t]he works of Toni Morrison reflect more than her mastery of folkloric figures, most especially that of the trickster; her stories also exhibit her ultimate skill of author as trickster” (Hallett 355).³² In African mythology, *Anansi* is a trickster figure of a spider who, through his wisdom and cunningness, collects all *Nyame*³³ the Sky God’s tales, thus is also known as the god of all knowledge of stories. Similar to *Anansi*, Morrison too weaves her narrative as a spider web to engulf and make her readers lost in the labyrinth structure of her narrative. Because of his capacity to change his perceived flaws into virtues, *Anansi*’s tales frequently feature him as the protagonist. He is one of many tricksters from West Africa, including Brer Rabbit and Leuk Rabbit. In addition, he is also known for keeping connections alive between the dead ancestors and the living. Notably, tricksterism can be seen in the practice of Morrison’s writings through her

³² *Ananse*: also known as *Anansi*, an *Akan* character known for his insight, intelligence, and wisdom.

³³ *Nyame* or *Onyankopon*, the God of the *Akan* people of Ghana, which means he who knows and sees everything. He is the omniscient, omnipotent sky god.

language and wordplay but also in how she develops her characters into tricksterish modes of being. Her character plays, guides, cheats and steals, teasing the readers' minds and emotions, full of paradoxes and contradictions. Such characters continuously keep the narrative open-ended and attest to a variety of unpredictable interpretations and meanings. Through them, Morrison inverts the static and rigid worldviews and concepts and focuses on fluidity and plurality, deconstructs notions of visibility and invisibility; living and dead; absent and present.

Notably, Morrison presents Jadine as an orphan and is questioned about her identity and heritage throughout the journey of the novel. However, her being an orphan is significant as Sydney and Ondine nurtured her when she became an orphan at the age of twelve and did not get the nurturance and guidance of a parent. Ondine did not play her role similarly to Pilate, who guided Milkman with all the knowledge of ancestry, roots and heritage. Ondine herself was not well equipped to educate Jadine of her heritage as she and Sydney both prioritised their life serving their white masters. Ondine says, "I know my kitchens. Better than I know my face" (*Tar Baby* 37). This further suggests how they were involved in maintaining the lifestyle and following the culture that was expected of them by their white masters. Ondine accepts her fault for not educating Jadine about her cultural heritage: "I never told you nothing. I never told you nothing at all and I take full responsibility for that" (*Tar Baby* 283). Therefore, Sydney and Ondine share the responsibility of making Jadine a cultural orphan as they put her out in the white culture, farther away from her black culture.

Similarly, William Green is given the name Son, significant to the role he plays. His name reflects his immaturity as a man. He is unable to make a decision for himself and is nurtured like a child (son) rather than a man by all the women in the novel. When he goes to Eloe, all the elderly women and mother figures welcome and invite him to their

household. Thérèse, who has “magic breasts” (*Tar Baby* 291), symbolising her maternal role, treats him like her son and cares for and guides him. Through her insights (spiritual milk), she recognises Son as a lost child who must be reconnected to his ancient properties. She believes him to be one of the horsemen: “smiling at her as he rode away wet and naked on a stallion. So she knew [...] any day now he would be discovered or reveal himself” (*Tar Baby* 104). Towards the end of the novel, Son is guided by Thérèse to forget about Jadine and join the blind horsemen as it is his place rather than the world outside which keeps him confused. Being on this island will help him achieve freedom and can carry his heritage further. Son resists taking up any job when in New York, and his escape to the mythical land of *Isle des Chevaliers* signifies his escape from the responsibility of being an adult. He elopes from Eloë and never keeps a connection with his father; rather, he tries to educate Jadine about the black community who stick together for each other. Interestingly, Thérèse is also a character with trickster traits, mystical, visionary, and, importantly, marginalised. She is a blind seer who carefully evaluates the contractions and conflict between Son and Jadine. This trickster figure is also deeply connected with the tar women, also called the island’s swamp women, indicating her rootedness to her community and heritage. She clearly rejects Western ideologies and challenges their limitations.

Morrison asks her readers about both Son and Jadine; she leaves the novel with a dilemma and does not end the novel with a decision or conclusion. Will Son go after Jadine, or will he be accepted on the island and become one like the blind horsemen? Will he achieve the self-hood that he has been running from? For Jadine, what and where is her briar patch? Will a woman similar to Sula, who tries to redefine female ideals by entering the masculine territory that shuns her parents will, be able to gain her identity as a woman? Will she be able to find and provide nurturance in her life? What and where lies the

wholeness for both of them? The novel begins with the quest for wholeness and does not provide a direct answer for its readers. In 1986, Morrison confirmed that her writing style that follows the oral tradition; she said, “You don’t end a story in the oral tradition” (Davis 419). Therefore, Morrison leaves the novel in ambiguity for the readers to decide the outcome of both Son and Jadine according to their choice. Lewis Hyde can explain Morrison’s reliance on her audience: “Trickster commonly relies on his prey to help him spring the traps he makes” (19).

7. Biblical Use

Morrison chose the epigraph for her novel from the Bible’s book of First Corinthians 1:11.

For it hath been declared
Unto me of you, my brethren, by them
which are of the house of
Chloe, that there are
contentions among you. (*Tar Baby* ii)

In the Bible, this is a letter by the Apostle Paul to one of the early Christian communities in Corinth, a port city in Greece. Chloe was the head of a congregation in Corinth, and her people informed Paul that there were some contentions among the members of the community. Thus, Paul writes to them, addressing the contentions. Morrison’s use of this epigraph suggests her concern with resolving the disagreements among African Americans regarding their identity and heritage. The further contentions are on rejecting and distancing from one’s ancient properties and moving towards opportunities. In addition, she tries to re-evaluate the stereotypes against African Americans that perhaps encourage them to associate with the New World and reject their history.

Furthermore, the novel introduces the readers to a man-made paradise created by Valerian to compare it with the paradise in Genesis created by God. This comparison

encourages the audience to consider the dualism between the real and fictional world, black and white, male and female, rich and poor. However, while talking about the setting of *Tar Baby*, Morrison shares:

I wanted to be in a place where the characters had no access to any of the escape routes that people have in a large city [...] Everyone else is confined to the island by Valerian who has domination over everything there. I wanted to examine that kind of fiefdom. (McKay 399)

Similarities between *Paradise Lost* and *L'Arbe de la Croix* can be read through Lauren Lepow's essay, 'Paradise Lost and Found: Dualism and Edenic Myth in Toni Morrison's "*Tar Baby*.'" Morrison tries to introduce the reader to have a view of a ground reality of the paradise, a paradise that is created, controlled and channelised by the Whites. This is a paradise where nothing is peaceful or happy, everyone who lives here is distorted and unhappy, the environment is chaotic, and their relationship with each other is full of secrets, grudges and differences. There is no good or evil in the paradise created by Valerian (representing the enslavers); there is only one power, which creates the hierarchy among people, creates a gaze, a stereotype to distinguish the enslaved on different aspects such as the colour of the skin, gender, class and race. To ensure there is no fall or casting out from Eden, the novel is set on *Isle des Chevaliers*, from where each one of them chose their own path. Here, she addresses the contentions between the self and the other, the individual and the group.

8. Conclusion

Mobley illustrates: "The black woman who denies her 'historical connections' and 'sacred properties' risks psychic chaos and alienation from the very resources that could empower her" (291). The novel's central conflict concerning the dualism between male and female,

black and white, rich and poor are visited through William Green and Jadine Childs, who act as tar babies and tricksters for each other. They both try to resolve and find the connection between their own self and their identities.

Both Son and Jadine read one another as tar babies, querying both racial and gendered identity. They criticise the other for not adhering to the cultural norms that they have been educated to enshrine. As such, they exist in an enduring state of difference from one another. Yet this difference also suggests a less dualistic perspective on how men and women can better understand the world and each other, asserting that a path toward nondual consciousness might exist. Their conflict appears to have troubling implications for Blackness and Whiteness. Although Son considers Blackness to be innately beneficial, he believes that education and ‘authentic’ Blackness are incompatible. In his opinion, to become educated and wealthy would corrupt his ideologies, suggesting that he would have abandoned his Black identity and, ultimately, turned white, as Jadine has. It is challenging, however not unattainable, for the reader to argue that one is essentially correct while the other is essentially incorrect. Since neither Son’s nor Jadine’s perspectives are completely without worth, nor are they entirely valid.

Additionally, through *Tar Baby*, Morrison “dusts off the myths to uncover their deeper meaning and to consider their adequacy for building up African American culture and community” (Baker-Fletcher 29). Letitia L. Moffitt’s article ‘Finding the Door: Vision/Revision in Toni Morrison’s *Tar Baby*’ (2004) is concerned with how stereotypes are constructed and viewed (and reviewed) in *Tar Baby* and the consequences of the limited visions with which the characters view themselves and each other (15). In other words, the novel continuously challenges stereotyping and perhaps is able to break it down due to the excessive usage of stereotypical views: “[*Tar Baby*] immerses readers in a plurality of these perspectives; by doing so, it insists on a complex vision that renders

stereotypes—and the binaries that result from simplistic identification of stereotypes—impossible” (24). Yet Morrison rejects using flight as a means of escaping from the community. Jadine departs for France near the end of the novel, but this flight is metaphorically compared to a queen ant’s last flight in life. Soldiering ants are the queen ants who have “no time for dreaming” (294). The ants are the ‘females’ who are constantly performing their work because, according to Morrison, “the life of their world requires organisation so tight and sacrifice so complete there is little need for males” (*Tar Baby* 293). Even though perhaps the ants are too busy to dream, the queen ant always has one last strong desire: a bridal flight in the sky. The ant soars through the air, but it must eventually shed “the wings she will never need again” (293). While in the air, the ant realises she must return to the earth, her former home, to carry forward her generation. Jadine’s flight, like the ant’s, is just transient.

Malin Walther Pereira acknowledges Morrison’s introduction of the theme of female selfhood through the insect image (ant), which symbolises Jadine’s search for self. Morrison’s use of the female insect as a metaphor connects her to Sylvia Plath’s *Bee Poems*, which also perform a narrative that could be said to end with a symbolic death that might also signify a beginning. Plath’s poems end with her bees that “taste the Spring” (218); however, it is not so clear whether Jadine’s flight is such an awakening. It is instead an attempt to distance herself from African American culture, which is rich in the concept of female selfhood. As Pereira opines: “[R]ereading through Morrison reveals Jadine’s self to be a white self, constructed in part by the fear and repression of blackness” (Pereira 527). Although she flies with the dream of white cultural ideals, to live her life independently away from womanhood, motherhood and family hood, she will undoubtedly acknowledge the truth and reconnect to her roots. This can be seen after she comes back from Eloë and moves out of her problematic relationship with Son; she finds

it difficult to recognise or associate herself with an identity. She thinks of herself as black with white skin.

Morrison uses the competitive versions of Son and Jadine's trickery to revisit, address and foreground the notions of ancestry, culture, heritage, and rootedness. Both act as tricksters to each other where they struggle with each other's adhesive 'tar', and each has a different 'home' - a briar patch. Furthermore, throughout the novel, Morrison raises the presence of racial pride, conformity, beauty, and identification. The violence, uneasiness, and tension between Son and Jadine address the larger question of African Americans as they try to find their place in modern society while keeping the connection with their roots and culture. Therefore, revisiting the folk legend of 'tar baby' indicates Morrison's vision to hold on to folk knowledge, allowing one to connect with one's heritage and cultural values without hierarchy or differentiations. It creates a tar for the reader, which encourages them to revisit the briar patch of oral tradition, storytelling where folklore is present to understand the harmony and commonality among humans.

Morrison's novels perform as an operating structure for readers to read and understand the essence of folk traditions; simultaneously, they act as a mode of resistance against the deliberate attempt to erase the history of the enslaved. According to the folklorist Biebuyck, an African epic is a "long, orally transmitted narrative presented in an episodic manner" (5). A bard singing and performing a multi-generic performance circulates it orally. The narration is performed episode by episode, in a circular narrative style, basically with repetition of the episode and incorporating all the literary forms known to Africans. This repetition occurs due to the oral transmission of the narrative (Biebuyck and Mateene 13–14). This circularity of oral tradition is further explored in the following chapter's exploration of *Beloved*, where a historical fact lays a foundation to revisit the catastrophe of the slave trade. The narration takes the readers back to the place

from where and how the folklore emerged, addressing the power of beliefs, rituals and community traditions. The presence and absence, appearance and disappearance of slavery is represented through a gothic image of a dead child. Morrison designs the opening and ending of her narratives in a circular movement, connecting the beginning and end in a rhythmic circularity.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost-Texting: Beloved's Messages to and from the Beyond

Lewis Hyde talks about the appearance of a trickster as a saviour: “when human culture turns against human beings themselves” (279). Reviving and revisiting the folk myth of the ‘tar baby’ in the previous chapter, Morrison-as-trickster performs the role of saviour for African culture and tradition, revisiting the catastrophe of enslavement and suggesting how it might be negotiated. *Tar Baby*, ends with Jadine discovering her definition and identity of ‘home’ and Son happily reaching a place, the shore of an island (*Isle des Chevaliers*) of blind horsemen, that he can call and feel as his ‘home.’ Morrison’s *Beloved* continues the work of improvising ways of interrogating concepts of belongingness, family, home and community in a post-slavery historical context. Beloved, who represents the acute problem of remembering those who died in slavery, may also be interpreted as a manifestation of a cunning *artus*-worker: “think of trickster artists as *artus*-workers, jointworkers” (Hyde 256).³⁴ As a trickster herself, Morrison “fondled” the legend of Tar Baby; in *Beloved*, this shape-shifting of myths and legends is carried forward in that she crafts a narration by loosening up the thread of a historical fact gleaned from a newspaper clipping. *Beloved* builds on the true story of Margaret Garner, a fugitive who killed her daughter, and attempted the killing of her sons in order to prevent them from being returned to captivity.³⁵ *Beloved* radically broadens and intensifies what might be understood conventionally about the enslaved experience.

³⁴ The flexible or moveable joint. The word *artus* is derived from the Latin word *articulus*, which means to join, to fit or to make (Hyde 254).

³⁵“Margaret Garner was a well-known slave (*sic*) woman in the years leading up to the American Civil War. In January 1856, she fled from her owner Archibald K. Gaines in Kentucky with her husband, Robert and four children. The Garners successfully crossed the Ohio River near Cincinnati, but a group of slave owners soon discovered the family. Margaret Garner killed her little daughter with a butcher knife even before slaveholders discovered the runaway slaves. Garner also attempted to murder her other children but was unsuccessful. Garner did not want her children to be sent to slavery.

1. Aftergods, Mobilegods

Albert Raboteau states in *Slave Religion* (1978) that in the enslaved states of America, “the gods of Africa died” (86). The horrendous cataclysm destroyed not only the culture and identity of Africans but also their faith in a supportive divine power; if Africans had believed in the intrinsic and distinct dignity of their gods that was hard to sustain in the face of such destruction and violence.³⁶ With the gods dying, the foundation of their being also died. The families and clans of the enslaved Africans were separated and sold to different plantations making it impossible for them to resurrect their own identity, let alone their gods.³⁷ Michael Ras Brown uses the Congo proverb: “Where your ancestors do not live, you cannot build your house” (90), to explain how the removal of the inhabitants resulted in the loss of blood ties and the loss of established spiritual connections: “No ancestors in the new land meant no graves, and no graves meant no access to the land of the dead” (90).

Nevertheless, songs, myths, tales, and riddles allowed them to connect, communicate, and form new families in America. However, they could not revive or resurrect their gods, and their spiritual relationship to nature. Instead, they had to adopt religion and religious practices derived from European institutions: “From the very

The Hamilton County Grand Jury convicted Garner and her husband of murder. The Garners were released from jail and handed to their owner by a United States commissioner. A federal district judge agreed with the commissioner and ordered the Hamilton County sheriff to hand over the Garners to a United States marshal for the slaves’ (*sic*) return to their master. A Hamilton County probate judge attempted to intercede, but the Garners had already been returned to their owner in Kentucky by the federal marshal” (*Margaret Garner - Ohio History Central*).

³⁶ Africa is a large continent with diverse cultures and ethnicities with different languages. African civilisation is monotheistic, but they have numerous secondary divinities whom they pray, celebrate and follow. These secondary divinities, the mythological figures (pantheon of gods) and ancestors act as messengers and intermediaries between humans and the creator of the dynamic universe, the Supreme Being. For example, the creator for *Asante*’s clan of Ghana is *Nyame*, for Yoruba in Nigeria is *Olorun* and in East Africa, it is *Mulungu*. However, due to the forced migration, people from different parts of Africa were introduced to Islam and Christianity.

³⁷ Raboteau talks about uncomprehensive tragedy of the Atlantic slave trade in his book *Slave Religion*. The slavery not only removed from the enslaved native lands but also from the political. Social and cultural systems along with their tribal and linguistic groups. They were broken off either on the coasts of Africa or in the slave pens, which did not allow them to preserve their family of kinship ties (4).

beginning of the Atlantic slave trade, conversion of the slaves (*sic*) to Christianity was viewed by the emerging nations of Western Christendom as a justification for the enslavement of Africans” (Raboteau 96). Despite these obstacles, some African gods traversed the Atlantic.³⁸ Brown has suggested, an African god of water, *simbi* (worshipped by Congo communities of West Central Africa) came across with the enslaved and landed on the shores of South Carolina Lowcountry: “[O]ne variety of an African god arrived on these shores and made an enduring abode of the freshwater springs of the South Carolina Lowcountry” (xiii).³⁹ Morrison looks for further traces of such African divinity. She aims to repair the loss of connection to the divine in her writings and seeks therefore to incorporate the restorative magic of African cultural tradition. *Beloved* revolves around the imagery of water, marking the significance of the water god in African culture, along with tracing matrilineal ancestry and connection between Africa and America.

We have seen in *Tar Baby* how Morrison used familiar mythical structures, symbols and archetypes in her writing, and how these enable the resurfacing of histories, and ideas about history, that have been suppressed, misinterpreted and misrepresented. Morrison presents a figure of an ever-present ancestor throughout her narratives, which tunes in with otherwise lost African culture and African American history, bringing the reader to an awareness of its existence. In *Tar Baby*, Morrison revives the presence of ancestral spirit among the trees and a female elder, Thérèse, who is an ancestral figure for Son. She guides and protects Son from Jadine, on whom Son was stuck. Due to the

³⁸ Africans brought as the enslaved, lived near the sea islands and shores of North and South Carolina; they were called Gullah. The enslaved in Florida and Georgia were called Geechee. They were identified with their unique form of speech which is incomprehensible to an outsider (Patton 300; McWhorter 406).

³⁹ “The landscape in which African-descended newcomers settled consisted largely of the lands along the main waterways of the coastal plain, including the Ashley, Cooper, and Stono Rivers [...] This was a natural extension of settlement, as the rivers and connected waterways provided the most efficient means for transporting people and goods. An early settler of Carolina commented that with all Plantations being seated on the Rivers, they can go to and fro by Canoe or Boat as well and as soon as they can ride [horses]” (Brown 52).

presence and guidance of this ancestral figure, Son vanished into the legendary myth of the blind horsemen, who are considered a pure form of the enslaved descendants and becomes one of them on the island. As the novel ends with him happily running towards the shore of an island of the blind horsemen, he can figure out his identity and his home, the belongingness from which he has been running away. In writing, Morrison conjures beliefs in spirits, survivors from the ships of the Middle Passage who exist to remember, acknowledge, and connect with their ancestors.

Engaging with myths simultaneously enables Morrison to be contemporary and traditional, and her writing models the ongoing negotiation of past and present. Morrison queries the narration of history, how it can amass historical evidence in terms of dates, data and facts but still fail adequately to represent the true experience of survival, to communicate what it took in human terms to live through inhuman circumstances. In “The Art of Fiction”, an interview for *The Paris Review*, Morrison states: “And in the same way I wanted to show the reader what slavery (*sic*) *felt* like, rather than how it looked” (Schappell and Taylor-Guthrie 76). In *Beloved* (1987), for example, Morrison uses the family tradition of her father’s ghost stories to tell a horrifyingly nuanced tale about slavery. In her emphasis on the familial history of the enslaved, Morrison endeavours to resurrect the misremembered and forgotten, to provide a corrective to the commodification and dehumanisation of people under enslavement when all familial and community values were lost.

In the novel *Beloved*, Sethe is understandably haunted by her decision to kill all her children rather than to see them become enslaved. Three of her children survived, but her youngest daughter, Beloved, died. At first, Beloved haunts Sethe’s house as memory or perhaps in the form of a ghost: “She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even” (5) but gradually manifested as an

increasingly physical presence: “A fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (59) “Beloved” (62). Beloved is the dead child of Sethe, who was murdered by her mother. Like Margaret Garner, Sethe tried to kill all her four children, rather than return to the plantation of Sweet Home. She did so when she recognised the hat of schoolteacher, the white man who presided over her rape and torture at Sweet Home, proceeding towards her new home at 124 Bluestone Road. To save her children and escape the brutality and inhumanity of the plantation, she chose to kill them. She is a mother who did not want her children to face and experience what she had as an enslaved person. She only “succeeded” in killing one, who was only known as ‘crawling already’. After the funeral of ‘crawling already’, Sethe chose ‘Beloved’ to be engraved on her headstone. The readers first meet Beloved as a child ghost who seems angry with her mother, a harmful and vengeful spirit. Later, when the ghost is shooed out of the house by Paul D, Beloved reappears in human form. Therefore, Sethe’s battle with her ‘re-memory’ is made ‘real’ to construct Beloved (the dead child).

Beloved exemplifies mobility in terms of voice, character and genre; it begins as a ghost story with familiar gothic elements, then moves into a more fully-realised magic realism with the thorough incarnation of the ghost. At the same time, the book is also founded on historical events, and can be regarded as having documentary origins. Morrison bases *Beloved* on two types of historical source: a newspaper clipping about the aforementioned Margaret Garner and accounts of enslaved people's “unspeakable” experiences during the Middle Passage that she had heard from her mother and grandmother, as well as others in her community.⁴⁰ When Garner’s children were threatened with recapture, Garner tried to kill all her children but ended up killing one of

⁴⁰ Oral accounts of slavery that had been passed on within the storytelling traditions of Morrison’s family and broader community.

her daughters in a desperate attempt to save her from the suffering and inhumanity of captivity. Morrison does not echo the definitive story of Garner but re-tells it complementarily; she borrows the killing of her daughter, the attempted killing of her sons, and the presence of the mother-in-law who neither condemn nor approves the infanticide (*The Origin of Others* 77-81). The horrific past of the Middle Passage, in which millions of African Americans lost their lives or souls (or both), is another historical truth that Morrison uses in *Beloved*. This provides the necessarily broad context for what at first might appear to be a horribly intimate, even private, crime. Plantations and ships sailing from West Africa killed children too. According to Morrison, every soul lost on the ships has a ghost who wants to be remembered and cared for: “[W]e are the subjects of our narrative, witnesses to and participants in our own experience, and, in no way coincidentally, in the experiences of those with whom we have come in contact” (‘Unspeakable Things Unspoken’ 2304). Ghosts seek to bridge the gap between the past and the present, between the dead and the living: “The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for” (Darling 5). Morrison asks herself, and her readers, to take on some of that responsibility, to help the ghosts do their work of connection. In 1988, Morrison spoke:

[The] issue of restlessness amongst ancestor spirits. These are the spirits which have been largely unacknowledged and unaccounted for as the dislocation of African peoples and individuals—the diaspora—has swallowed the memory of their existence. (Darling 6)

Morrison has fused African lore with American experience to explore and account for this restlessness. *Beloved* is a victim of an American catastrophe. However, she is resurrected

through her connection to the folkloric traditions of Africa and the cosmological belief in the resurrected spirits of dead ancestors.

Beloved also represents an archetype of a woman lost to history and whose story was never heard. On the return of Beloved to Sethe's house, the latter is herself paradoxically reborn by the re-experience of giving birth to her dead child, with a practically diluvian breaking-of-the-waters:

[R]ight in front of its door she had to lift her skirts, and the water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on, she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born. (*Beloved* 61)

However, Beloved is too powerful a presence for Sethe to bear alone, and to find her way back to life, she requires the sustenance of her community, the same people that had shunned her as a child-killer. When Beloved has almost drained Sethe's will to live, the community group intervenes and resurrects her in a mystical ceremony involving repeated sounds that conjure life powers. Sethe is brought back to life by the acts of repentance and forgiveness, with the group serving simultaneously as a medium and a midwife:

[W]here the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did, it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe, and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (*Beloved* 308)

The radical dynamics of folklore and community are demonstrated here, illustrating how people come together and interact to shape and formulate their lives and identity through tales, legends, folk beliefs and rituals. In healing Sethe and welcoming her into their community, they also grow their community and make it prosper. Her desperate history is redeemed by admission into the lore of the folk-group.

That desperation is represented throughout the book in terms of necessary escape. Various types of flight are described in *Beloved*, similar to those taken in other novels such as *Song of Solomon* and *Tar Baby*, each with differing extents of consequence. Sethe takes her first flight to escape the slavery of Sweet Home Plantation: “[T]here is this nineteen-year-old slave (sic) girl [...] walking through the dark woods to get to her children who are far away” (*Beloved* 91). When she and her four children were about to be re-captured: “[S]he flew, snatching up her children like a hawk on the wings” (185). Morrison further details the hauntings that prompted Howard and Buglar (her two sons) to flee:

[H]ad run away by the time they were thirteen years old ---as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny handprints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). (3)

Feeling hopeless about the future, they were forced to seek possibilities away from home. Moreover, they also ran because of the presence of a violent and scary ghost in the house. Yet it can be argued that here *Beloved* is doing the tricksterish work of scaring her brothers onto a productive path. Although terrifying, the spirit of *Beloved* threw their predicaments into even sharper relief, and arguably showed them a way out into the world. Yet Morrison also appears to view such evasive strategies as futile, as they only serve to turn people away from others and the necessary truths that they ultimately will face. The brothers ran away rather than accepting the reality of the presence of their dead sister, as Sethe and Denver did. The brothers resemble other young adult male protagonists in Morrison’s fiction, such as Milkman (*Song of Solomon*) and Son (*Tar Baby*), who run away from their roots, presence and identity in search of a new identity. In this way, Buglar and his brother Howard’s flight is yet another development of the ancestral myth of flying, owing to the supernatural undertones that the characters’ acts create. This folkloric background

substantiates what might otherwise look only like evasion or cowardice.⁴¹ Brown mentions historian Michael Gomez, who further explains the ‘flying or escape’ of enslaved Africans as an act of resistance:

Something more profound than simple suicide had taken place because, for the captive Igbos, suicide was perhaps the ultimate form of resistance, as it contained within it the seed for regeneration and renewal. (140)

The young men run because that is what they must do. Morrison, therefore, investigates the dialectic of male absence versus female presence as a complex and ineradicable phenomenon within the black psyche. In all her narratives, there is a deliberate attempt to represent women as figures who preserve the roots and tradition together and take them forward for the next generation. If these female characters preserve the heritage of their culture and tradition and feel to bind the community together, the male characters exemplify the unbearability of the present and the irresistible impulse to flee it.

On the other hand, *Beloved* refuses to accept the reciprocity between self and community: she does not realise that the self is literally “empty... alone” without the community (*Beloved* 309). This is understandable, of course, because in her “first” life, she never really got to feel part of such a community. Since she is not a member of the clan and its collective memory, *Beloved* is “disremembered” (323). Sethe and everyone in the community repress the nevertheless inevitable effect of *Beloved*’s memory on the present: “Although she has claim, she is not claimed” (323). She is also forgotten and unaccounted for because she was not given a name at birth. No name implies no identity,

⁴¹ Phyllis Green of Charleston recounted one such story in which a group of Africans brought to James Island “fore rebel time [the Civil War]” planned to end their captivity after the two-week period granted to them to become accustomed to their new surroundings: “When they left by they self you hear a tapping, tapping, tapping all day and all night. And they would not crack the teeth to them [not talk to anyone].” When the time came for them to work and the driver summoned the Africans by cracking his whip, “They come out and they stretch out they hand just like they going to take the tools to work like the rest. But when they stretch they hand they rise. At middle day you could see them far out over the ocean. At sundown, you could hear [their] voice, but they couldn’t see them no more. Them gone home” (Brown 139-40).

yet this was also suffered by all the enslaved. An iron marker branded them with the sign particular to their plantation on arrival.⁴² If they were given a name, it was only as an afterthought or a matter of the employer's convenience. Although one can argue that Sethe engraved "Beloved" on her daughter's headstone, this name was not socially acknowledged or known in the same way, as was Sethe, Denver or Baby Suggs. Beloved's anger about why she is forgotten reflects how recorded history has also forgotten the lives and names of the people who died during the Middle Passage. Morrison prompts her readers to question why omissions in history occur, and to understand the violence inherent in such a practice. It is consistent with the systematic cruelty of the slave trade, the calculated fragmentation of families, and the constant use of physical and psychological violence to pressurise and coerce people, irrespective of their age or gender.

The "veiling" or "erasure" of the reality of the Middle Passage was influenced by the psychological desire of both African Americans and white historians to escape or soften the horrors of captivity and the restrictions imposed on what could be expressed in enslaved narratives due to the sensibilities of primarily white readership.⁴³ Through both Beloved as a ghost and as a full-grown human body, Morrison tries to 'unveil' the truth and represent the interior life of the people that have not been recorded in history but are present in the memory. The narratives she has heard of the enslaved people are the representation of 'rememory' and draw upon those memories. Morrison claims and shares that the presence of ghosts is a significant part of her cultural heritage:

⁴² See Figure 1 for branding tool.

⁴³ 'Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936 to 1938' explains the limitations of slave narratives focusing on the key element of race. The absence of black interviewers and presence of white interviewers resulted in different accounts collected of the enslaved people. The responses collected by the white interviewers suggested the responses of 'what they wanted to hear' because the interviewees were aged African Americans and sometimes knowing the fact that the interviewers were from the slave holding families. Thus, the biases in the responses which resulted in self-censorship ("The Limitations of the Slave Narrative Collection").

My own use of enchantment simply comes because that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew...there was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities. (Davis 414)

There comes a crucial point when the community is needed to remind the protagonist of their past deeds and reconcile them to their people. For the first time in eighteen years, the women assembled at no. 124 to assist Sethe and Denver, demonstrating true cultural solidarity and community rediscovery. The group reclaims Sethe and Denver with the sustained sound of their chanting and wailing, "leaving Beloved behind." "Alone." "Again" (*Beloved* 309). As the influential leader, Denver restores the community's peace with 124. She could do that because she first recovered the relationship between "I" and "We" between her and the community. She realises that to help and save her mother, she must abandon her home's security.

2. Storyhealing

For Morrison, confronting her folk with their dark history, however painful, is a component of the collective healing process. This methodology will be more beneficial and effective if it can be viewed, understood, and experienced. Folklore is vital for resurrecting one's culture and heritage and feeding that healing process. Morrison's blending of magic and truth in *Beloved* parallels the *Mande* epic.⁴⁴ This epic, also known as the *Sunjata* epic, is "the primus inter pares among all African oral traditions" (Jansen 14). It narrates the heritage of King Mali's empire, which was considered a direct descendant of *Sunjata*. If the *Mande* epic highlights the supernatural, Morrison weaves it into the fabric of a more recognisably "normal" reality. Beloved is a supernatural being, a

⁴⁴ *Mande* or *Malinke*, is an ethnic group from Western Africa. It is a small region (society or civilised world) around Kangaba, 100 kilometres southwest of Mali's capital- Bamako (Jansen 14).

ghost, a descendant of the enslaved, but they also feel powerfully human and aware of practical realities. When she returns from the dead, she knows things she should not (like Sethe's earrings) and even vanishes into thin air (in the storehouse with Denver). She also uses these abilities to boost her life force. She feeds on Sethe after mysteriously driving Paul D away. "Beloved ate up [Sethe's] life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (*Beloved* 295). If Beloved is a supernatural force, she also clearly depends very much upon her attachment to the tangible world for her being.

Beloved's ghost expresses Morrison's memory of her cultural heritage. Morrison has described how she heard many ghost stories as a child and is emphatic about her belief in ghosts as an essential component of her heritage. She has stated that she believes the spirits of her ancestors who died during slavery still live and visit/haunt those their descendants (*The Origin of Others* 70). This Africanist cultural legacy helps descendants of enslaved people to comprehend the horrific material history of slavery through a spiritual perspective. Morrison claims that the African American "mind is loaded with spirits. "Everywhere you look you see one. You know as well as I do that person who die bad don't stay in the ground" (*Beloved* 221). This "one" can be found anywhere. Furthermore, since African Americans claim that "[N]ot a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief" (6), they consider believing in ghosts and the supernatural to be a part of their culture. Morrison declared herself as an active participant in the conjuring of such ghosts:

I wanted to use black folklore, the magic and superstitious part of it. Black people believe in magic. Once, a woman asked me, 'Do you believe in ghosts?' I said, 'yes ... it is part of our heritage.' (Watkins 43)

The ghost of the baby would not settle in the world of the spirits and had to come back to the present world to finish or accomplish the unresolved matters. In this context, there is

nothing gothic or unusual in the arrival of Beloved back into the world; she is doing what has to be done, reconnecting to the practical magic of living.

Through folklore, the spirit of Beloved can be read as an ancestral spirit of the Mende community of Sierra Leone (West Africa). Among the *Mande* people, it is believed that the spirit of the person is not entirely dead if their death was owing to an unnatural cause (or if it was wronged during its lifetime).⁴⁵ Kenneth Little has further indicated the dimensions of the ancestral spirit and how their otherworldliness is inextricably linked to the worldliness of those who remember them:

In order to enter the new country, the person's spirit has to cross a river, and certain rites, known as "tindyamei" or "crossing the water," are necessary. What is fairly significant, however, is that the conditions of this world are apparently continued in the hereafter, and the life lead by the ancestral spirit seems to be similar in many respects to that of the people on earth. It also seems that the spirits retain an anthropomorphic character and much of their earthly temperament and disposition (Higgins 30).

Cultural ghost stories, which depict people being haunted by the ghosts of their history, are one way in which a community consciously reinterprets its connection to the past. Unsurprisingly, these narratives arise in the aftermath of rapid and even sometimes traumatic development, when old social bonds are shattered and new group identities must be formed. The presence of Beloved's ghost has a long-term influence on the characters, forcing them to confront their forgotten pasts and explore and find a way to deal with themselves and their roles in the African American community. Beloved's ghost is the medium through which the characters gain knowledge of their respective pasts, which

⁴⁵ A similar belief in spirits and reincarnation among the folk can be seen in the later chapter on Assamese folklore. In the folktale, '*Tejimola*' the girl is brutally killed by her stepmother in the absence of her husband. Later, the girl reincarnates as a plant in the backyard where she was buried.

ultimately helps them to grow. They have a cultural significance in that they model how people might re-examine history, examine the present, and redefine the future. For example, enslaved women's brutal and horrifying stories have not been properly laid to rest. How could they be? Thus, their spirits haunt the present, as the reason for their death was unnatural and fundamentally unjust. Therefore, for the same reason, ghosts from captivity are necessarily present in contemporary African American literature. However, just because they were buried incorrectly does not mean they are forever lost. She continues to believe that understanding the past is necessary for African Americans to recover from the injustices perpetrated against them and move forward into the future.

Morrison's interpretation of African American history is based on oral folklore, refusing to accept the written texts and documents that describe the conventional history of the United States. These have no legitimacy, as they have been either written from the perspective of white people, or do not acknowledge the reality that was lived through in America by those who were other than white: "A Dahomean asserts that while Whites have schools and books for teaching purposes, they tell their children stories, for them their stories are their books" (Levine 90). For this reason, Morrison argues that a fictional account of a formerly enslaved person's inner life is more historically "real" than authentic records, as those were primarily written from the dominant white culture's viewpoint. For instance, when Paul D faces the newspaper report of Sethe's deed in *Beloved*, the reader is reminded that textual records often if not always struggle to capture life exactly as it is lived. Despite his inability to read, Paul D believes the depiction of Sethe's face is inaccurate: "That ain't her mouth" (*Beloved* 181). The difference between a real-life or any photographic or written reproduction is not equivalent. The discrepancy is highlighted by Paul D's reaction to Sethe's photograph. In the same way, the newspaper

clipping about the crime of Margaret Garner is only a meagre representation of the totality of the truth of the Middle Passage, which has been kept alive by the folkloric underground.

3. Mischief, Appetite, Metamorphosis: Beloved as Trickster

Beloved is a figure of multi-faceted folkloric agency. She does not only act as a ghost but also as a version of the trickster figure, “generally amoral, a protean figure, able to assume different shapes and forms, and maybe a creator or destroyer, young or old, hero or mischief-maker, scapegoat or God” (Matterson 223). She is greedy and selfish and probably envies Denver and Paul D, as they lived with Sethe in reality while Beloved was forced to live as a ghost. However, when she appears later in human form, she also lays traps to induce forgiveness, acceptance, and compassion among the same characters. She tricks Sethe into saving herself by forcing her to confront and revisit her past. She makes Paul D open the tobacco tin to let go of his fear of not being a man and guiding him to fall in love, and through another trap, she pushes Denver out the door, forcing her to find herself to be brave and face the world.

At first, Beloved appears to be a baby ghost, a vengeful revenant who wreaks havoc on the residents of house 124 on Bluestone Road. Then, perhaps because of Paul D’s arrival, Beloved undergoes a transformation, abandoning the tricks and establishing herself as an indispensable member of Sethe and Denver’s household. Morrison here again follows the pattern of storytelling found in the judgement tales discussed in the first chapter, where the readers are asked to assess Beloved’s worth, whether she should be kept in the house, and what she represents in relationship to the life of Sethe. The emphasis on erasure is denoted from the book’s first line, “124 was spiteful” (*Beloved* 3). The missing number 3 in the sequence is a starting point for the readers and leads them to all the things that are missing: the grandmother, Baby Suggs (an ancestral figure, a person who was with Sethe since her time at the Sweet Home plantation); secondly, Sethe’s sons

Buglar and Howard, and finally (most importantly), Beloved herself (also the third child), who reappears when all the other missing pieces of the puzzle (history) come together one by one to complete the narrative (the forgotten past).

Furthermore, after Paul D's arrival, Beloved reincarnates into a full-grown woman and is no longer a ghost. She appears as if she never died. This complication is presented when Paul D casts the ghost from the house; Beloved, the trickster, reincarnates. Sethe is ultimately saved by Beloved, who had seemed as if she was bent on destroying her. Trickster Beloved skilfully inquires about the earrings and sings a lullaby that only Sethe understands. This triggers Sethe into recalling the horrific past she has been running away from, which was buried deep in her scarred consciousness. Morrison shows how it takes a trickster's complex mentality and capability to bridge the gap between lived reality and a past that is so traumatic that it is unbearable to recall or realise.

As is common in trickster tales, no one ultimately is hurt except the trickster themselves. Beloved haunts and possesses Sethe as a disembodied baby ghost and then dominates her when in blood and flesh. Beloved develops a parasitic relationship with Sethe. She starts to punish Sethe because she killed her, leeching her to the point that she is fragile and small: "Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it" (*Beloved* 295). As fragile and small as Beloved was when Sethe killed her, this is done to make Sethe reflect on the horror she committed by killing her child. Beloved starts consuming Sethe in every way, such as how she talks, eats, walks and even laughs. The scene where Beloved is shown pregnant (with a big belly) and naked is revelatory, as she steals away Sethe's power, essence, and identity as a mother. This punishment by the trickster acts as a means of taking Sethe back to her African roots and history of slavery, which she had tried to erase from her (new) life. Beloved also acts as an ancestor for Sethe, therefore, helping and encouraging her to remember and accept her past, heritage and

hardships. Sethe undergoes a metamorphosis with Beloved's help, allowing her to speak of what she once thought was "unspeakable." She remembers the trauma of killing her child and of being removed from her ancestral land. Beloved also opens lines of spiritual communication with Sethe's African ancestry. She empowers Sethe to unfold the memory of her mother (who was brought from Africa as a captive).⁴⁶ Beloved further represents the spirits of the dead mothers and daughters who were captured and stolen from Africa and whose stories were never told. They speak through her. Her protruding belly (shown when the community women gather outside 124) is the reminder of the imagery of the rape faced by enslaved women and how they were considered as property: "[Rape] was what Baby Suggs died of what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble" (*Beloved* 295). The memory of the children conceived through the horrific rapes forced on the bodies of enslaved women meddles with their future. So, a trickster figure who is a conflation of Sethe's dead mother and daughter acts on an inter-generational and inter-continental level. The reappearance of Beloved is not to showcase or push to remember the horror of slavery; instead, it is a reminder of what was lost during the transatlantic trade.

In *Song of Solomon*, Guitar tells Milkman, "All that jewelry weighs it down. Like vanity. Can't nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weighs you down" (179). Despite Sethe's numerous efforts to forget, she could not transcend her past: "Some things you forget. Other things you never do" (*Beloved* 43). The readers witness Sethe being robbed of her life, freedom, daughter, sons and even the community where she lives. Once Sethe accepts and relives her past to face it through Beloved, she has no more dark memories left to cling to, and no horrors to engulf her anymore. She has now made peace with the weight of her past traumatic experiences and

⁴⁶ Sethe's mother was not born on the plantation, as Beloved and Denver were born.

is healed to live in the present. Paul D asserts and comforts her by saying, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (322). Therefore, like the knowledge offered and disseminated by the trickster figure, Morrison demonstrates how, even with abolition, African Americans struggled to fight or try to escape their horrific memories and live in the present. Morrison shares her view of the dismembered: “There are certain things that are repressed because they are unthinkable, and the only way to come free of that is to go back to them and deal with them” (Carabi 105). Morrison leaves the judgement of the hurt to be both felt and answered by the readers, whether it is the pain of the process of coming back to life or the pain that caused the dead person (Beloved) to come back to life. Amy also mentioned this tragic element of pain in the beginning: “Anything dead coming back to life hurts” (*Beloved* 42).

The trickster figure’s linguistic maze, both as a character and as a storyteller, is a central cultural shield against the ethnic and human problems that have plagued African Americans since the beginning of slavery. Comparably, Morrison creates her characters with traits of the African gods, still present among African Americans or African descendants who were brought to America.⁴⁷ Beloved’s character resembles the god of water in Congo, known as *simbi* (or *bisimbi*). This god is considered a protector of the water body and a source of life renewal on Earth.⁴⁸ It is believed that to know the legend, myth and story about the god, one must be able to see *simbi* first (Brown 113). Morrison reflects a similar aspect concerning Beloved, where in order to truly know the story of Beloved and the horrifying past of Sethe, one must first be able to see Beloved. Brown

⁴⁷ There are many gods in Africa, and different clans have different numbers of gods. Morrison tried to represent some of them through her characters.

⁴⁸ One variety of an African god arrived on these shores and made an enduring abode of the freshwater springs of the South Carolina Lowcountry: “The existence of the *simbi* cannot be doubted for earlier times, however, as captives from West-Central Africa carried the knowledge and name of the *simbi* to the Americas, particularly the Lowcountry and Saint-Domingue, no later than the late eighteenth century, as that period marked the end of the transport of captive Africans to the latter colony” (Brown 111-12)

has described the transmission of the water god “[A]s expressions of the spiritual cultures of African-descended people, the Simbi reflected the ways that Africans and their diaspora-born progeny managed cultural dialogues between the diverse peoples dispersed throughout the Atlantic world” (xiv).

The legend of *simbi* was carried by the people onto the plantations of the South Carolina Lowcountry. Furthermore, the birthplace of Sethe is not revealed clearly by Morrison; instead, Sethe guesses the place of her birth: “She was born (Carolina maybe? or was it Louisiana?) she remembered only song and dance” (*Beloved* 37). This further implies that her enslaved life is not her real life, and she is indifferent to her place of origin. *Beloved* as *simbi* emerges out of the water as a protector and guardian for Sethe, who also gives birth to Denver on a boat. *Beloved* emerges from the water as evidence to emphasise the remembered power of water spirits and their importance among African Americans. The symbol of water is used at many events as a life-giving source; it also signifies death, birth and re-birth, and purification. When Sethe sees the Ohio River for the first time, her water breaks, and she gives birth to Denver. She then drinks water from the river, symbolising the cleansing of her life; when she crosses the Ohio River, she gains freedom and has a new life. The arrival of *Beloved* as a young girl out of the water symbolises rebirth, which is later signified by Sethe’s urge to urinate upon seeing *Beloved*. A similar ‘flooding’ happened on the boat while giving birth to Denver.

In addition, Sethe’s character resembles *Asaase Ya*, the earth goddess of fertility in Ghana, whose spider like legs and arms double as weapons. Similarly, Sethe uses a weapon, a handsaw, to protect her children from the brutality of the schoolteacher. The mother figure is one of the essential characters in African tribal life and beliefs. It is she who gives life, so she also can take it away. Sethe believes that her act is not brutal or

horrendous, but rather is an act of saving her 'girl' child from the "unspeakable" tragic fate which will fall on her if she lives, just like every other enslaved female:

That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up (*Beloved* 295).

Hegemonic whiteness sought to destroy the divinity of African motherhood, and the sacred bonds of mother and child. It is enslavement that has corrupted motherhood and contorted the mother figure out of all conventional recognition. In such a context, Sethe's radical act, not only killing her daughter but affronting her own motherhood, makes sense, even if it is painful to digest. Understanding the story folklorically allows for this to be understood with a kind of long-term wisdom. She must kill *Beloved* so that the possibility of her resurrection as a free woman can arise.

Baby Suggs is also a memorable character; her age adds to the nurturing nobility of the mother figure. At first, she appears to be a miserable mother who loses both of her children and is almost entirely unaware of their whereabouts and well-being. However, she discovers a way to recover and survive. She can find hope in that late turn of fate because the only child she has been allowed to hold buys her freedom. Baby Suggs grows up as a preacher and mother to all the formerly enslaved people who cross her way. She resembles *Ama*, the ancient mother goddess, the Nigerian deity who is the embodiment of Earth.⁴⁹ Baby Suggs is a representation of the ancestor, the elder, and the existence of great significance in the lives of the freed enslaved of *Bluestone Road*: "Baby Suggs, holy,

⁴⁹ *Ama*, the creator, a high god, may be a fusion of two or more gods, being sometimes regarded as a male being, at others as a female, sometimes as the creator, other times as the earth goddess or world mother. *Ama*, creator of all living things, patron of childbirth, nourisher of crops, identified with the earth, queen of the underworld, sits before *Chido*, who is always present on earth, creating men and things. (*Ama, the Potter, Creates the Human Body* (Jukun/Nigeria).

followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing” (*Beloved* 102). Through Baby Suggs, Morrison wants her readers to venerate old and wise women, mother figures (like the old lady she mentions in her Nobel Prize Lecture) who are kind and comforting, women who always provide answers, even from the other world (the mortal world).

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise.

The woman is the daughter of slaves (*sic*), black, American, and lives alone in a small house outside town. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. (Nobel Prize Lecture)

Morrison also wants to remind people not to neglect or dismiss one’s own cultural significance and, through Baby Suggs, advocates spiritual practices that are deeply rooted in self-love: “She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (*Beloved* 103). This “grace” erases the memory of dehumanisation and self-denigration that was forced upon them.

4. Truth-Trees

Beloved also features a variety of trees: they grow in the real world and the flesh; they are real and fictional; they also serve both as a map and markers on a map, offering evidence of the past, a permanent, tangible thing that recalls scars and horror. Trees enjoy a particular significance in folklore. Trees have always accompanied humans in the world, taking them on a journey across the world and carrying story seedlings all along the journey. As part of the root system of a tree that reaches into the deep source of the entire continent’s myths and tales (Africa), Morrison brings them closer to the people who were forcefully separated from their land, culture and heritage. Such a root system also acts as a metaphor for the impact on the reading community of Morrison’s work and her use of

African mythology. Its lines of narrative are interwoven with religious and classical ones, finding diverse and original ways of transmission.

The author challenges the audience to participate, reinforcing the project of rereading and revisiting the past. So Amy's description of the chokecherry tree engraved on Sethe's back symbolises the children's survival through the imagery of the line that continues metaphorically indicating that life perseveres. Despite all odds, the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back bears fruit, with the incident when she runs away during the final months of pregnancy. Heavily whipped and tired, she is rescued by a white girl. This tree on her back captures her trauma, stolen milk, and shattered femininity. The horrific piece of body art, brutally carved by a whip, also tells the horrendous story of the people who were unidentified, silenced, and denied humanity: "the sculpture [her] back had become, like the decorative work of an ironsmith too passionate for display" (*Beloved* 21).

In addition, the contrasting imagery of the tree from the Bible, whose fruit needs to be tasted to let the characters gain knowledge, is used in *Beloved* and its precursor Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to reflect multiple ideas of good and evil. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Janie Crawford frequently mentions the pear tree in her grandmother's garden through which she gained knowledge about herself by visiting repeatedly. Here, Hurston tried to replace the Tree of Knowledge from an apple with a pear tree, symbolising emerging sexuality and carnal knowledge. On the other hand, her grandmother, Nanny, warns her against the tree (like god) as she interprets the tree as a tree of death and shame. Sethe in Morrison's *Beloved* gains knowledge from the death-dealing trees planted in Sweet Home. She recalls them as 'lacy groves' and simultaneously re-memories the atrocious scene of her rape, which left scars in the form of a tree on her for a lifetime, a chokecherry tree. The carnal knowledge she gained from the fruit of this

tree was bitter for her, and there is a further reminder of this when the engraver at the cemetery demands minutes of sexual favours in return for letters from the alphabet for the tombstone of her daughter's grave: B-E-L-O-V-E-D costs her ten minutes of unwanted sexual onslaught (*Beloved* 5). Morrison uses the Bible and the conventions of Christian piety to rebuke and resist the brutal behaviour of white Americans that hypocritically promote their beliefs and superstitions. Biblical allusions and religious symbols are used to create a parallel between the characters and biblical figures to emphasise issues of morality and humanity. In one sense, Sethe's suffering might be said to be Biblical in its immensity; at the same time, her predicament is comparable to multiple women from multiple traditions of storytelling and folklore. If she has something of the Biblical Sethe, then she also has something of the classical Medea about her.

The cluster of trees in the Clearing is also folklorically significant. It is where Baby Suggs preaches and magnifies the suffering of the people of her community who have undergone the same pain of slavery. If it appears to be a kind of religious gathering, it is not clear what the religion is, beyond Baby Sugg's own singular sense of spirit and being, her own version of the "holy". The Clearing metaphorically implies that the spiritual clearing represents another enclosure, a space for the realisation of the self in tranquillity and a natural shrine, "some fixing ceremony" (*Beloved* 101). When at the Clearing, all the community members come together, breaking off the limitations of their selves by exchanging their roles of 'laughing, crying and dancing' which is initiated by the trees, "[children] ran from the trees, [...] the woods rang [...] among the ringing trees" (103). Sixo dances among the trees as if they were ancestors. From his favourite tree at Sweet Home, the blooming of the trees made him feel the possibilities of independence. Paul D also has a distinct, continuous relationship with trees:

[B]ut nothing like any tree he knew because trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to as he frequently did since way back when he took the midday meal in the fields of Sweet Home. Always in the same place if he could, and choosing the place had been hard because Sweet Home had more pretty trees than any farm around [...] Keeping his relationship with his cultural values and roots, Sixo went among trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open (25, 30).

The trees in the novel symbolise something that brought peace and calmness in the chaos of the lives of the enslaved during “the lowest yet” (301); it encouraged them to stand tall and gave strength and hope of flowering (in freedom) one day. Thus, the tree is an emblem and incarnation of cultural identity which continues to grow, fostering remembrance and truth, bearing the memory of slavery and oppression to the descendants of those who suffered under it. Similarly, lonely Denver creates her own safe house where she can stand tall, nurturing, healing, and attaining salvation as a wish. She crawled to a room “hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, [...] its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves” (*Beloved* 34). Morrison draws attention to the significance of the trees, which provide support and comfort to Sixo, Paul D, and Denver: “trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to” (25). In this ability to converse and console, they are similar to a family or communal member who helps in reconstructing fragmented selves. Trees at the Clearing embody continuity and wholeness.

The imagery of the tree can also be associated with Beloved, who resembled a branch (of Sethe’s family tree) sliced with a handsaw in the woodshed by Sethe. The branch sliced off when alive: “The sawyer who had planted them twelve years ago to give his workplace a friendly feel-something to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living” (57). The slicing of the branch is parallel to the slicing of Beloved’s throat with a

handsaw.⁵⁰ The sawyer is Sethe, who is judged by the community for committing the ‘sin’ of killing her daughter instead of saving her (Bonnet 45). In Yoruba mythology, *Abiku* is a spirit of the child who dies before attaining puberty and is reborn several times to the same mother. The *Abiku* spirit lives on the large trees which are worshipped, such as the iroko, baobab and silk-cotton (Mobolade 62). Therefore, Beloved resembles the spirit of *Abiku*. In addition, it is believed in African culture that the dead spirits living in the trees mark Beloved’s resemblance to the tree as she represents the dead spirits ‘disremembered’. The Baobab tree, or *Adansonia Digitata*, is also known as the ‘Tree of Life’ among some Africans.⁵¹ The tree is mainly recognised or is called the upside-down tree, and the legend behind the name is derived from the physical appearance of the tree. One of the many versions tells that when the supreme god created the world, the baobab tree was planted in the Congo basin, but the tree complained of much dampness. So, even though a god planted it on the mountain in Ruwenzori, the tree was still unhappy. Seeing him complaining and unhappy, one day, the god got angry, and he pulled out the tree, threw him in the dry area of Africa, and planted it upside down to shut the complaints (Wickens 193). A similar ancestral spirit among the trees is seen in *Tar Baby* when Jadine falls into the tar pit of *Sein de Vieilles*. Jadine clings to the tree to save herself from sinking, “which shivered in her arms and swayed as though it wished to dance with her” (*Tar Baby* 183).

In Morrison, trees represent the struggles of life and death and escape from physical and mental enslavement; yet they are both harmful and kind. Trees are shown as a place used for punishment; for example, Sixo is tied to a tree and burned, and Paul A is

⁵⁰ An African American proverb, “The axe forgets the tree remembers” plays a significant role in portraying how Beloved remembers her being sliced off by Sethe. However, Sethe never forgets her but deliberately tries to ignore or escape the truth.

⁵¹ The Baobab tree is called ‘Tree of life’ because it serves as a symbol of life and positivity in a place where little can survive as the climate is dry and arid. It is a succulent that stores water during the rainy season and stands tall providing a nutrient dense fruit.

hanged from a tree. Sethe blames herself for preparing the ink from the trees, which the schoolteacher later uses to write descriptions of the ‘animal’ characteristics of her and others on the plantation within his notebook: “He liked the ink I made [...] He preferred how I mixed it, and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book” (*Beloved* 44). She regrets making the ink and how giving it to the schoolteacher provides him with the means to write, which affords him authority. Written words were given more power as enslaved people did not know how to read and write. Also, the schoolteacher’s written records in the notebook and questions signify how he used language to dehumanise the plantation workers: “I still think it was them (*sic*) questions that tore Sixo up. Tore him up for all time” (44).

Tree imagery signifies a plurality of connections elsewhere in the novel. It is associated with birth when Sethe, on the run, meets Amy Denver, who “comes out of trees.” (*Beloved* 93). Later, when the community women come together to exorcise the spirit, Sethe believes as if “the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves” (308). The regenerating energy of trees becomes the means for Sethe’s spiritual washing, her rebirth. Furthermore, when Paul D escapes from horrific prison conditions in Georgia, his journey is represented through the imagery of trees. Trees shape and obstruct his journey along with his other fugitives: “[m]oss wiped their faces as they fought the live-oak branches that blocked their way” (131). Still chained together they are fixated on the geographical co-ordinates of freedom: “Free North. Magical North. Welcoming, benevolent North” (132). Paul D’s co-convicts, the Cherokee, guided him to follow the flowers:

Only the tree flowers. As they go, you go. You will be where you want to be when they are gone. He raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then mongolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut

and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north [...] from February to July he was on the lookout for blossoms. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him [...] He merely followed in their wake, a dark ragged figure guided by the blossoming plums (133).

The terror of Georgia peaches is fraught with danger, but he reached now towards the blossoming plums. This journey of Paul D allowed him to put all “Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, Schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one into the tobacco tin logged in his chest” (133). With each blooming flower, his faith and hope to reach the North, where the life of freedom, well-being and, most importantly, of being a human was blooming.

5. “Like a tender place in a corner of her mouth that the bit left” (*Beloved* 69).

Morrison follows oral storytelling technique in the fragmented narration of *Beloved*. These fragment narrations remain in the audience or readers’ minds and feel incomplete as they deny terminal meanings. For example, the novel begins with the ghost of Beloved, but she does not reveal who or where the ghost came from. Instead, she infers that the ghost is a child: “you are forgetting how little it is” (*Beloved* 5), “this ghost is a baby” (6). Each story has a different narrative voice and implies a painful impact which necessitates a break before the anguished absorption of the tale’s entirety can be resumed. Like the characteristics of dilemma stories, readers must sort through the text’s inconsistencies and formulate solutions. Episodes such as Sethe’s escape, her stolen milk and Paul D’s arrival are not narrated chronologically. However, with each brief narration, there is another painful story narrated, which keeps the readers fixed and curious to find out the answer,

to find out the complete narration, even if they know it will hurt. Despite the fragmentation of narrative, the stories are also intertwined and embedded, they reoccur from Kentucky's Sweet Home to Cincinnati's 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison deliberately makes her readers insist on searching for the answers she has refused to provide them with: "At the end of every novel, there is epiphany, discovery," she says, "everyone has discovered something they would not have learned otherwise. I don't want to give my readers something to swallow" she expresses emphatically. Knowledge for Morrison is not just conceptual. The reader has to both know and feel that they have learned the reality of something: "I want to give people something to think about and feel about" (Morrison and McKay 421).

Following the pattern of "once upon a time", Morrison starts the narration with the presence of a ghost. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, people who die unnatural death come back in the form of spirits. A similar phenomenon can be seen in storytelling: an untimely or unusual death makes the person a ghost. Commonly, when a ghost is shunned without obtaining what belongs to it, it manifests itself to demand satisfaction.

Morrison's retelling of the fugitive Margaret Garner's story reveals her ambitions of being a trickster; as Hyde mentions: "[t]ricksters do not make a new life, they rearrange what is already at hand" (341). She intertwines reality and fiction and names the Sweet Home plantation owner Mrs Garner. In this reappropriation, Eusebio L. Rodrigues claims that Morrison shows an affinity with Joseph Conrad, in that she feels compelled to "render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe" (166). She necessities on how slavery was abolished but not all enslavers. She illuminates equality to insist on the definition of true freedom (166). To adopt Gates' sense of the term "Signification", Morrison "Signifies" the name of Garner by using it in literature to ensure a written record for future

generations.⁵² The “Signification” implies remembering her name not as an enslaved or a mother who killed her child and was considered barbaric; instead, the name is playfully reconnected to that of an enslaver who represents the whole slavery system and the barbaric treatment that the enslaved had to undergo. The naming raises the question of how to properly describe what was done to Africans by Whites in the name of their civilisation. Hyde explains the role of “Signification” by the monkey as a balancing act: “The Point of the game [narrative] is to play with language, not to take it seriously, or better, to stay in *balance* on the line between the playful and the serious while trying to tip one’s opponent *off* that balance, dizzied with a whirl of words” (273).

Mrs Garner, in the novel, calls her nephew schoolteacher to Sweet Home as “she didn’t want to be the only white person on the farm and a woman too” (*Beloved* 44). This action completely changes the lives of the enslaved on the plantation, and leads to their categorisation by schoolteacher as animals, which results in the narration of Sethe’s cold-blooded life. Therefore, Morrison tricks her globally present readers into re-evaluating what was erased from the historical records and engaging with the reality of Whites who called Africans ‘uncivilised, savage, barbaric and animal.’ “[A]s tricksters they are mediators, and their mediations are tricks” (Gates 5). Also, no matter how good Mrs Garner appeared to be, a woman whom Sethe looked upon as a mother figure, in whose presence all the enslaved were treated as human, she was nevertheless an enslaver of the Sweet Home plantation. With the name ‘Mrs Garner,’ two images of a woman appear: the enslaved mother who had to kill her child to protect her, and the Sweet Home plantation owner who exhibits civilised barbarity and barbaric civilisation in the same moment.

⁵² Gates mentions in his book *The Signifying Monkey* that he uses uppercase S for signifying in African discourse (51). Signifying is connotative as it talks about what the word suggests and encourages in the dualism, ambiguity and hidden meanings (54). Through the help of verbal play (words), the enslaved learned to resist their master’s language and use the different versions of the exact words to play a joke on them. Thus, as an insult and defence mechanism, language was the only power tool for them in that situation.

The uncertainty and playfulness of the novel extends to patterns of numbers, although it is never exactly clear how entirely significant this is. Morrison also conjures with the number three throughout the novel. The novel is divided into three parts, and the 2005 edition even starts from page number three, while house number 124 has a missing number three. The third child was killed, and she was exorcised at 3 pm by thirty community women. Through the opening sentences of the parts, Morrison prepares her audiences for what is coming forth by using cautionary words such as “spiteful” (*Beloved* 3), “loud” (199) and “quiet” (281). The narration begins by indicating the pain and poison of infanticide and enslavement. The second part guides the audiences to follow the re-memorising of the systematic violence suffered by Sethe. The third and final section informs the readers of the exorcism of Beloved, the lost soul who has finally been acknowledged. This allows for the rebirth of Sethe, who is no longer trying to run away from her past. After Sethe undergoes redemption, the community accepts and again welcomes her (Rodrigues 154). Moreover, the narration acknowledges the division of the temporal into three experiences of reality through characterisation: Beloved represents the past, Sethe is present and Denver epitomises the future.

As the supreme trickster, Toni Morrison employs this mythological and mystical character in her storytelling to question authority, laws, and positions placed by those conventionally in charge of written history: “Art is a lie that makes us realise the truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies” (Hyde 79). The narrative of *Beloved* is founded on fact, and then Morrison augments the narrative with her imagination and infusion of folk material:

I did research about a lot of things in this book in order to narrow it, to make it narrow and deep, but I did not do much research on Margaret Garner other than

the obvious stuff because I wanted to invent her life, which is a way of saying I wanted to be accessible to anything the characters had to say about it. Recording her life as lived would not make me available to anything that might be pertinent.

(Darling 5)

Morrison admirably utilises the creative liberty of imagination and incorporates a historical fact with folklore and reality erased from history. The use of folklore in her writings queries the “factual” presumptions of conventional history, signifying the importance of memory and memory and memory-less-ness, not least as descendants of enslaved Africans were afraid to contemplate their brutal past. Their past haunted their present lives, making their lives more challenging and emotionally and mentally brutal. In all her novels, she tried to engage her readers in the importance of looking back, principally to make peace with life in the present. She metamorphosed memory into metaphorical associations through the help of folklore. This is evident in moments such as the singing of the Solomon song in *Song of Solomon*, which helps Milkman gain knowledge of his roots and identity:

O Solomon don't leave me here

Cotton balls to choke me

O Solomon don't leave me here

Buckra's arms to yoke me. (303)

The legend of the flight of Solomon underscores his act of being a coward and glorifies the escape as an act of courage which Solomon showed to rebel against the whites. Leaving behind one's own family, a wife and twenty-one children, all without any support, to let them survive without a breadwinner and escaping from one's responsibilities, requires much paradoxical courage. Solomon's mental trauma at leaving behind his family

becomes a matter of glorification, a legend. Contrarily, the escape can be seen as cowardly, and that Solomon was simply unable to survive in white society, and unable to perform his duties and responsibilities. Finally, when Solomon decides to run away and end his life, this is portrayed as an act of rebellion. Although the legend glorifies the act of escape as courage, simultaneously, the song includes the plea from Solomon's wife not to leave her and his children alone. The book does not rest on one version of the story, but promulgated a willed confusion of perspective, messy as reality itself.

Through her works, it can be inferred that she has always been mindful of the cultural and racial implications of her narrative(s). However, she has maintained her resistance against complacency over existing histories. There is always another truth to find: "I have to rewrite, discard and remove the print quality of language to put back the oral quality where intonation, volume and gesture are there" (Tate 126). Her introduction of folkloric orality to readers through the literary medium of novels helped her to outmanoeuvre and destabilise established history. Morrison sought to vivify African ideas of home, way of life, identity and heritage through her writings. Folklore was what she used to sustain the original identity and authority of these representations.

Therefore, in the tale of the Signifying Monkey, Morrison plays the role of the Monkey. Her works are the embodiment of rhetorical discourse, which she enhances rather than conceals. Morrison chooses style (African traditions and culture) over traditional fictive substance, form (folklore) over conventional content and exploratory soundings over mapped meanings. Her rhetoric, ambiguity and diversity of meaning mock and rebuke the standard codifications of English.

6. Tell but Do not Tell

Following the tradition of the African storyteller, Morrison does not pass any judgement on what she narrates; instead, she explores the full implications of any dilemma that her narratives make manifest. For example, she uses the trickster figure of the 'Tar Baby' to address the question of 'what the conflicts are' ('Rootedness the Ancestor as Foundation' 2289), not to solve a cultural problem. Throughout *Beloved*, folklore aids this project of Morrison's, showing us why folklore is a stable source of cultural unity. It draws people together without eliminating difference or variety—instead encouraging these things—and allows us to see the underlying connectivity, unity, and commonality that people share with each other and the rest of the universe.

Folklore is ineradicable, even if it might lie relatively unexplored, but it represents a bedrock for realising self and community. It provides a context within which African Americans can free their minds and bodies from the mind trap of Eurocentrism and white hegemony. This process of trying to recapture history, or remembrance in Morrison's terms, necessitates the inclusion of tradition in one's life. Since enslaved people were denied learning and literacy, it is vital to connect to the oral tradition that flourished nevertheless. The enslaved people were not only unnamed, but robbed of their actual names and languages from Africa: "What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma'am spoke, and which would never come back" (*Beloved* 74); yet they maintained their identity and evidence of origin through storytelling.⁵³ Sethe only remembers that they spoke in a different language which

⁵³ "The name thing is a very, very strong theme in the book that I'm writing, the absence of a name given at all, the odd names and the slave names, the whole business, the feeling of anonymity, the feeling of orphanage" (MacKethan 200).

Morrison plays with names in all her works and she often chose to name her characters from the Bible. In this novel, the name Sethe draws a similarity with Seth (the third son of Adam and Eve, according to Genesis), who was considered a replacement for Abel. Similarly, Sethe was also a replacement for all her brothers and sisters who were thrown away by her mother (or murdered by the slavery system), and she was the only one who was kept and given a name.

is not what she uses now. Their language disappeared, but through storytelling it can be reimagined. Morrison's writings play a considerable role in resurrecting these memories. She uses mythic elements from her ancestors' ancient world and newly adopted symbols from Christianity to enact proper remembrance. Ghosts appear in her novels to affirm her belief in African heritage, but also to "reconceive a fractured, partly obliterated culture, looking to a newly imagined past to redefine themselves for the future" (Brogan 163).

Beloved's ghost resurrects the historical memory of the crimes committed against African Americans during slavery, showing how people are haunted by the legacy of captivity, even though they are unaware of it. Cultural ghost stories depict people being haunted by the ghosts of their history, but also show how a community consciously revises its connection to the past. Not surprisingly, these stories appear to surface in the wake of rapid and sometimes traumatic change, when old social bonds have been shattered and new community identities must be established. Morrison has produced unforgettable African American characters that have triumphed and suffered hardships in their lives as whole individuals. The characters rely on their inner power, faith, and devotion by keeping themselves intact with their African American community and cultural values to transcend the violence of slavery, economic and racial inequality, and sexism. She accomplishes this by using "the allegorical approach," which is "particularly powerful in her novels" (Christian 240). The writings reveal the African American community's unspoken ties. She writes from and about a place outside literary culture, disrupting patriarchal engravings and conventional Western ideological boundaries.

Folk culture has been used in the work of writers such as Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and Ishmael Reed to bring forward the awareness of racial history, not just as a method for gaining cultural literacy, equality, and integrity but also to promote traditions and values that will help them (African Americans) survive.

Folklores act as strategies for resilience and structures for development rather than being mythic justifications for cultural and political dominance. Henry Louis Gates, Jr provides an example of how Alice Walker was inspired by Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed “turned to black antecedent texts for both form and content” (274). Addressing Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, Ann Petry, Paule Marshall, Leon Forrest, Ernest Gaines, and John Wideman, he notes these storytellers’ tropes and topoi to be revised. He implies, “Walker’s revision of Hurston stands at the end of a chain of narration. One ending is the beginning for other, and this repetition of tradition is to induce the feeling of start over and again” (275). Although no American writer, regardless of race or gender, can be considered entirely outside of the predominantly effective system of always having to make something new and original, these inhabitants of an alternative region on the margins reflect a way of thinking and understanding where re-telling becomes radical and vital. Hyde further supports this repetition and revision:

If the Bible’s story of Ham has been used to justify human chattel slavery (*sic*), then a Frederick Douglass will appear with the cunning reversal that shows how, by its own internal logic, slavery (*sic*) itself must soon become unscriptural. (280)

Morrison begins *The Bluest Eye* with a trope of oral narration, signifying that the story is mostly untold or suppressed: “*Quiet as it’s kept*”(3). *Beloved* ends with the phrase, “This is not a story to pass on” (323), implying the secretive stories that are shared among a specific group but with rightful caution. Everyone knows the story, but it is not a story to be celebrated. In this book, however, with its designed roughness and refusal of narrative smoothness, she wants her readers to engage with this terrible story. Through her disembodied conversational and lyrical narrative style, she aims to allow her readers to experience the narrative and characters intensely and thoroughly. Such a claim entails the possibility of transitioning from sadness to resentment. In other words, the phrase might

be understood as transmitting the tale, but not the pain associated with it; everyone wants to forget the past of captivity. Thus, 'not a story to pass on' invokes the urge and curiosity to repeat and re-tell the story and many such stories crucial to the enslaved heritage and American history; if not passed, they might get lost.

Beloved is a constant reminder of slavery in all its complex viciousness and violence. Morrison emphasises that it is not something that can easily be touched and felt, just as the women of the community in *Beloved* struggle to accept what Sethe did: "they can touch if they want, but don't" (324). The "whole story" exists fragmentarily in photographs, stories and the history of memories, so there never can be a whole story. At the same time, that is no reason not to try and tell the story. This horrifying reality, part of American and African American history, forced a mother, Margaret Garner, to enact a desperate situation; the 'sixty million and more' can never forget similar injustices. This form of remembrance pays tribute to the bereaved without reviving and reliving their difficulties and sufferings. Morrison addresses all the anonymous souls lost as a consequence of slavery, and they ought to be remembered. The final word in the novel is "Beloved", a whispered prayer, a re-dedication to her and the 'sixty million and others' from where the novel began. It invites the reader to think about what saying such a word might mean.

7. Conclusion

Following what Gates says about revision and repetition, Morrison exemplifies what can be done with folklore. While using folkloric practices in her writing, she is not only preserving what was lost or laying out the information, but also helping folklore grow. She is taking from folklore and making folklore: "the trickster in the narrative is the narrative itself" (Hyde 267). As mentioned above, Morrison repeats phrases such as 'this is not a story to pass on' three times in the novel, making readers question why such a

story should not be repeated. This curiosity is likely to lead readers to discuss the novel, explaining their respective opinions further. She tricks the reader into passing on what she said people should not pass on. Morrison regards everything as folklore, from oral to performative to gestural to literary material. Her own writing takes authority from being incorporated into this folkloric context. If history can be too hard to digest or unbearable to contemplate, making a story from it can mitigate that. A story remains strongest and most alive when it is recognised as a story. Sometimes it is the only way of passing things on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tea Garden Blues: Reviving, Connecting and Transmitting Lore of Assam

In *Beloved*, Morrison showed how the art of fiction actively contributes to the work of folklore. The novel is not a distillation of folkloric material into a separate entity but rather part of a much more generous and necessary organism that not only holds and restores memory but generates and regenerates the means of transmitting it. In reading *Beloved*, the reader enters the memory of not just a group of afflicted people in Ohio but also the experiences of all enslaved people. Some of these memories are articulated and voiced, others are not, but Morrison insists that we recognise the presence of all of it, the said and the unsaid, the untold and the told. Taking Morrison's lesson about inclusivity and unlimited possibility on board, this is where this thesis shifts focus to another territory and field of potential. If Morrison's fiction helps to realise the memory and the impact of folklore in the context of the American experience, it should follow that other traditions and aspects of lore could benefit from the same thing. This is not exactly to say that every tradition or community necessarily should have their own Toni Morrison, but it does imply that other traditions might be able to generate cultural representations which will generate comparable possibilities to those achieved by her.

The reader needs to be as radically aware of what such representations might achieve as Morrison is in writing them. Her ambitions for fiction are grounded in her commitment to the ongoing work of generating lore and radical memory; here, I want to adopt that ambition and transpose it onto contemporary representations of the folklore of the tea-growing region of Assam, where indentured labourers were brought to work from many poor regions of India. As with those Africans who suffered the middle passage, these workers were often forcibly transplanted and employed in conditions proximate to

slavery. They were uprooted and then had to attempt to foster both a new sense of community while retaining connections to their native regions. Folklore was a vital resource in all of this, yet its significance has not been exhaustively explored, and much of it has yet to be translated or made available to those outside of Assam. I explore how Morrison-like aesthetics of folklore might be adopted to understand what might be communicated by Assamese folklore in the following chapter. More immediately, however, it is necessary to provide some contextualisation of the Assamese experience, and to indicate possibilities of comparison between the experiences of indentured labourers there with enslaved people in the American South, focusing on how they gave voice and form to what they endured.

1. Brewing the Folklores of Tea Garden Labourers

The romance of Assam is a romance of commerce, the history of a savage country brought under civilized rule through the cultivation, by alien labour, of a single product,' wrote a European traveller in 1906. (Shekhwat 340)

The British looked upon Assam, the Northern-Eastern province of India, as a land of abundant resources: there was oil and coal, but principally, there was tea. If tea was not discovered there, it would have been left alone. The mineral resources were not sufficiently attractive for the colonisers, and tea was a cash crop. It also represented a key opportunity for British enterprise and market-control. Assam offered an opportunity to destroy the Chinese monopoly in tea production, and so Britain became intent on turning Assam into a massive plantation-state. In doing so, they destroyed and exploited the land, culture, heritage, and values of Assam (Sharma 25). The British interest in gaining power, control and success over Assam became a nightmare for the indentured workers who worked on the plantations. We have seen how Toni Morrison revisits and revives folklore tradition, and how she documents erased history by taking advantage of creative liberty,

bringing hitherto vanished lives out of the spectral and into the physical world. Her writing is giving ghosts back their bodies, un-forgetting them. Nobody has yet done this with the labourers of the Assam Tea Gardens. There are narratives present, but these are limited to transmission in Assamese language which is not widely known. Knowledge of this catastrophe remains limited and unexplored, therefore, and it is in danger of vanishing. In fact, people of today's generation are not well aware of the folklore of Tea Garden labourers, even if their labour enabled one of the most common daily rituals, the making and drinking of tea called *lal cha*.⁵⁴

Globally-popular Assam tea is made from the complex processes of exploitation under colonialism and imperialism. Not only were human resources destroyed and enslaved, but also natural resources. The indigenous tea plants, which were thirty metres high and grew widely, were controlled and disciplined for commercial purposes (Assam State Biodiversity Board, Govt. of Assam). The biological cultivation was tamed and experimented with to escalate the production on a large scale to export on a global level. Assam's physical and socioeconomic landscape has been permanently altered by the invasion of the British idea to transform natural resources into a money making business. The 'primitive' land, which according to the British enterprise, was a wild jungle with minimal agricultural practices and was converted into an export-oriented tea industry that exemplified modern ideas of improvement and progress (Gupta 2). Of course, this also indicates how Western capitalism made up fairy tales of its own to justify colonisation. Such invented "lore" was yet another thing for the folklore of the indentured workers to resist and struggle against.

⁵⁴ Red tea. In colloquial terms, the tea is called Red Tea because of the colour of the freshly brewed tea leaves.

2. Infusing Folk Lores

We know that folk tales and songs are a reliable index of the deep consciousness of communities of people; furthermore, folklore allows for profound affinities between apparently disparate cultures to be realised. Each community's folklore reflects the regional character in the lore created through the medium of local dialects, as well as being a medium of entertainment, an emotional outlet shared and understood by the entire folk group or community. It shares folk culture and holds the potential to generate new audiences for it. So folklore is key in expressing and perpetuating the prevailing ideologies of a culture. It is dynamic, yet conservative (in the purest sense), in that it adapts to new desires and requirements but does not let the old values, customs and traditions fade away. This becomes even more urgent and complicated when external forces uproot and relocate communities. In Native American culture, lore and legend provided a strong base of identity and community understanding in the face of European aggression and expansion. In addition, as has been seen, evolving folklore and plantations in the Deep South enabled people of African heritage to keep the memory of their origins alive while also serving to adapt to new circumstances and generate new forms of community.

Like the American South, the North-Eastern Indian province of Assam has a rich record of folklore that reveals the people's diverse facets of life and culture. This grew more complex and intricate as people from various regions were forced to relocate there from the 19th century onwards.⁵⁵ Folklore was the only storehouse of identity for the indentured labourers that had been shifted to North-Eastern India and their families, and it remains a vital element in a living culture.⁵⁶ The landowners brought the labourers to the land of Assam from different parts of the country. Each of them had different customs,

⁵⁵ Complex due to the migration and amalgamation of different cultures, traditions, languages, religious tolerance, societal harmony, love, compassion and brotherhood. Yet, formed a community by adapting and mixing old with new.

⁵⁶ For both males and females

language and traditions of their own, and none of them was familiar with the language and customs of the 'new' land of the Assam Tea Gardens. All these people had rituals and beliefs that would be regarded as unique to them. Despite being transplanted, the members of these groups developed a strong, unbreakable emotional bond due to their traditions, and retained some rootedness, feeling responsible for one another, which helped in the formation of identity. So even if a member of some of those groups may not be associated with some of the other members, they all share a common foundation. This tradition fosters a feeling of self and cultural identity among its participants. In turn, this produces regional, ethnic and local customs that become part of folklore. At the same time, different ethnic groups could begin to recognise that even if some of their stories or beliefs appeared to be different, they could also observe commonalities of experience and structure. This created the possibility for new forms of folklore that would reflect the complex and inter-regional origins of those that had been brought to Assam.

Folklore has traditionally enjoyed mobility across India through pilgrimages and fairs. In addition, the wandering minstrels, *sadhus*, and *fakirs* have also disseminated folk tales and songs.⁵⁷ People of the northeast visiting the temples of the south and pilgrims going in the other direction have carried their folk tales, songs, riddles, and proverbs with them, generating a simultaneously conscious and unconscious concourse of material. The *Dharamsala* and inns, where the pilgrims gathered and rested, worked as the clearinghouse for the folk tales, traditional songs, and riddles (Goswami 12).⁵⁸ Traditionally, therefore, folklore was passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth before it came to be converted to writing, and this pattern was true in most regions. In the family setting, primarily, the older person narrates the stories to the children to teach

⁵⁷ *Sadhus* are religious ascetic or holy people and *fakirs* are religious ascetic who live solely on alms.

⁵⁸ A place devoted for religious and charitable purposes.

them about the values, customs, and universe and entertain them. Prafulladutta Goswami asserts in the preface of his book *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1980):

Around the world, there are some skilled people in each community, the elderly men or women are the skilled narrators. There have occasionally been young storytellers as well. These stories they pass on have been recounted to them as children and later shared with their grandkids and others in the community (xv).

However, in the communal setting, an elderly female, in particular, is the orator of all the folktales, and the folksongs travel through the *sadhus* and *fakirs*. Folklorist Linda Dégh, in her book *Narratives in Society* (1995), asserts that womenfolk play a significant role in sharing and circulating oral tales amidst their domestic chores and leisure time:

In addition to pure entertainment, stimulating laughter, excitement, emotion or fright, women's stories discipline and socialise children and teach girls proper behaviour in preparation for future life roles as well as comfort adult women in their daily domestic drudgery. (62)

Morrison's narrative embodies the significance of women in a family and community, who act as universal guardian and guiding figures and are the protector of the culture and heritage. From the old woman she discussed in her Nobel Lecture to her narratives, women are represented as the cultural bearer.

Katharine Loumala questions what might be meant by folklore, as "the word 'folk' is still linked with the concept of a peasant, a member of society dwelling on the outskirts of civilisation" (Leach 261). Increasingly, folklore exists in a vacuum between the civilised elite and the uncivilised primitive, between literacy and illiteracy. Yet not all folklore necessarily follows the traditional pattern. Just as the American South produced exceptional folklore because of exceptionally traumatic circumstances, the Assam Tea Plantation produced new shapes and forms that did not adhere to traditional transmission

models. The stories that evolved there bore traces of tradition and relied on traditional strengths. Still, they also drew on the elements of those traditional elements that corresponded most meaningfully to the predicaments of those living and working in the tea plantations. The new folk are peasants, tribal labourers, and outcasts from the urban middle class elsewhere in India. They sought to build a distinctive cultural environment where several religions and cultures could coexist after being displaced from their natural habitat.

The migrant peasants brought their own traditional cultures and folklores as they migrated to the production centres in Assam, where already established populations had their own customs and practices. This migration was not always necessarily “forced”, as people also migrated from one place to another to earn a better living (although this does imply another kind of force, which is economic). Migration thus brings variation, modification and diffusion in culture; with it comes a change in lifestyle, language, communication practices, geographical variation and many more diverse elements. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “deterritorialization” by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari can be cited here: the forces of colonial domination seek to take over Assam, to deterritorialize it and reterritorialize it under the name of Empire and tea (Childers 78).⁵⁹ In the process of doing this, they also enforce (either economically or militarily) the deterritorialization of the inhabitants of other regions that they wish to employ as indentured labour. With the erasure of the memory of their pre-existing territory, all the pre-existing culture, tradition, language and customs are apparently destroyed. The deterritorialized are apparently consigned to a zone of weakness and inferiority, where their identity is defined or influenced by the dominant. Yet what remains possible for these “weak” people is that they can perform a counter-process themselves. Through

⁵⁹ ‘Deterritorialization and reterritorialization’ is the spelling used by Deleuze and Guattari.

reterritorializing themselves in the invention and improvisation of folklore, they can both reconnect to the pasts and territories which they were severed from, as well as assert their placidness in the “new world” on their own terms. In reterritorializing themselves through new expressions of folklore, they resist the deadening definitions of the master class. They deterritorialize the original deterritorialization that was visited on them. Due to the formation of new territory, the former culture is assimilated into the unique culture that is emerging. A new common language emerges. So in Assam, when groups of people were deterritorialized and reterritorialized, they created a colloquial language, one created by mixing the original language (from each transplanted or migrated tribe) with the existing vernacular Assamese language called *sadri*.⁶⁰

3. The Plantation History

Britain created the landscape of tea plantations in the North-Eastern Indian region of Assam in the mid-nineteenth century. The tea industry filled imperial coffers and allowed the colonial state to transform a wild area loaded with tea plants into a sophisticated system of plantations. The British soon began importing indentured labourers from Central India, claiming that local peasants were indolent. The truth was that the local peasants refused to work on their own lands as indentured labourers and under low wages. “Being on the whole sure of getting easy and cheap replacement [...] the European planters viewed them (immigrants) as worse than animals and did not care for their health and sanitation” (Gupta 4).

In the twentieth century, these migrants were joined by others who came voluntarily to seek a livelihood. However, the arrival of migrants developed a concern that reluctance and resistance towards relocation could jeopardise the plantation industry’s

⁶⁰ A language formed which is the admixture of Hindi, Bengali, Oriya and Bhojpuri languages.

ability to continue producing low-cost, disciplined labourers (*coolies*).⁶¹ For example, when it was proposed that a few hundred *Gandas* were to be transported to Assam as *coolies* for the Tea Gardens from a district prison in Sambalpur, Odisha, the terror of moving to plantations reached an elevated level among the *Gandas*.⁶² The prisoners threatened the authorities to kill themselves by slitting their throats if they were forcibly deported to tea plantations. In response to this resistance from the *Gandas*, a report from the Labour Enquiry Committee of 1906 proposed being more aggressive and proactive in transporting the labourers to the tea plantations. The hundred thousand *Gandas* already in Assam were considered to be the best workers on the plantations. At the same time, the recruiters also called the *Gandas* community ‘low caste weavers and day labourers addicted to thieving’ (Varma 105). Hence, such a kind of resistance to choose death over working at the plantation reflects on the misery of working and living conditions there. The prevailing and reoccurring fear of hopelessness was the feeling with which one can associate with the Assam *cha-bagan* in the recruiting zones.⁶³ In addition, people were concerned for their relatives and families. The feeling was that they had been manipulated into working for the tea plantation, which was a place of no return.

From the lens of plantation owners, in *Sah Bagisar Coolie* (The Tea Garden Coolie), Bolinarayan Bora shares the perception of the ‘coolies’:

Reader, listen, to what manner of creature the coolie is, and how it lives. That whose body hue is blacker than the darkest hour of the night, whose teeth are whiter than even pounded rice, in whose home are to be found the bird, pig, and dog, in whose hand is a

⁶¹ *Coolies* are the low wage labour, a term used by Bolinarayan Bora in ‘Sah Bagisar Kuli,’ (The Tea Garden Coolie) in Haranarayan Bora (ed.), *Mau or The Bee*, February (Calcutta, 1887).

⁶² *Gandas* or *Gandawa* is an indigenous community of Odisha.

⁶³ *Cha*- Tea, *bagan* - garden; Tea Garden

bilayati umbrella, and in whose hands are held a hoe and basket among the tea bushes, that is what is called a coolie.⁶⁴ (qtd. in Sharma 13- 14)

Such perceptions of the *coolie* were mainly based on stereotypical understandings of the ‘lower’ castes and ‘primitive’ tribes relocating to Assam as low-cost labourers. Furthermore, such lies and distortions relating to the *coolies* were further propagated by the moneylenders and locally landed elites, who discouraged their own local people (their lenders and occupants) from trying to migrate. The ultimate reason for discouragement was because the migrants were cheap labourers without knowledge of their rights and duties, who were easily deceived in the name of prosperity and more money.

The worker’s place was paradoxical in the manner that they were manipulated by the recruiters on false promises of opportunities (good fortune), and later after many years, when they tried to escape the labour to seek a better life and either migrate to a free land or back from where they came, they could not. They were discouraged from migrating or returning to their native lands, as if they had lost their identity at the plantation, or had it stripped away from them. Constant exploitation and the feeling that there was no way out of the *cha-bagan* made them believe that *cha-bagan* life was what they deserved (Shekhawat 345). This feeling is further expressed (later in the chapter) through a folksong “*Ekta kolir duiti paat*” (One Bud Two Leaves). It shows that people can indeed be imprisoned in a condition that fails to empower them to effectively think or even dream about their better futures. The impact of the past has become so overwhelming that they are unconsciously coerced into accepting their conditions, however harsh, as inevitable.

Apart from the recruiters’ indifference to the welfare of the workers compared from when they were lured to the plantation, the “choice” to leave the plantation seemed to be a “relatively brief plan” or even an “act of desperation.” Thus, staying at the

⁶⁴ *Bilayati* means foreign

plantation was motivated by the fear of failing to create a better living in their hometown or of settling their escalating debts and loans. The recruiter's substantial advances relieved the immediate situation and the possibility of earning and trying to save money in Assam. Unlike where labourers are frequently "circulated" in pursuit of work and earning for varied periods, *cha-bagan* appeared to be a never-ending struggle. J.B. Fuller, then Chief Commissioner of Assam, who expressed his views on bonded labour, can further elaborate on the similarity of atrocities and conditions suffered by the plantation workers in India and the American South:

The truth is, of course, that serious abuses must occur under a labour system which is something of the nature of slavery, for an employee who can be arrested and forcibly detained by his master is more of an enslaved person than a servant and that these abuses are the price which has to be paid for the great advantages which have resulted from the establishment and growth of the tea industry in Assam [...]. They were deprived of all their freedom, and their derogatory conditions and atrocities remind one of the enslaved people running in Africa and the global slave trade. (Behal 31)

The above statement provides a connection of how the indentured labourer's migration was not termed as 'slavery', but the conditions of the workers resembled those of slavery in the American South and elsewhere. This migration draws a connection with the enslaved due to the brutality and inhuman behaviour they suffered in the Tea Gardens. The plantations of Assam and the Mississippi Delta were on two different lands and continents. What unites them most clearly is that they were environments of either chattel or wage slavery designed to satisfy European appetites for commodities and profits. Whatever local adversaries were encountered in the folklore of either place, the spectre of

the slave economy, conceived in Britain, overhangs everything. In the cultural and social realm of life, the workers on the plantations were unconsciously tied through their violent exploitation. Slavery in the early to mid-nineteenth century proliferated because of the British demand for increased cotton production of both coffee and tea. Both plantations started almost in the same period. The Assam Tea Plantation was introduced in 1823 and moved onto large-scale production in 1852. Cotton plantations in the American South began in the 1800s, and around four million enslaved people lived in the Deep South by 1850.⁶⁵ The torture and brutality were conducted on far apart different continents.

To understand what happened in Assam, it is crucial to get a sense of the essential materiality of the situation. Assam is in a sub-Himalayan zone characterised by high mountain terrains intermingled with plateaus and river valleys (Assam State Biodiversity Board, Govt. of Assam).⁶⁶ The tea business is a labour-intensive agro-based economy of Assam, still accounting for over fifty-one per cent of India's total tea plantation territory. As a result, it generates roughly fifty-five per cent of the country's total tea production and is regarded as the state's economic foundation. It is a significant source of household consumption and a valuable exported source. Tea plantations are historical proof of colonisation and its legacy. In 1823, British Army Major Robert Bruce discovered tea plants in the upper Brahmaputra valley of Assam after being introduced to tea by Singpho Chief Bisa Gam (Sharma 41). However, the people of the Singpho tribes of Assam had a tradition of drinking *Fanap*, which was tea, as Col. Letter observed in 1815. Following the East India Company's conquest of Assam in 1826, the potential of tea production was

⁶⁵ The Deep South included South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas. The enslavement on American land began in 1619 in the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, for the production of indigo, tobacco and rice. In the late eighteenth century, the emergence of the textile industry led to enormous demand for cotton from America. Therefore, the beginning of chattel slavery.

⁶⁶ The name Assam is derived from *Ashama*, which means without a parallel. This refers to the epitome of nature- dense forest, wildlife, rivers and mountains. However, there are many other observations for the name Assam.

established. Governor General Lord William Bentinck authorised it to be grown on a pilot project under a government initiative in 1834 (Gait 358).

The rise of tea plantations in the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys ushered in a massive influx of indentured workers, mostly peasants called *Adivasi* (*Adi* means original, and *vasi* means inhabitant). When the tea industry expanded significantly in the 1850s, backed by substantial British finance, a significant labour force was needed, not locally available. Therefore, the landowners dispatched agents to all labour-scarce areas, particularly Eastern Central India, to entice the impoverished to work as garden labourers in Assam. Most of these workers were from the present-day state of Jharkhand. They were the people from the tribes of *Santals*, *Oraons*, *Mundas*. In 1839, tea packages were sent for evaluation to London and received satisfactory results. As a result, by 1852, European tea planters began to flood into Assam. In 1851, Assam had twenty Tea Gardens, which grew to eight hundred and eighty-three during the next fifty years. By 1901, the tea sector in the Northeast accounted for seventy-seven per cent of overall tea production in the country.⁶⁷ Around one hundred and eighty thousand people from various regions moved to Assam between 1871 and 1901 (India. Assam Labour Enquiry Committee 235; Tinker 50). Despite having various ethnic identities in their original homeland, they created a new social cluster in the gardens, necessarily relinquishing many of their previous ethnic group identities and restrictions. If migrant labourers brought their own traditional culture and folklore when they migrated to greater manufacturing centres, they were simultaneously introduced to the prevailing elite culture. However, they took extraordinarily little from the culture and society of their employers.

⁶⁷ According to The Economic Times, in current period Assam produces nearly seven hundred million kilograms of tea annually (200 Years and Counting).

Narratives of notable Assamese books like *Seuji Patar Kahani*, *Davar Aru nai*, *Ejak Manuh Ekhon Arayna*, and renowned Assamese feature films like *Chameli Mamsahab*, *Kecha Xun* and *Era Bator Sur* are centred around the life and culture of the tea labourers (“About Tea Industries”).⁶⁸ Throughout history, tea plantation labourers have made significant contributions to Assamese culture and civilisation. Nevertheless, rather than portraying themselves as a section of diverse migrant labourers recruited by the British to build capitalism and colonialism in Assam, they renamed themselves the Assam tea tribe. This is because they worked together to impact differences in Assam’s economic and political landscape significantly. Tea tribes have therefore consistently attempted to merge into Assamese culture by blending their ancestral heritage/identity and creating a new one, the ‘*baganiya lok*’ or ‘Tea Garden Tribe’ (Uppal and Sutar 26–28).⁶⁹

Today, groups are formed among the tea tribes into the categories of Tea Garden Labourers and Ex-Tea Garden Labourers. They still raise concerns about legal identification from the government, so they can enjoy the benefits of full citizenship. Initially, they were termed under the category of *Adivasis*, but now they are working towards gaining legal status on the pages of the Government of India. The Tea Gardens are still present on the land of Assam and produce tea as casual labourers but not under inhuman circumstances; the Tea Gardens have become a lifestyle and mode of living for the tea tribes. A new identity has been formed, and Ex-Tea Garden tribes are majorly established and reside in the districts of Darrang, Sonitpur, Nagaon, and Morigaon in

⁶⁸ *The Story of Green Leaves* (1959); *There is No More Cloud* (1955); *The Crowd and the Forest* (1986); *Madam Chameli* (1975); *Raw Gold* (1959); *The Melody of the Abandoned Path* (1956)

⁶⁹ Tea Garden Tribe are also known by several other names such as, *Sah Bagani Homproda*, *Adivasi Samaj*, *Bagania Manuh*. To name some of the tribes: *Asur*, *Aryamala*, *Baiga*, *Bania*, *Banjara*, *Bedia*, *Bhumij*, *Bhuinya*, *Bhil*, *Binjhia*, *Birhor*, *Basphor*, *Birjia*, *Chamar*, *Chero*, *Chik Baraik*, *Deswali Goala Bagal*, *Dhanwar*, *Dandari*, *Dhobi*, *Dushad*, *Dandasi*, *Dhandari*, *Dom*, *Gour*, *Ghansi*, *Ganda*, *Gorait*, *Ghatowar*, *Gonds*, *Gossain*, *Ganjhu*, *Gowala*, *Hari*, *Holra*, *Julaha*, *Karmakar*, *Koiri*, *Kharia*, *Kalahandi*, *Lodhi*, *Lodha*, *Mahli*, *Malar*, *Mal Paharia*, *Mirdha*, *Modi*, *Munda*, *Manki*, *Madgi*, *Majwar*, *Patnaik*, *Nunia*, *Oraon*, *Parja*, *Pradhan*, *Rajwar*, *Rajwal*, *Reily*, *Reddy*, *Rajbonshi*, *Rout*, *Rautia*, *Santhal*, *Sonar*, *Savar*, *Saora*, *Tanti*, *Tantubai*, *Turi*, *Tassa*, *Telenga*, *Teli* (“About Tea Industries”).

middle Assam; Jorhat, Golaghat, Dibrugarh and Tinsukia in upper Assam; Cachar and Karbi Anglong in southwestern Assam; Khokrajhar in west Assam and other districts such as Hailakandi, Sibsagar and Karimganj (Uppal and Sutar 28).

4. Weaving of Myths, Songs and Tales

A distinctive Assamese community has grown over time, with different ethnicities adhering to the concept of becoming Assamese.⁷⁰ So what is now known as Assamese Folklore evolved as a diverse and colourful assemblage of what every group of immigrants brought with them. The substantial movement of immigrants from outside the region and the surges of development and modernisation have contributed to the region's changing societal traditions. There have been identity issues consequent upon this as well; in that context, folklore has also become a renewed focus for people who want to reinforce their own cultural identities.

Assamese folklore is polyvocal, heterological, and representative of the success of the vernacular community by homogenising, standardising, and amalgamating all the traditions. The labourers were from various tribal communities such as *Santhal*, *Oroan*, *Munda*, *Kharia* and many others residing in Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Odisha. The diverse cultures are a massive cluster of seventy-five communities such as *Urang*, *Kol*, *Bhil*, *Ghatowal*, *Gowalla*, *Chantal*, *Munda*, *Pradhan*, *Kurmi*, and *Bhumis* ("About Tea Industries"). Therefore, Assamese folklore created on the tea plantation is essentially a glorious fusion of many forms and emotions. Folklore has had a significant influence on Assam's popular cultural forms. It considerably influences the state's most prominent famous voices, such as the dance and song for the harvesting festival Bihu, the most well-known of Assam's folk forms that belong to the non-tribal communities. Bihu is

⁷⁰ People living in the territory of the state Assam.

celebrated during April, also considered the Assamese New Year and the beginning of spring. The festival is celebrated in three parts at three different periods in a year. These are Bohag Bihu, Kati Bihu and Magh Bihu, and all are celebrated at junctures of harvesting (“Fairs and Festivals”).⁷¹

However, *jhumur* songs also recollect the hardships of tea plantation life, relating its incidents and stressing what is necessary for survival. Some folk dance songs are called, *Jahli*, *Domkoich*, *Tuchugit*, *Kathi Dance*, *Jahli Git*, and *Uria Nritya*; the *jhumur* folk dances are performed during *Karam Parab*, *Chahrai*, *Gram Puja*, *Tuchu Puja*, and *Manasa Puja*. The inhabitants share some commonalities between the two significant songs and dances as they have borrowed the themes and nature of songs from each other. For example, the most common folk song “*Assam desher Baisakh Bihu*” (The Bohag Bihu of the Assam Nation) expresses the commonalities (borrowing and sharing between cultures):

Assam desher Baisakh Bihu

The Bohag Bihu of the Assam Nation

Karam paraber saman re

It is equal to the Karam puja (of the Tea Garden community)

Sristir katha ache gatha

The story of creation (fertility) is woven around

Dunate saman re

Equally in both the festivals. (Collected and translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

⁷¹ Bohag Bihu is celebrated for seven days from the onset of spring. The farmers prepare their fields for cultivation during this festival. Kati Bihu is celebrated to seek blessing and protection from the Gods for the crops. Magh Bihu is celebrated to mark the end of the harvesting season.

The song marks commonalities of celebration. Both Karam Puja and Bohag Bihu are harvest festivals celebrated during the same time but among different communities. Bohag Bihu, as mentioned earlier, is a festival celebrated among the local people of Assam; and Karam puja is celebrated among the Tea Garden communities, people who migrated from central India to the Tea Gardens. The celebration is about harvesting and cultivating crops, new life and the beginning of spring.

Tea plantation labourers imported to Assam during the colonial period came from various ethnolinguistic groups. These groups are *Munda, Chaothal, Kol, Kharia, Bhumij, Ghatowar, Baraik, Sabar, Gauda, Skandha, Baiga, Bheel, Saora, Bhui, Paharia, Urang, Parja, Mali, Teli, Dom, Rajput, Mal, Kandapan, Hari, Sarban, Hoo, Nowar, Napit, Patra, and Sero* (Uppal and Sutar 23). They were in a challenging situation in terms of maintaining their linguistic identities. The tea plantation workers' social constitution was multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic. According to government records, living with each other in the garden caused various ethnic-linguistic groups to establish a hybrid language known as *Sadri* or *Sadhri* for inter-ethnic communication. The merging of all languages primarily facilitated this; therefore, it has several sub-dialects, such as *Madoni, Sadri, Khorta* and *Kurmali* (Behal and Linden 145; Muthukumaraswamy 17).

Assam is indeed a territory of immense diversity, populated by people of various ethnicities, races, and linguistic tribes. Due to the labourers' movement at different periods, each one of these communities has a unique set of cultural traditions. As a result, a new culture emerged in the valley along the river Brahmaputra through social exchanges among these various communities over the generations. It is from this culture that the term "Assamese" was coined.⁷² Some communities assimilated totally into the new culture,

⁷² English formation of Assam as Assamese by which the British rulers referred to the tract covered by the Brahmaputra valley and its adjoining areas.

while others, such as the *Dimasas*, maintained their distinct identity despite having made significant contributions to the establishment of Assamese culture.⁷³ Due to the heterogeneity of the cultures, traditions and sub-dialects, the folklore collected is present in the languages of the respective tea tribes (Sharma 132). It is problematic that there are not one or two languages in the land of Assam first collected and later translated into a language accessible to everyone. Layers of translations are needed due to the vast number of Tea Gardens, tea tribes, and dialects in the folklore created.

Assam has a rich record of folklore and has been developing through the ages. It has thrown a floodlight on the people's diverse facets of life and culture. It is like a storehouse of delight and knowledge for the people of Assam. The ancient Assamese folklore created by the multi-ethnic communities has played a vital role in traditional Assamese society. Considerable sectors of the population were uneducated but created a vast amount of oral literature, which also included a broad array of ballads, folk songs, folktales, hymns, proverbs, and riddles, among many other elements, which thus resonated with the socio-political challenges of the period. Assamese folklore helps impart lessons to society, especially the womenfolk. Moreover, it has a universal appeal in a manner that addresses all the aspects of life, such as plants, animals, humans, stars, and planets. In the Assamese language, folktales are called *Sadhu* or *Sadhukatha*. The word *Sadhu* means "the righteous," hence *Sadhukatha* tells a moral tale. According to P. Goswami, "The Assamese for an oral tale is *sadhukatha*, usually derived from the Sanskrit word *sadhu*- a merchant, and *Katha*- a tale, meaning thereby that the *sadhukatha* is a tale told by a wandering merchant (80; Muthukumaraswamy 22).

⁷³ While *Dimasas* origins are unknown, its mediaeval history is well documented because of the Ahoms' numerous *Buranjis* (chronicles), as the mediaeval Dimasa kingdom maintained a strong adversary of the Ahom dynasty until its disintegration in 1832. The Dimasa kingdom came under the influence of Brahmanism and the Vaishnavite religion subsequently in their rule. The Dimasas produced significant literature throughout this period, notably in Assamese, Bengali, and Sanskrit.

Assamese folk literature has been an excellent educational source as it has eternal educational value. For example, through folklore, women are taught various things related to day-to-day life. Charles Francis Potter notes the uniquely significant role of women in story-telling:

There is also, besides the juvenile, a strong feminine element in folklore, because its origin antedates the emergence of reason and belongs in the instinctive and intuitional areas. It is irrational and highly imaginative, often termed “old wives’ tales”. Women have always been the savers and conservators of beliefs, rites, superstitions, rituals and customs. (Leach 261)

Grandmothers use ‘*Dakar-Bachan*’ to educate their girls and daughters-in-law about various aspects of life.⁷⁴ Since the emergence of tea plantations and migration, Assam has been home to many tribes (the tribes of immigrants). Each tea tribe has its traditional customs and beliefs and its own treasury of folktales.

The chronicle of tales began with the rendition in the early twentieth-century development of the literature of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (1911) by Lakshminath Bezbaroa (1864-1938).⁷⁵ Born on a boat on the river Brahmaputra at Ahatguri, Raxoraj Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s birth was not celebrated with the customs, rituals and festivity which was usual on a birth of a male child in Assam (factually, celebration on the birth of a male child is all over India). For about half a century, Lakshminath devoted his life to reviving the glory of the Assam language and literature through his writings and is known as *Raxoraj* (The King of Humour). The tales of ‘*Tejimola*,’ ‘*Malita*’ (Ballads Tales), folk songs- all kinds of folk knowledge have great relevance.⁷⁶ ‘*Dakar-Bachan*’ and other proverbs are still

⁷⁴ *Dakar- Bachan* refers to proverbs attributed to the study that deals with the vernacular architecture (local building construction) of Assam.

⁷⁵ Grandmother’s Tales; *Xadhu* refers to myths, tales, legends, fables.

⁷⁶ Bezbarua’s other folktale collection *Kakadeuta aru Natilora* (The grandfather and the grandson) published in 1912. Bezbarua’s daughter Aruna Devi Mukherjee has translated his *Kakadeuta aru Natilora* (Tale of a grandfather from Assam, 1955). There are twenty-nine folktales in this collection. Another

used frequently. Assamese folklore helped impart lessons of identity, culture, and tradition to the rest of the labourers brought from distinct parts of the various states of central India. It has played a significant role in society, modelling social behaviour, social culture, and tradition. Tales about animals have provided continuity between various communities. Furthermore, moral values, truthfulness, obedience, unity and religious values have been helping a vital part of educating the women of the Assamese community. Knowledge of the evolution of all living things' evolution and rethinking the relationships between humans and non-human lives has also been vital.

Moreover, emerging folk knowledge has aided in constructing theological conceptions and cultural identity, as well as the juxtaposition of ethnic and religious identity. With most families being denied formal education, folklore has become a vitally important social tool. Through folklore, people have the freedom to exercise their imagination. The first and the last source of folk material is human society itself. I identify how Assamese folklore created on the tea plantations performs an essential function in generating awareness about the rich and complex cultural and social values of the migrant labourers.

5. Blending the Language

So a new society and a new language emerged during the most intense period of establishing the Tea Gardens. Immigration lasted for more than a century, from 1841 to 1960, that is, even after the country gained independence in 1947. Two thousand forty-nine labourers were brought from Chotanagpur and Medinipur in 1859-60, and this

collection of folktales *Junuka of Bezbarua* was published in 1913. This is the collection of eleven folktales. Some tales of 'Bhuri Air Sadhu' were translated to English by J. Borroah in 1915. After Lakshminath Bezbarua Sarat ch. Goswami edited a collection of Assamese folktales *Asamiya Sadhukatha* by Taranath Chakrabarty and Sadhur Bhoral of Kumudeswar Borthakur in 1929 was published in Assamese. Trailokeswari Devi Baruani collected some other Assamese folktales in the books *Sadhukatha* and *Sandhiyar Sadhu*. *Sadhukatha* is a collection of seventeen Assamese folktales published in 1934. In *Sandhiyar Sadhu*, there are twenty-two Assamese folktales. This collection was published in 1937.

practice was repeated subsequently (Sarkar et al.).⁷⁷ The labourers from Chotanagpur were convinced to work on the tea plantation ranch of Assam as it offered a higher wage and a better living than in their native provinces. Pragmatically, Assam was considered to be a place where you might live out the terms of a contractual agreement (it was known as “agreement *ka jagah*”, or a region of agreement) (Varma 105). Yet if it was a place to make money the tea plantation was not regarded as a good place to live. It had a negative and gloomy image where nobody would want to go:

By 1920s, while some of the worst abuses associated with recruitment of labour were done away with, fraudulent practices and covert compulsions, most striking example of which was the *girmit* (agreement) bonus system. (Gupta 3)

A similar situation can be seen among railroad labourers in the nearby Northern Allahabad. The commanders or landowners feared the reaction of the labourers when they heard the phrase ‘Tea Garden’.⁷⁸ The folksongs narrate the sad story of the migrants depicting the exploitation and trickery faced, as in the following:

ki bolibo dukher katha

What shall I say about my sad story?

are bolile je gow lage betha mazdur salan karile assame

It pains me to explain you brought me as a labour to Assam.

mator garir char saka are raigari dir das saka

the car has four wheels, the train has ten wheels

railgadi sole ghone ghone

The train runs all the time rapidly

⁷⁷ Chotanagpur region is an area comprising South Bihar and parts of Bengal, Orissa, and Andhra Pradesh. This is a drought-prone area, and the people are forced to search for jobs in other parts of India. From there the contractors brought these coolies to Calcutta, and from Calcutta, they were taken by steamer to Assam.

⁷⁸ Proceedings of Assam Labour Enquiry Committee in the Recruiting and Labour Districts (Calcutta, 1906).

phaki diye Assam anile.

that brought us to Assam by telling lies. (Collected and translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

Such folksongs manifest a clear connection with the Blues of the American South that express how separation and loss affects a family. For example, “Railroad Blues” by Trixie Smith expresses sorrow for getting separated from her father and remembers ‘trains’ as a mode of transportation that brings destruction and with hope for the same transportation to take them back home:

Now if the train stays on the track, I'm Alabama bound

Now if the train stays on the track, I'm Alabama bound

Don't you hear that train comin', I'm Alabama bound

Now the train went by with my papa on the inside

I say the train went by with my papa on the inside

Lord, I couldn't do nothin' but hang my head and cry

Did you ever take a trip on the Seaboard and Air Line?

Did you ever take a trip on the Seaboard and Air Line?

'Cause if you ride that train, it will satisfy your mind

I got the railroad blues, I wanna see my hometown

I got the railroad blues, I wanna see my hometown

And if the Seaboard don't wreck, I'm Alabama bound. (Smith T.)

The train blues is a transnational style. The ‘Indian Migration Act, 1873’ allowed the British to recruit labourers legally on the tea plantations. The workers were deceived by lies and brought to the tea plantation via railways. The Assamese railroad song shares the remorse and repentance of labourers, and all the misery that is left in their lives. Many folksongs created on the plantation centre on feelings of betrayal.

The new way of life has led to the development of a new Tea Garden culture, resulting from intricate interactions among individuals from many ethnic groups. The various dialects from different regions led to the creation of a connecting language known as *bagania* or *sadari* language.⁷⁹ These folksongs became a ritual of sharing and expressing grief and remorse among the tea tribes and were further adapted to sing during the festivals. At the same time, trade and traditional rites at festivals and some songs and dances were brought to the pristine environment, and a new language, a hybrid of Hindi, Bengali, and Assamese with vocabulary from other languages, was formed. Tea Plantation migrants or coolies evolved their form of culture and identity by engaging with such folklore. In turn, this generated a new state of ethnic consciousness, allowing the Tea Plantation group to identify itself in relationship to others. This also demonstrates how an ethnic group can accept the name ‘tea tribes’ given to them by the planters.

6. Labourers’ Lives

Assam is still primarily associated with tea today, and Jayeeta Sharma traces the history and impact of this commodity on Assam. Her *Empire’s Garden* (2011) brings the history of Assam, too often only perceived as a backwater, into the mainstream South Asian historiography. The major transformative event in Sharma’s narrative is the introduction of tea cultivation in British-owned and operated plantations in the nineteenth century. The

⁷⁹ *Bagan* is a Hindi word for the garden; *bagania* means the language of people working in gardens or spoken in gardens.

introduction of tea required a redefinition of the region and its people and led to the migration of many other groups to Assam. All these factors shaped the emergence of Assam's middle classes and their interventions in creating different forms of regional, linguistic, ethnic, and nationalist politics. It is by tracing the history of many of these transformations that Sharma can engage with a range of scholarly debates on colonialism and nationalism; labour, slavery, and migration; the creation of linguistic, racial, and ethnic identities; the creation of a middle-class-dominated public sphere, and the challenges faced by this imagination of Assam.

Cha-bagan (Assam Tea Garden) has been described as everything from a symbol of hope and loss to a source of terror and deception. Even if they could obtain a discharge certificate (*hathchi*) or be deemed "useless" for future employment by the management, the time-expired workers were sometimes left stranded with few means to return home, even if they chose to (Varma 110). There were worries that individuals might be compelled and detained against their will. Contract renewals were particularly regarded to be performed under coercion and threat. Family members made many failed attempts to reach their relatives in Assam. In the mid- nineteenth century, about ten thousand workers migrated from the Midnapur area, in Bengal, for the Assam Tea Plantations and never returned. The migration of labourers to the plantations and never returning remained the same till the twentieth century. Several instances of people have approached the colonial officer stationed in Bihar during that time. People enquired about their family members, "My wife, daughter, or son has been dragged off to Assam [...] How do I locate him?" (Varma 108). Furthermore, these concerns grew more severe after the constant promises made by local tea agents regarding the happy and settled life of their relatives at Assam Tea Plantation, which made people panic that their relatives had entered into a new

utopian domain of prosperity from which they would never come back. Of course, this was not the reality that labourers encountered.

The folk songs that emerged on the plantations describe the anguish of the labourers (*coolies*); their narratives are of exploitation, deception, unpredictability, struggles, and unmet expectations. Years ago, labourers arrived from Odisha, Chhattisgarh, West Bengal, Bihar, Birbhum, Bankura, and Medinipur, and since then they have made their home here in the *cha- bagan*. The songs shared among the coolies were a medium to share and express their *dukh* and *taklif* with each other.⁸⁰

The origin and development of folk song in Assam have been attributed to the impact of hard labour and the demand for maintaining productivity in a near-torturous working environment: “Once the tribesmen and peasants were violently detached from their traditional habitat and earlier forms of production and brought to the Tea Gardens, they were confined in concentration camp-like condition” (Gupta 3). Many folklorists believe that men in ancient times relied on magical acts and chanting to perform their labour (qtd. In Goswami *Essays* 24). Further, these prayers and chants were performed with magical dances and songs that have become folk songs. Traditionally, the work songs attempt to alleviate the arduous boredom of hard labour and facilitate both the working process and recovery from it. They are created or sung by workers with the aim of maximising their productivity by pacing the task, maintaining a consistent work rate, or passing the time throughout the hard workday.⁸¹ During the day, Assam Tea Garden

⁸⁰ *Dukh* means Grief and *Taklif* means pain.

⁸¹ Folk song: Plucking time
The pruning’s sometime finished,
and the Deep-Hoe too is done
And it’s getting on
Towards the plucking days,
.....
Oh it’s plucking time, my lassies
And, your baskets all are full,
(There’s a brick below
If only you could see),

workers laboured, and at night, they gathered at one location to sing and dance to the tunes that reminded them of their hometown. To put it romantically, for years the soothing songs of *jhumur* have echoed through the Tea Gardens that give way to the mist-covered hills in the distance. *Jhumur* is based on the experiences of everyday life and reflects the coolies' pleasures and sorrows under the rigid disciplinary plantation system. The songs originated in the tribal traditional society by the women folk and were called *Hawka Jhumur*. They expressed their emotions while working on the plantations in local languages called *hawka*, which means shouting.⁸² However, shouting and singing are not synonymous. Therefore, this 'shouting' was combined with music played by male folk to make it delightful and enjoyable. The songs are played and performed during the harvesting festivals known as *Karam Puja* and *Tusu Puja*. *Jhumur* tunes are played in the background as the dance is performed. The memories and experiences of the migrants were found through these folk songs, which live on to the present.

A similar pattern can be observed with the emergence of Blues music in 1861 out of the lands of Mississippi. Blues developed after the American Civil War (1861-65), evolving from the oral traditions (folk songs) created during work and religious rituals. The foundation of Blues music can be traced back to African rhythms and music styles. Blues were also work songs sung during the daytime by workers in the cotton fields to engage themselves, to communicate with each other (call and response method, as was seen in the Assam plantation folk song) and later at wooden shacks during the night-time

But the Sahib he doesn't look there,
 And he'll never find that brick there,
 So just come along and
 Pluck the leaf with me.

.....
 Yes, we'll teach you how to cheat,
 We can do it quite a treat,
 So just listen sisters all
 To what I say (Hanley 93-94).

⁸² A similar practice can be seen with the creation of Blues: "The shout as much as the Africans call-and-response singing dictated the form blues took. Blues issued directly out of the shout" (Baraka 62).

where everyone came together to share their emotions.⁸³ Baraka elaborates on the transportation of work song from Africa to America:

Most West Africans were farmers and [...] these agricultural farm songs could have been used in the fields of the New World in the same manner as the Old [...] So the work song, as it began to take shape in America, first had to be stripped of any purely African ritual and some cultural reference found for it in the New World.

(19)

In addition, they are the religious, field hollers, chants and rhyme ballads of enslaved African Americans and freedmen. The work songs had a utilitarian side, sung to relieve the boredom of the job and increase endurance and coordination while working in a group. The songs described the brutal and harsh conditions of workers on the plantations and were a channel of expression. The emotions of misfortune, betrayal, adversity, and frustration are expressed in blues lyrics, there are shared joys and communal desperation. Blues singers emerged from African American communities that were oppressed and economically disadvantaged. First, the blues were performed in the small shacks around the Delta; later, the Blues were carried towards the North by the singers to earn a living from their music, using Northbound trains as their way out. Interestingly, the word 'blue' is associated with the emotion of sadness and melancholy. B.B. King, a famous blues

⁸³ Folk song: Plucking

There are two female workers (coolie)- Budhni and Sarawasti on the plantation where they are talking about stealing a leaf and a bud to sell it in the market.

Budhni: "Plucking, plucking, plucking of the leaf,
Strictly just two and a bud, but take another sheaf
The Sahib is on kamjari and the burra babu's far,
Two piece a seer to spend in the bazaar"

Saraswati: "Plucking, plucking, plucking all the leaf
Budhni you're a Sali, the mother of a thief,
Get back or I will hit you" (Hanley 94).

singer, notes, “What is the blues? Life. Life as we live it today, life as we have lived it in the past, and life as I believe we will live it in the future” (Brewer 2).

To think of Assamese songs as a form of blues, here are some examples of folk songs that emerged on the *cha-bagan*:

Song 1 Title: *Assam Desher Chah Pat*

Assam Desher Chah Pat

Assam, the land of tea,

Pani Boli Bar Mitha

where the water is supposed to be sweet,

Chal Sakhi Chal Jabo

Friends! Let us go.

Bagane Tulbor pata anand mane

We will pluck leaves in the gardens with joy. (Varma 117, translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

In this song, the labourers apparently converse about Assam’s optimism, considering it a region of opportunity, hope, and work, restating the kind of propaganda that recruiters used. The prospective labourers who dream of the beautiful green land full of prosperity and good life sing the song. They call Assam a land of Tea where they are going only to pluck the tea leaves, earn wages and live a happy life. The song suggests the innocence of the labourers who assume that going there will improve their living standards. They will earn more money and can fulfil their dreams, impossible in their current work situation. For them, plucking tea leaves will be a facile task which does not require toiling and will bring happiness working in the green gardens on the hill. The scenic beauty portrayed to

them by the recruiters lured them to leave their current home and family and move to the Tea Gardens.

Song 2 Title: *Chol Mini Assam Jabo*⁸⁴

Chol Mini Assam Jabo

Come Mini; we will go to Assam

Deshe baro dukh re

Misery abounds in our Desh.⁸⁵

Assam deshe re Mini cha-bagan horiya

In Assam, my dear Mini, the tea gardens are green and beautiful.

Hor mara jaimon taimon

There lies our future.

Pata tola tann bo

Plucking leaves and digging is tough.

Hai jaduram

Oh, Jaduram!⁸⁶

Phaki diye cholai di assam

You lied to us and sent us to Assam.

EEK poisar potima

⁸⁴ Mini is the name of a girl.

⁸⁵ Country, here state

⁸⁶ Magician- a name given to the recruiter as he manipulated the labourers.

It is difficult to earn one paisa.⁸⁷

Gaya golai tail go

Just fetch some oil from the Marwari trader's shop⁸⁸

Minie papa mantee Jodi

If Mini's father asks

Aare dibo jhol ko

He will get some more fish curry

Sardar bole kaame kaam

Sardar says, "Work, work!"⁸⁹

Babu bole dhorai aan

Babu says, "catch them."⁹⁰

Sahib bule libo pither chaal

Sahib says, "whip them hard."

Hai jaduram

Oh, Jaduram!

Phaki diye cholai di assam

You fooled us and lured us to Assam. (Dasgupta, translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

Song 2 bitterly rejects the utopian fantasies of Song 1. Here the singer is a labourer recruited to go to the Tea Gardens, addressing his daughter Mini. The first paragraph shows the hope and enthusiasm of migrating for a better livelihood, as seen in Song 1.

⁸⁷ Indian currency equivalent to cent

⁸⁸ Merchant's shop

⁸⁹ *Sardar* is a person who is the leader.

⁹⁰ *Babu* is used to refer to an English man (British)

They can put their current miserable and poor life to an end. Furthermore, the tone of hope is revived in the opening words of song 2, where the singer demonstrates and compares the vastness of his troubles and sufferings (*dukh* and *taklif*) with the greenery of Assam. Then reality fell, and the migrant labourer experienced actuality on the plantation as burdensome and oppressive, their (labourers’) dreams of living happy lives were shattered. The promises turned out to be lies as there were no lush green gardens to enjoy, rather they were forced to work in these Tea Gardens; the labourers worked tirelessly in the fields to dig soil and pluck the leaves throughout the day. Most importantly, the workers were disheartened by the fact that it was difficult to earn the least of the currency, one paisa (one penny), despite their hard work. The song elaborates the hardship of the labourers to seek good comfort food if they earn the minimum amount to buy fish curry, the staple food.

Further in the song, the labourer expresses his fear of the inhuman torture imposed by the plantation owners known as ‘*sardar*’ if they refused to work or tried to escape. The inhuman conditions on the tea plantations were described in such a manner that the pain and remorse could be felt in the tone of the song. They could not rest even for a second. As soon they took a break, the ‘*sardar*’ would order them to keep working or else they will be lynched. “In fact, being under the bindings of the penal contract, the indentured workers had no freedom. In case of continued refusal by an indentured labourer to work or of absence exceeding seven days, he was liable to imprisonment and chastisement” (Gupta 3).

Song 3 Title: *Ekta kolir duiti paat*

Ekti kolir duti patai to – peeter bhat,

One bud has two leaves, and is the only source of our food

Pahi pahi Pata kuri, tokori bharai,

Petal by petal we pick lots of leaves to fill the basket

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai, hai re- Hai re hai

Dear friend, this is the only way to live.

Pahi pahi Pata kuri, tokori bharai,

Petal by petal we pick lots of leaves to fill the basket

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai, hai re- Hai re hai

Dear friend, this is the only way to live.

Dutakar bajar kori baki ani, na paini

We shop for two rupees on credit that we do not get

Gota din pata kuri hapta hisab pai

We pick leaves every day but we get paid weekly

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai, o hai re

Dear friend, this is the only way to live.

Ehi sokhi jiye ki upai

Dear friend, this is the only way to live

Babu bhaiyer chana pona school pore- jai re

Children of my manager study in the School

Moder chana poka biche jai

Our children goes to pick insects⁹¹

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai- hai re hi

Dear friend, this is the only way to live

Ekti kolir duti patai to – peeter bhat,

One bud has two leaves, and is the only source of our food

Pahi pahi Pata kuri, tokori bharai,

Petal by petal we pick lots of leaves to fill the basket

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai, hai re- Hai re hai

Dear friend, this is the only way to live

Pahi pahi Pata kuri, tokori bharai,

Petal by petal we pick lots of leaves to fill the basket

Ehi sokhi jiye ke upai, hai re- Hai re hai

Dear friend, this is the only way to live. (Dasgupta, translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

The folksong 3 is a *jhumur* song where the singer narrates the story of their life. The plantation worker is saddened even to talk about their life. The worker narrates that they are stuck on the plantation, and this is now their life. The task is to pluck the two leaves and a bud on the gardens, which are considered the purest, and the best tea leaves. This task requires a lot of hard work and concentration and is tedious. The song speaks that the workers carefully pluck leaves by leaves and fill their baskets.

There is a refrain in the song used after every stanza that the worker is disappointed, feels stuck, and tries to console himself or herself, saying now this is their life. They are disappointed because even though they work every day, they are not paid

⁹¹ Insects on the plants

daily wages, but by the week, so they have to wait for the means to buy their bare necessities. To which the song narrates that they live on credit despite working so hard throughout the day. At the end of their working hours, they do not have money in their hands, which makes them feel exploited even further. The worker is more disheartened by the fact that not only them but even their children are pushed into this life of plantation workers. Their children are not allowed to go to school and get an education. Instead, they are forced to work in the Tea Gardens and pluck insects on the plants. Due to their short height and lack of concentration, they are not given the task of plucking the tea leaves. That work is paid, but plucking insects is not; the children are enduring even worse injustice than their parents. Yet the children of their manager (plantation owner) go to the school every day. The song has moved into a poignant awareness of the implications of social class. This practise of imposing forced debt culture was also a feature of life on the Mississippi Delta, as Clyde Woods indicates: “Even though wages were extremely low, workers were forced to incur grossly inflated debts for food, clothing, and rent. Debt opened the door to both imprisonment and disenfranchisement” (78). This forced debt culture among the labourers was a kind of semi-bondage mechanism practised commonly by plantation owners, and it inspired a commonality of sung complaint.

It is not only their own lives that dishearten the plantation workers but their children are being dragged into a similar position that hurts them more. They feel stuck in the gardens and are unable to escape; understandably, they do not want their children to live a similar life, yet they feel paralysed and impotent to enact change. The song expresses the deep turmoil the workers go through and how their life has run entirely opposite to what they expected when they were lured by the false promises of agents. The image of Assam was created using exoticised descriptions of it as a land of green gardens, a land where mountains and sky meet, and as a sea of opportunities. The association propagated

in relation to the name Assam was that it was a beautiful mountain region with an abundance of lush green gardens near the Hooghly River, full of prosperity and wealth. The people in central India thought of it as heaven on earth, a beautiful and unpolluted idyll. What seemed like paradise became infernal, owing to the labourers' traumatising and inhuman living conditions, poor sanitation, and low wages.

The songs mentioned above can be read as a series, imitating the journey of the labourers from their home to the tea gardens, which started with hope and excitement but led to despair, disappointment and a harder life than they could have imagined. In song 1, we see how the labourer was happy and excited to migrate to a new place with the hope of a better opportunity for earning and improving his livelihood. The image of the tea garden that was portrayed to him has beautiful green gardens and a serene landscape; a heaven on earth in terms of nature, living conditions and earning good money. In addition, when we move to the second song titled "*Chol Mini! Assam Jabo*" we see the dreams that the labourers are visualising during their migration. The song starts on a note of positivity, where the labourers were happy to leave their current poor condition and migrate to a better place. However, the stanza that follows expresses the shock and disappointment faced by the labourers after reaching the tea gardens. The expression of labour and hard work forced the labourers to earn a minimum wage. Followed by the third song, it narrates how their lives are on the plantation where they are not paid fairly for the work, and their children are dragged into similar labour and taking them away from childhood and receiving education.

The *jhumur* songs capture the everyday experiences of the workers on the wrenched green fields, and they forged a sense of connection within the emerging community of the labourers. There has been a long colonial history of exploitative working conditions in tea gardens, which are highly labour-intensive. It does not require

skilled labour but labour in bulk to pluck the tea leaves. The workers were thoroughly estranged at first: from their owners (management), from themselves and from the outside world, to which they were barely connected. These connections with the outside world are related to the socio-economic and cultural lives of the labourers and, further, to the process of making and producing the product (Tea) as a unit.

Slavery in America was legally abolished in 1865, but even then labourers were smuggled to the southern region for the maintained production of the cash crop, cotton. This time the people were not termed as enslaved, but rather as sharecroppers who were distributed among the plantation owners in small batches. The migration of labourers continued to keep the production of cotton ongoing on a large scale. Many labourers moved to the North, free from slavery, to earn a better living, but many still stayed back as sharecroppers because of sociocultural and economic oppression. The Blues has its descendants in enslaved people, *jhumur* speaks of the experiences of indentured labourers.

Other songs such as “*Ranchi Che Bhejali Kuli*” (From Ranchi was sent the coolie) or “*Axom Deshor Bagisare Sowali*” (The Girl from the Tea Gardens of Assam) take the listeners on a journey to witness the life of a tea plantation labourer. The songs express the loss of dignity and longing to end the brutality suffered at the plantation and the abyss that has become their life. The labourers cannot rest and work tediously throughout the day and night, and the folksongs express the helplessness of the workers and how they feel trapped. The fear continues that if the labourers fail to pluck the leaves and buds of the tea plant perfectly, the owner (*Sahib*) will lynch them later and will not pay them wages. Today, for the labourers/migrants who managed to return (escape the brutality) from Assam, a communal festival is celebrated to help them regain their status as free and courageous men and women who chose to return to their roots and community. The

festival is celebrated among the *Ho tribe* of the Chotanagpur region and is known as *Jati mandi* (Kali Dasgupta (1926-2005)).

The music created on the cotton plantations was a reflection of the people, as explained by Baraka: “[T]he music was explaining the history as the history was explaining the music. And that both were expressions of and reflections of the people!” (x). Blues music is therefore another unique cultural tradition that Africans evolved out of the devastation visited upon them by the transatlantic slave trade. It is another form of oral history, which emerged during the devastating consequences, and experience of enslavement in the form of call-and-response techniques and work songs: “Blues did begin in slavery, and it is from that peculiar in-situation, as it was known euphemistically, that blues did find its particular form” (Baraka 50). The desire of the enslaved for freedom was expressed through the stories and songs of misery, enslavement and torture. Blues carries on the cry of the enslaved, even as it also addresses more present experiences of desire and its frustration: “And this intensely personal nature of blues-singing is also the result of what can be called the Negro’s ‘American experience’” (Baraka 66). Blues played a major role in helping the descendants of the enslaved gain their cultural identity in a place where they were considered inhuman, uncivilised and without an identity.

The enslaved were first denied speech and second were unable to express their emotions in English, which was not their language and was adopted from their oppressors: “[B]lues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives” (Baraka 17). Blues represents a decisive moment in the discovery of African American language, a forum where new modalities of speech could appear. The enslaved themselves had different dialects and languages from each other; therefore, language only negated their reality. The songs sung during the work also gave them a steady and upbeat rhythm

to perform the tiding task. These songs were not only about pain and grief but also about love, loneliness, spirituality and, nevertheless, sarcasm and mockery towards their oppressors, a way to transcend their reality. Blues brought another dimension of intimate experience to the worksong, often reflecting emotional and experiential conversations individuals. Words and music became an avenue for spiritual escapism for the enslaved, which was difficult to attain in real life. The same was true for those stuck in the economy of sharecropping. Similarly, the folklore created on the tea plantation later emerged into songs known as *jhumur* songs and *Bihu*. These songs were later developed and known as the songs of festival and celebratory dance, performed during different seasons and occasions in a year. The songs exemplify the overcoming of tyranny and triumphing over the torturous and brutal past of the tea plantation.

Notably, as both these American and Indian categories of folksongs emerged through shout and call-and-response methods, the singing style of both types of song bears some similarity. To build up a dense rhythmic complexity, singers like Charlie Patton (Delta Bluesman) focused on attaining the right rhythmic effect which is done by the stretching of syllables and interesting pauses between the words (Woods 111). The similar sound and rhythmic pattern, the repetition of the first two lines in many Blues lyrics echoes the repetition of the first two lines in *jhumur* songs, such as “Chol Mini Assam Jabo”:

Chal Mini Assam jabo-oo-oo,

Deshe baro dukh re-eee.

Chal Mini Assam jabo-oo-oo,

Deshe baro dukh re-eee.

Delta Bluesman Charlie Patton’s “34 Blues” observes a comparable structure:

I ain't gonna tell no body

34 have done for me-e-e

I ain't gonna tell no body

34 have done for me-e-e (Sackheim and Shahn 187)

This repetition of the two lines (call) reflects the viewpoint of the singer to receive the next lines (response). The first two repeated lines of the shout are repeated several times throughout the song, whether to mark time while waiting for the next lines or possibly to reflect the time taken to improvise a new line in performance. In the case of *jhumur*, the songs were sung in Assamese, and in the case of Blues, the songs were sung in English. Therefore, the plantation workers were not using their native language but rather appropriating the language of the ownership class for their own artistic and defiant reasons.

The history of suffering draws the transnational connection between the two plantations as well as the folklore that each culture created. Both Blues and *jhumur* songs also address the poverty gap and its material and cultural consequences. Workers had the basic elements of subsistence: food, clothing and shelter. Owners evidently had all that, but also the freedom to read, write and enjoy leisure. The workers' pain elevates to an extent when they see their owners having what they have been denied. The folk songs expressed similar pain and suffering among the workers. Yet by comparison to Blues, *jhumur* songs are not well known, not even in India. Knowledge of *Jhumur* songs is limited to within the Assamese culture and nearby states where workers migrated to escape the tea garden nightmare. Yet in comparing these songs to Blues, the possibility of opening up a much wider audience for them appears. Comparative folklore becomes politically

educational in these moments, a way of showing previously unacknowledged solidarities between workers across time and space.

7. Trickster in Assam Folklore

Trickster is present in an abundance of cultural narratives around the world. In the Assamese language, a trickster is known as *Tenton* or *Teton*, which means the clever one (Muthukumaraswamy 9). The one common feature of the trickster in Assamese folktales is that the trickster is often out of his home due to his foolhardiness and can reincarnate into different life forms.⁹² Moreover, the trickster tales are often rich in political and social satire. The trickster figure tends to have several symbolic representations shared across life forms, such as an elephant egg, some fruit, a python, a human and many more; therefore, metamorphosis occurs across life forms. They signify the presence of thoughts and corporeality in the same world. The sufferings or achievements of the trickster figure invoke that the two elements, thought and corporeality, are not just inseparable but also interwoven and extensions of each other. The blurred transmutable corporeality of a trickster is between both thought and materiality as well as nature and culture.⁹³ The trickster transcends its sufferings to take the form of flesh while the bodily boundaries are transcended into nature.⁹⁴

⁹² For example, the folktale of '*Tejimola*' reflects such trickerish characteristics.

⁹³ This can be seen from the folktales created. The first tale starts with a story as follows: A pregnant woman is hungry and eats the food which was meant for the cat in her household, who was also pregnant at the same time. Due to this, the pregnant cat could eat the food and was starving. To punish the woman for stealing her food, the cat lays a curse on the woman. The curse she lays is not known unless the woman mysteriously gives birth to 3 kittens. The woman and the community people were surprised to witness this strange thing. An old woman thus reminds the woman that she must have probably done some kind of harm to the cat, and therefore she must have been cursed, hence the result of the delivery. After realising her mistake of stealing the cat's food, the woman begs forgiveness from the cat. To see the woman repenting, the cat delivers 3 human babies and forgives the woman.

Thus, this certain kind of imagination, magic realism and creation is done in the folklore to teach the people not to disturb the cycle of nature and make the people learn to live in harmony. Moreover, since this story, there are many folktales created where the woman marries a python and a woman delivers some fruit instead of a human baby, a girl is born inside the shell of an elephant apple and many more.

⁹⁴ Reincarnation across all life forms in the folktale '*Tejimola*'; is generative of rethinking relationships between human and non-human lives.

Interestingly, the authorship of all the folktales has always been questioned due to the variation in the language of ‘tribal’ and ‘nontribal’ groups. However, the stories are still alive, some oral and written in different versions and are preserved under the tutelage of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. These narratives provide an impressive assortment of trickster forms and emphasise that these constitute further than their various manifestations as specific supernatural entities or diverse physical objects. *Tenton*, in perhaps the most basic form, conjures a notion of energy, which supports the existence and growth of all lives. The folktales in Assamese folklore are interrelated, reflecting on the significance of reincarnation, refrain, reemerging, and repetition: a life cycle of death and birth into different forms.

8. Trickster Tale ‘*Tejimola*’ (1911)

The most famous trickster tale in Assamese folklore is that of ‘*Tejimola*.’ *Tejimola* is the name of a girl beaten to death by her stepmother. She was killed when her father was away for work. The stepmother kills the daughter out of jealousy as she thinks the man’s love is being shared between the two and finds the daughter a burden. *Tejimola* is shown as the obedient daughter in the narrative, while the stepmother is depicted as evil. The stepmother brutally kills *Tejimola* with a *dekhi* (rice pounder) and buries her in the garden of the house.⁹⁵ Being a trickster figure, she emerges to life in the form of a gourd from the place where she was buried and has the human capability of communication.⁹⁶ As soon as the stepmother realises the plant is a form of the daughter she killed, she destroys the plant as well. However, with the traits of both human and non-human things and with the power of reincarnation, *Tejimola* retook birth as a citrus tree.

⁹⁵ See Figure 3 for a rice pounder

⁹⁶ *Tejimola* reincarnates into a bottle gourd or pumpkin in some versions.

The tree was also destroyed, completely uprooted and thrown into the river, where she metamorphosed as a lotus flower. During the return journey of her father on a boat, her father saw this magnificent flower in the river and went close to it. To his surprise, the flower has a human voice, and later, the flower reveals that it is Tejimola, his daughter. The father asks the flower to transform into a bird to prove her identity. The flower again reincarnates into a bird and narrates all the episodes to his father. The father takes the bird back to the house and confronts the stepmother. Justice is served to Tejimola, and the stepmother is punished. At last, Tejimola comes back to the human form. Tejimola, after her death, her reincarnated figures recite a refrain throughout the story:

Don't extend your hand, don't pluck a gourd. Where from have you come beggar?
Alongwith the silk-clothes, my stepmother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola.⁹⁷
I call you my brothers. Don't extend your hands, don't pluck a fruit, but go back home. Alongwith silk-clothes, my step-mother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola.
Don't extend your hand, don't pluck a flower. Where from have you come boat-man? Alongwith silk-clothes, my step-mother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola.
Don't extend your hand, don't pluck a flower, dear father. Alongwith silk-clothes, my stepmother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola. (Bezbaroa 40–42)

A similar tradition of oral narrative can be seen in African lore; as discussed in the earlier chapter, an African epic is a “long, orally transmitted narrative presented in an episodic manner” (Biebuyck 5). A bard singing and performing a multi-generic performance circulates it orally. The narration of the Assamese story is performed episode by episode, in a circular narrative style. In this it echoes and incorporates the narrative methodologies manifest in African tales. Globally, there are very few differences in the style of creation and delivery and transmission of folklore. Whatever diversity and differences appear, the

⁹⁷ The spelling Tejeemola is used by Deepika Phukan in her translation of *Burhi Aair Xadhu*.

aim of folklore is similar throughout the world: to entertain, teach and understand the vitality of a community's culture and tradition.

9. Reincarnation of Folktale

This trickster tale of Tejimola has been passed on for generations. In 2011, Joi Barua recently recreated it into a pop song, another new manifestation of lore, and Ibson Lal Baruah wrote the lyrics. The narrative preserves the social issues of a stepmother's jealousy, domestic violence, magic realism and reincarnation:

Teje teje, rongaronga

Everybody is blooded,

Dixedixe, dhuwaa dhuwaa

Each direction is blurred,

Ghoreghore, huwaduwa

every household is disordered,

Dexedexe, bivixika

Every part of the country is terrorised,

Biringise eti hahi, umolaghor xajixaji

by making a toyhouse, a smile is emerging out,

Kijane taai,

What is known to her?

ki solona Nisine taai,

She is unaware of the conspiracy against her,

bivixika Tejimola tumihahithaka

horror, Tejimola keeps smiling. (Joi Barua, translated by Jayanta Mukherjee)

The lyricist and singer are trying to depict a picture of horror, terror and hope by tracing the character of Tejimola. The song is about a state of disorder; everywhere you see, it looks chaotic, people are blooded (angry and full of jealousy), every direction is obscure, every household is in a rush, and there is horror on each side, every part of the country. Nevertheless, in such a situation, there is hope. In this context, the lyrics say that a smile comes from making a toy house (*umola ghor*). Here, Tejimola is making the toy house. Tejimola, the protagonist, is so innocent that she is unaware of the conspiracy against her and is happy in the little things she does. She is unaware of her predicament. She is smiling, making of *umola ghor* amidst such horror and terror. Thus, the singer suggests that she should keep smiling and that the troubling time will pass.

Apart from minor changes in the nuances and narratives, this story of Tejimola and other trickster tales has been adapted into various forms, allowing readers different narrators and interpretations. The differences in each retelling can be seen through poems by Nitoo Das's '*Tejimola*' and Uddipana Goswami's '*Tejimola Forever*.'⁹⁸ Transmitting the oral tale into the medium of stories and fiction by Aruni Kashyap's *His Father's Disease* (2019), Joi Barua's song and Bhaskar Hazarika's film *Kothanodi* also witness the opening out of Assam folklore for re-interpretation by readers and creative people. These productions are the evidence of how Assam is regenerating itself in the same way that the African American experience has been revived through the work of Toni Morrison. It is interesting to note that the narrative of Tejimola has lived across the generations in different versions. Similar to the trickster figures with the characteristics of reincarnation into various life forms, the folktale of Tejimola lives in different narratives across other

⁹⁸ *Tejimola* retells the story through two narrators - an omniscient narrator and Tejimola. *Tejimola Forever* uses a first-person speaker - Tejimola, who looks at her past and recites the poem.

regions and timelines. Prafulladatta Goswami, in his book *Ballads and Tales of Assam*, remarks on this phenomenon of the transmutability of human and animal:

It has been observed that in the folktales of many of the lower races (*sic*), the majority of the characters are usually animals, who speak and act like human beings to such an extent that it is plain that the narrators, who tell the stories in all seriousness, have no distinct idea of the boundary line between man and beast.⁹⁹

(Goswami 79-80)

This story is re-read, re-narrated and re-lived across generations, similar to Morrison's vision of re-visiting the legend of the 'tar baby' in *Tar Baby*. She re-narrates and re-creates a version of the story addressing the significance of 'ancient properties' and 'home.' The re-narration of the 'Tejimola' story is one example of keeping the folklore alive through various mediums and versions. Folklore is a medium for the people to revisit their 'ancient properties' where nature, traditions, rituals, spirits and humans cohabitate.

Not only the tale '*Tejimola*' shows reincarnation into different life forms but other trickster tales such as '*Tula and Teja*', '*Panesia*', '*Champawati*', and '*Ou Kuwori*'. The trickster stories relate to the agricultural form and teach us to respect nature and stay in harmony with nature. Furthermore, the folktales depict the significance of culture in the society and community as the outer shell (considered as flaws, immoral or wrongdoings) eventually peeled off, burnt, or broken off as the story progresses. Furthermore, the folktale of '*Tejimola*' is a representative of dead women who speak out to claim their status as human beings with no limitations, freedom and mobility. If women were initially confined in the household, all the lifeforms chosen by the dead Tejimola exhibit tricksterish attributes of fluidity and mobility.

⁹⁹ By lower races, Goswami is addressing the tribal community.

Tricksters in Assamese folklore are famous for their trait of always being outside the periphery of a home, again signifying mobility, fluidity and limitlessness. In the folktale of '*Tejimola*', we see her dead body has always been distant from her house. She was dragged away from home and was taken to the outhouse near the *dekhi*, where she was brutally killed and buried. Later, when the dead body reincarnated into a gourd, it was smashed and thrown farther away, 'a remote corner of her garden' (Datta 242). *Tejimola* has been physically moved away from the house, from the inner home to the outhouse to the garden area.

Further reincarnation into a citrus tree occurs, and then the stepmother eradicates the tree from the roots and submerges it in the river (242). Her reincarnation into a lotus flower happens in the same river where she threw the citrus tree, the farthest location from her home. Her reincarnation at the exterior end depicts the farthest she was pushed. Nevertheless, to mark the restoration of a kind of justice, the dead spirit of the girl comes back to the home from where she was cast out by the stepmother. The trickster returns to the original state to narrate the story and signify moral righteousness. The trickster makes the death multidimensional by re-centering the original scene of the crime.

A similar trait in the trickster can be seen while reading Morrison's trickster figures such as Pilate, Jadine, *Beloved* and *Sula*. All these characters were outcasts of one sort or another from their families and communities, even as they remained significant to them. However, they played an essential role in the narration precisely because of such exteriority, which required them to make their way back home (restating the significance of home in the process). Morrison explains her representation of outcast women in terms of fascination:

Outlaw women who don't follow the rules are always interesting to me because they push themselves, and us, to the edge. The women who step outside the

borders, or who think other thoughts, define the limits of civilization, but also challenge it. (O'Connor *Los Angeles Times*)

Furthermore, the reincarnation after the death of both Tejimola and Beloved at the hands of stepmother and mother, respectively, is a tricksterish symbol of breaking out of the constraints of bodily boundaries. Their respective incarnations are indicative of undertaking new forms in both earthly and unearthly ways. After having no choice in their death, they both choose their own life forms, becoming the architects of their origin. The reincarnation(s) of the dead body into different lifeforms to narrate their story of unchosen death describes the aesthetics of corporeality as hyperbolic and uncanny. For example, the reincarnation of Tejimola happens in a multiplicity of natural forms (keeping the roots and culture of Assam and Tea gardens connected), organic phenomena such as vegetable, fruit and bird. Furthermore, the reincarnation of Beloved happens in the form of a ghost (an absent body, experiencing spiritual connection with the spirits of the dead in African culture) and later as a full-grown woman (as if she had never been killed). The belief in reincarnation, and coming back to life in different forms, is significant in both stories, and both folklores, on a transnational and transcultural level.

10. Conclusion

The element of relationality in folklore is depicted in both the stories of Tejimola and Beloved. Both are stories of resilience. Their bodies are dispersed and take a fluid space of transformation. It further reflects the difference between the relationality of self and the autonomous sovereign self. The protagonist in the stories encompasses a multiplicity of life forms, thus querying the intactness of bodies as a precursor to individual living. Furthermore, relationality is also associated with kinship, where we see the maternal figure kill the protagonist. However, the stark difference here lies within the intentionality of the maternal figure while killing the child. The notion of kinship in the stories is not

limited to human kinship; rather, it travels beyond and shares the affiliation of belonging to a pan-earthly community, communicating collaborative endurance and survival. The death of the protagonists is not associated with the end; rather, it signifies continuity. This concept of death and afterlife, recursive dying and living across the life forms, is commonly followed in both Asian and African societies.

Tracing the conditions of workers on both plantations necessitates considering the significance of their emerging folklores, as it grew out of the difficult labour of assimilating transplanted workers, both individuals and families, from an array of different places of origin. They had been brought, either by economic or physical force, to an entirely new place where they were given no encouragement to think of themselves as anything other than a cheap labour resource. Yet the very instability of workers, and the imposition of deracination upon them, paradoxically allowed for the evolution of a folklore that was agile and mobile, helping them re-create their identity and self. Just as Morrison adapts folklore from oral tradition into written forms, thereby creating new life for folklore, Assam folklore has a similar potential for rematerialising in modes of fiction or representation. The mobility of folklore is used by Morrison to help the African American community reterritorialize their identity, roots, heritage and ancestry. The model for Morrison's fiction is always the radical action of folklore, and how it finds its way into all forms of communication, whether analogue or digital. The following chapter will elucidate the adaptation of oral folklore into the medium of cinema and online fan discourse. This will be studied through two films, *Kothanodi* and *Beloved*, where a relatively new but non-literary medium works to preserve and transmit the lore of a local community to a global context.

CHAPTER FIVE

Folk-Films: Transglobally Coming to Terms with Infanticide

1. Cinema as a Folkloric Instrument

In their online review of the Assamese film *Kothanodi* (2015), Ram Venkat Srikar cited how the great Italian director of horror films, Dario Argento, paid tribute to the capacity of the genre for its cultural translatability and radical expressiveness: “Horror is like a serpent; always shedding its skin, always changing. And it will always come back. It can’t be hidden away like the guilty secrets we try to keep in our subconscious” (Srikar). This chapter will reflect upon folklore in a similar way, and argue that in cinema, horror and folklore work in confederacy with each other to make repressed truths emerge. Through its adaptive facility, cinema works as a particularly effective medium for transmitting folkloric content. Furthermore, its capacity for reaching a wide audience discovers a plurality of interpretative and communicative possibilities.

Transglobal connections consequently emerge between folklores (and adaptation methods) from apparently disparate zones of experience and culture. This will be explored through analysis of the aforementioned *Kothanodi* (2015), a partly-crowdfunded production of the local film industry of Assam that re-narrates folktales from the region.¹⁰⁰ This film is read in conjunction with Jonathan Demme’s 1998 adaptation of Morrison’s *Beloved* for Hollywood. These films could not be more different in terms of their financing and production context, and yet they coincide in their engagement with the folkloric, and their fascination with the intensely taboo subject of infanticide.

Both films show the murder of a child by a parent (in *Beloved*, by a mother, and in *Kothanodi*, a stepmother), as well as exploring the motivations for the act. In *Kothanodi*,

¹⁰⁰ *Kotha* means story, *Nodi* means river. Hence, the title translates as *River of Stories/fables*.

director Bhaskar Hazarika sources his story from the folklore of Assam, adapting and intertwining four folktales from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's aforementioned collection, *Burhi Aair Sadhu (Grandmother's Tales)*.¹⁰¹ By contrast, Demme's *Beloved* is a big-budget Hollywood production, a multi-million project that was instigated by Oprah Winfrey's acquisition of the rights to Morrison's novel. The film dutifully seeks to represent key traumatic elements of African American history that Morrison represents, including episodes of slavery, post-slavery and the afterlife, using techniques familiar from a century of film-making on themes of haunting and possession. Both films show folklore moving through various stages of transmission, from its origins in oral communication to literary expression and finally into the new language of the cinematic. In turn, this generates new forms of transmission through the discussions of fans on internet forums and other kinds of digital media. This process necessitates changes and differences in perspectives, and the online commentaries of audiences are readable as adding to the lore not just of the films themselves, but the storytelling traditions which have been used as source material. In a folkloristic economy of transmission, no words are wasted, everything becomes part of the story.

Both films are categorisable to a degree as 'horror' films, not least because they address their audiences about the apparent brutality that lies within human capability. They demonstrate this through the particularly grotesque idea of infanticide. According to the *Dictionary of Film Studies*, the genre of horror is categorised as a "large and heterogeneous group of films that, via the representation of disturbing and dark subject matter, seek to elicit responses of fear, terror, disgust, shock, suspense, and, of course,

¹⁰¹ The film talks about four different folktales from Assam that had been collected by Bezbaroa. The director interlinks them with each other and in doing so forms a new folktale altogether. The film reflects on the tribulations and afflictions of a range of maternal figures and shows them dealing with their own demons.

horror from their viewers” (Kuhn and Westwell 769). In keeping with this, the films discussed in this chapter represent supernatural elements such as ghosts, demons and an oppressive darkness. Eerie music and wailing sounds sometimes enhance the goriness of the plot. These signifiers act as points of recognition, providing reassurances as to how to understand the events within the generic terms of storytelling in film. If there are verbal tropes in folktales that remind the audience that they are ‘only’ hearing a story, the same goes for some of the visual and aural effects deployed by film direction.

Yet to describe the terrible crimes that form the main stories of these films as fit for a horror film also sensationalises what happens within them. Behind the effects, the killings register with the audience as bitter and realisable facts. Despite this sometimes grotesque visual material, the films nevertheless simultaneously inculcate emotions of sadness and anger. Particularly in *Kothanodi*, the violence is thoughtfully presented and consequently thought-provoking; the “horror” is ethically instructive and intelligent. The comparison of these films aims to understand the capacity of cinema as an apt medium for transmitting folklore, combining the sophistication of effect with devastating simplicity of affect. This leads to consideration of how cinema implicates the audience in a necessarily close relationship to the protagonists of the films and the worlds they inhabit. It can bring audiences back to the kind of instructive magic that folklore generates and allows for radical lines of comparison to emerge between apparently disparate cultures and peoples.

2. *Kothanodi* and Assamese Culture

The director of *Kothanodi*, Bhaskar Hazarika, has won awards as both a director and screenwriter for films such as *Players* (2012), *Aamis (Ravening)* (2019), and *Emuthi Puthi* (2022). *Players* was his only film made within the Bollywood production system; after that earlier work, all his films have been made in his native region of Assam and using the

Assamese language. *Kothanodi* takes the viewers on a journey to a mysterious Assam that fulfils its reputation in the broader Indian context as a land of folklore, beauty and near-occultist mystique: “Assam, known as the land of tantra- mantra (magic), which has a number of folk tales of dead regaining life with the mantra and had been extensively used for the benevolent or malevolent purpose” (Borah and Das 105). First screened in 2015, the film takes its audience to a pre-modern moment in Assamese history. The film is very much an expression of its director’s vision, with Hazarika acting as a scriptwriter as well as director. He kept all aspects of the production under close personal attention, including the music and cinematography. Hazarika at the same time applauded his production team for facilitating his vision: “The authenticity of a bygone Assamese rural idyll owes much to the stellar work of our art director Gulok Saha and my dialogue writer Arupa Patangia-Kalita; they played a big role in ensuring the film stays true to its setting” (Borah). The entire production was committed to communicating the grain of reality in pre-modern Assam, a necessarily gritty context within which to relate stories of considerable cruelty and violence. Except for a demon-like character that resides in the shadows of a forest, the film draws its characters from a cast of common people, indicating the realities of life in rural Assam, and refusing to take the audience to an entirely fantastical world. The film features figures such as a stepmother, father, labourers, daughter, neighbours, priest, fisherman and village boys. They could be archetypal characters from a folktale, but also indicate how such archetypes are recognisable in everyday life. The film does not clearly locate in Tea Gardens, but the folklores Hazarika works on are derived from the Tea Garden community.

The four separate folktales which Hazarika incorporates into a new entity are taken from Bezbaroa’s collection of tales called *Burhi Aair Sadhu* or *Grandmother’s Tales*,

which is effectively a collection of bedtime stories or fables. Hazarika shares his methodology:

Instead of adapting literally the entire folktales we just took out the cinematic qualities that these stories already had, and it is sort of this, figured out all the raw material. So we just wanted to make the film, and ideas can come in many different forms and different ways. (Hazarika *Film Companion* 00:01:31-00:01:47)

However, Hazarika moves away from the parable-like aspects of these stories to intensify feelings of horrified incredulity and a related fear of the uncanny, and to challenge proverbial folk wisdom with radical fear and cruelty, removing the comfortability that a moralistic framing might provide. For example, the story featuring the *outenga* fruit is a combination of two different folktales from Bezbaroa, “The Tale of Cat’s Daughter” and “*Ou-Kuwori*” (*Outenga* Princess).¹⁰² In the first tale, a woman is accused of giving birth to a pumpkin and pestle and mortar, thus is considered unholy and is thrown out of the house to live in the backyard (Bezbaroa 3). The second story is about a girl who lives inside an *outenga*, each day she comes out of the *outenga* to eat and bathe and returns to her shell (Bezbaroa 10). Both these stories teach a karmic lesson that the evil you do will come back to you eventually as a punishment. To offset this, one needs to perform certain rituals to seek forgiveness and gain happiness. Therefore, all the unusual occurrences that one witnesses are manifestations of the grace of gods and goddesses, affirming their power.¹⁰³

¹⁰² *Outenga* is an apple-like fruit, which is mostly eaten by the elephants. Thus, it gets its name as Elephant Apple. Scientific name is *Dillenia Indica*.

¹⁰³ It is believed that there are 36,000 crores (360 billion) Gods and Goddesses in the (most followed) Hindu religion.

3. Material and Linguistic Acculturation: Dress, Language, Artefacture

Two facets of the film that further reflect the reality of Assam and acculturate the audience are the distinctive costumes that the characters wear, as well as the use of the Assamese language. All are dressed in the traditional and unique clothing of Assam, which for males is known as *Dhoti*¹⁰⁴ and *Gamosa/Gamusa*¹⁰⁵, while *Mekhela Chador*¹⁰⁶ is for women. Other small details of female appearance communicate the specific identity of women in the film as Assamese, such as the way married women put wide vermilion marks on their foreheads and heads, as well as their own unique application of kohl. Another stark instance to verify the setting of the film is the depiction of Bihu, a traditional dance of Assam. Such cultural authentication in all its totality allows the audience to witness and connect to the cultures and traditions of rural Assam, pre-modern times where the cow dung and mud was used to give fine finish to the floor. It is a medium to transmit the cultural values and significance of nature in human lives.

The bare realities of life in rural Assam are also shown through how the huts there are made of sawdust, wood and mud. There are no big buildings; indeed, there are no bricks, and fencing and furniture are all made of bamboo. Hazarika also maintains the aesthetics of rural Assam and signifies how nature is an integral part of their lifestyle and economy, as when we see the woman offering water to her guest in a glass made of bamboo wood.¹⁰⁷ Another character is shown drinking a local alcoholic drink (rice beer known as *apo*), pouring it from a bamboo jug and not a glass bottle. These small details are significant of a specific ecology, a way of life in which everything has its use value.

¹⁰⁴ A lower garment, a type of sarong wrapped around the waist and legs which resembles loose trousers. A long rectangular piece of cloth worn by males.

¹⁰⁵ A white colour small piece of cloth with red embroidery significant to Assamese culture.

¹⁰⁶ Traditional Assamese sarong.

¹⁰⁷ Assam forests are richly stocked with bamboo canes of various species. Bamboo is a hugely significant economic and existential resource for the people. Over the years, Assamese people cultivated bamboo for commercial purposes. It represents a large part of the household industry.

Yet this orderliness nevertheless contains the capacity for horrifying and traumatising violence, and such violence ought to be regarded as part of that ecology.

The film's portrayal of Assam balances its culture of magic and superstitions with detailed observation of the pre-modern technologies and practices of life there. The viewers come across the machine made up of wood required to pound the rice, known as *dheki*, and the machine used to weave the cloth to make *Gamosa* is also made up of wood. The absence of electricity and the use of lamps further indicates the pre-modernity of the setting.¹⁰⁸ Viewers are also introduced to the use of locks made up of wood to lock the house instead of locks made of iron or copper with a key.

In keeping with the ecological integrity of the film, however, some of these instruments and machines of pre-modernity can also function as weapons. A stepmother kills her husband's daughter (Tejimola) by making her work ever more aggressively on the rice pounder until it is inevitable that it will crush her. Earlier in the same tale, the wedding invitation received by Tejimola and her stepmother also depicts an appreciation of the integral role nature plays among the people of Assam. The wedding invitation was not written on a card or paper; rather it was done by placing two leaves of *Tamul Paan* (betel leaves) and a *supari* (a type of nut) one over the other.¹⁰⁹ This cultural practice has existed in Assamese culture since its beginning; the leaves and the nut represent love, honour and respect. *Tamul Paan* has been used for all significant and auspicious occasions among the community for centuries. Generally, only one betel leaf is used, but on the occasion of a wedding invitation, two leaves are used to mark the significance of both bride and groom. Hazarika's precision in respecting these traditional practices again depicts the real and abiding rhythms of life in Assam, an agrarian society that is far from

¹⁰⁸A type of lamp made from a wooden bowl filled with oil that fuels a wick.

¹⁰⁹ See Figure 2

literacy and modernity and which makes its living with the help of natural resources. All of this suggests the self-sufficiency and toughness of the Assamese people. These qualities are what would sustain the Assamese communities that had to endure the effects of the tea plantation, and they are also the qualities which Hazarika wanted to communicate to a worldwide audience, inviting empathy and recognition. This mitigates the terror that is implicit and explicit in the film, ensuring that *Kothanodi* is not ‘only’ a horror movie.

4. *Beloved*: Folk Magic goes to Hollywood

Demme’s film adaptation of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* remains close to its literary source in its focus on how Sethe (played by Oprah Winfrey, who was also a major funder of the film project) is trying to build a new family and a new life in the ‘free’ state of Ohio, but is being held back by the past (her life as an enslaved person in the Kentucky plantation ‘Sweet Home’). This sense of the oppressive past haunts the family through the active presence of the ghost, Beloved (Thandiwe Newton). The cinematic adaptation tries to use the elements and essence of folkloric communication that we have already identified as coursing powerfully through Toni Morrison’s novel, but fails to do so with the same intensity and impact.

Only some episodes in the film capture the edge and strangeness of folklore, such as the gathering in the forest of recently freed men and women where Baby Suggs preaches and calls out “love your heart”. There is also the presence of ghosts in the house (the Beloved and Baby Suggs), as well as the significance of the family quilt, a familiar signifier of African American community and creativity. During slavery and the Underground Railroad the quilt played an important role and was known as ‘fabric griot’ (Bryant). Harriet Tubman initiated the use of the quilt as an instrument of political strategy: quilts inspired from the West African cultural tradition were sewn with maps of escape routes incorporated into their patterns. The geometric patterns and colours of quilt

designs were codes for the enslaved who were otherwise denied reading and learning. Ozella McDaniel Williams, a retired educator and quilt maker in Charleston, S.C. reveals how the codes used in the quilt provided a path from slavery to freedom:

The code confirms the use of quilts as visual maps to freedom. Forging a link between the past and present, between Africa and America, between blacks and whites, and a route from the South to the North. With the telling comes the responsibility to honour these African American ancestors, not just as enslaved but also as masters of their own destiny. (Velone)

In the film, the family quilt is more subdued and intimately familial in its significance. The quilt is shown to be a predominantly grey dull colour with only two orange colour patches, and was worn by the ailing Baby Suggs, symbolising how her life was full of darkness during her time at the plantation of Sweet Home until her son Halle (husband of Sethe) purchased her freedom. This quilt is later passed on to Beloved when she appears as a human in the house of Sethe. As such, the quilt stands for continuity between generations, a material demonstration of how families and communities keep on making memory come alive.

Significantly, when Beloved vanishes, she holds the same quilt belonging to Baby Suggs. Quilt weaving symbolises the community's togetherness and connects them with their roots and identity, as also shown in Alice Walker's story *Everyday Use*, but it also represents survival and endurance, an ability to withstand history and prevail through it. The quilt takes the viewers to witness the circularity of life, as Baby Suggs witnessed the horrors of the plantation but was freed at the age of sixty. Similarly, the quilt later comforted Beloved, killed by her mother to escape the brutality of slavery. Sethe's radical act of killing Beloved serves to break the continuity of generations, even as the quilt suggests the opposite. Slavery and exploitation represent a cycle of destruction and

oppression, the quilt suggests an alternative and more creative way of abiding through history. At the very least, it offers a precarious comfort. In this way, Baby Suggs and Beloved helped both the community and other marooned individuals to make peace with their respective pasts, to come together to help each other.

Sethe was considered an outcast, but when the community women knew how Beloved the ghost had taken total control over her mother's life, they all came together to help and set her free. Baby Suggs holds a powerful notion of hope and healing and is present in the memory of Sethe and Denver throughout the novel both physically (till the time she was alive) and metaphysically. However, in the film, Baby Suggs appears only four times, and briefly; thus, is absent from the lives of Sethe and Denver most of the time to guide and comfort them. Her first appearance is on her sickbed with her grey quilt, after Howard and Buglar ran away, consoling Denver. The scene is shot in shades of grey and white, and she is shown with persistent sadness and hopelessness. In the novel, by contrast, we see her longing for colour on the second page: "Bring a little lavender in, if you got any. Pink, if you don't" (4) and recalling and comparing her past with a present which seems "intolerable" (*Beloved* 4). She remains powerfully present in the text despite lying on the sick bed and communicates about the presence of ghosts in African culture.

For all that, the film makes Baby Suggs appear on the screen physically only for a very short time, and her connective influence becomes noticeably less tangible. This is fundamental to her character, but it is only glimpsed in Demme's version. Her second appearance is relatively late in the film, when she preaches to the people in the forest, highlighting her building of community. She tells them to love their lives and, most importantly, their hands which have helped them to survive until freed. It is an important lesson, yet it is presented as an isolated event. In the novel, Baby Suggs's presence abides throughout. She is a constant source of nurture, even when she is not physically present.

She is presented through a complex of affective significations: “holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed” (*Beloved* 102). Prior to the killing of Beloved, Baby Suggs gave 124 Bluestone Road the aura of a cheerful and comfortable house. She was not only a kind of teacher or preacher to the Clearing, but a vital presence in her entire community. Demme does show this vitality, but in less complex ways. His flashback scenes are shot in bright daylight with Baby Suggs wearing bright colours, a yellow colour dress with a brown scarf tied around her neck, which is embroidered with tiny flowers of red and pink colour with green leaves. The film portrays her as suffused in bright and happy colours, yet the novel suggests that this was Baby Suggs’s desire rather than her lived reality. This might be a representation of her fantasy, but even so it lessens a viewer’s sense of her longing, and the source of that in deprivation.

Viewers see Baby Suggs for the third time when she encourages and guides Denver to go out and seek help from the community women to save her mother from Beloved. She is last seen at the film’s end, preaching at the Clearing, again inviting people to make peace with their lives, and to love their heart more than anything. This scene acts in continuation of the first Clearing scene, asking the audience to connect with the circle of life, a belief in one’s own self and God:

And the beat, Beat of your Heart. Love it more than the lungs. That need yet to breathe free air. More than the womb that holds life. More than the private parts that give life.

That’s right...Love your Heart. (*Beloved* 00:02:39)

In this shot at the Clearing, the scene is inspirational, but brief, and stresses a form of conventional therapeutic learning (something you might expect from watching Oprah) rather than the raw force of the ancestral voice which speaks in the novel. Baby Suggs is present everywhere in the novel, in all the conversations of past and present, in the quilt,

white dress and in the memory, touch, words and emotion of hope and happiness of family. She is the ancestral figure for Sethe, Denver, and the community of freed people. Her presence is metaphysical as much as physical, yet the film only emphasises the latter form of presence. The film also diminishes the significance of praying (which gives Baby Suggs the title 'holy'), and the power of faith and courage that Baby Suggs builds among the people: "Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing" (*Beloved* 102). She connects the freed people and God through ritual and prayer, through which she ensures all those at the Clearing to believe they are loved by the God and are his children. In the film, Baby Suggs is not shown as an ancestral figure, or someone who gives her heart to everyone, rather she appears as an occasional preacher for the community and a guide for Denver.

The emphasis upon the quilt in Demme's *Beloved* is arguably an expected gesture, as audiences in the 1990s had become habituated to the use of quilts and quilting as political and social metaphors in the fiction of Alice Walker and others. Quilting was practically an expected trope of representing the African American experience.¹¹⁰ Therefore, in one sense, the quilt is very powerful in Demme's film, but maybe not quite with the precise focus which Morrison gives it in her writing. She can suggest in detail the historical freight and burden of personal experience which the quilt contains and how it amounts to a kind of biography of Baby Suggs: "[I]t was clear why Baby Suggs was so

¹¹⁰Quilting was brought to America through different sources in England and Africa, which later became a significant part of American culture. It became a tradition, a group ritual, a mode of expression and aesthetic domain among women. Interestingly, the American tradition of quilt making erased the racial, regional, class boundaries, and encouraged diverse designs. However, the enslaved quilt makers designed quilt for their own use with West African designs, which were different from the designs they were ordered by their owners. The quilt making in African tradition uses old clothes, recycled clothes as they believed: "Old clothes carry something with them...you can feel the presence of the person who used to wear them. It has a spirit in them" (Rubin 146). The tradition of quilt making is a women's art form where they associate it with their bodies, mother-daughter relationship, their inner feelings, and the intimacy of the home. The fragments of pieces sewed together to create a new pattern or design reflects the truth of African Americans lives and how they patched together their torn pieces of life and family together and integrated their identity as a whole (Showalter 148-49).

starved for color. There wasn't any except for two orange squares in a quilt that made the absence shout" (*Beloved* 46). The film fails to show any of this, although in some scenes Baby Suggs is seen wearing the aforementioned yellow colour dress with brown scarf. The quilt is present, but Demme does not give it the same sense of materiality and embodiment that Morrison's descriptions can.

In the novel, Baby Suggs's longing for colour in her life is provided by the only colour from the two patches of orange in the quilt she wears:

The walls of the room were slate-colored, the floor earth-brown, the wooden dresser the color of itself, curtains white, and the dominating feature, the quilt over an iron cot, was made up of scraps of blue serge, black, brown and gray wool --- the full range of the dark and the muted that thrift and modesty allowed. (*Beloved* 46)

Later, *Beloved* admired the orange colour patches but the transgenerational continuity of the quilt is not captured through the film. It does not write the quilt into history in the same way that Morrison's language can. Through the quilt, Morrison marks the departure and arrival of Baby Suggs and *Beloved* and later *Beloved* and Paul D, along with the community (who acknowledged Sethe as an outsider). Paul D stares at the quilt, then recalls and realises how Sethe and his life can be patched together to hold each other: "The pieces I am, she gathers them and gives them back to me in all the right order [...] Only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. He wants to put his story next to hers" (322). The novel is also narrated in fragments of episodes by each individual, and patched together as a whole similar to how the quilt was patched with fragments. The two patches of orange colour can be associated with both Sethe and *Beloved*, who are present to heal and revive from past events. Morrison symbolises the quilt as a model for the transmissive art of storytelling, which is passed on from one person to another. Again,

none of this is presented in the film; the quilt is grey in colour, patched together with scraps of cloth (there are hints of light colours here and there), but the most important essence of its orange colour patches is missing. Throughout the film, the quilt is shown three times within shorter time frames, and the orange colour is missing from the quilt. Like Baby Suggs, its presence is fleeting and ephemeral rather than abiding and pervasive.

5. *Beloved*: Folk Magic Lost in Tinseltown

Rather than dwelling on the minute and material details of life lived in a particular time and place, as in *Kothanodi*, the film of *Beloved* focuses more broadly on the monstrosity of slavery, and the traumatic past that African Americans consequently had to deal with, even after emancipation. This narrative is channelled through the representation of the three main characters of Sethe, Denver and Beloved. Unfortunately, this comes at the cost of neglecting the importance of other characters such as Paul D, Baby Suggs, Buglar and Howard, who significantly animate Morrison's novel. This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of attempting to adapt a fiction as varied and complicated as Morrison's into a Hollywood format, and yet cinema has shown itself to be a supple and subtle medium, whether a film comes from Hollywood or not.

Each character in the book is essential and carries specific knowledge; they help each other individually, and as a community, to relive the past and make peace with it. Yet the male characters in the film are shown on the periphery, and only female characters are given the agency to reveal, reflect, bind and take the film forward. Buglar and Howard are only depicted running away from the house in the first scene, and then once again as an illusion by Sethe, who has been waiting for her sons to return and live like a normal family. Paul D, who was with Sethe at Sweet Home, appears on the screen again for a brief time to share his experience of dehumanised behaviour during slavery, and to witness how the freed have immunised themselves against the pain of memory. He appears as a

medium to connect the dots from Sweet Home to the present life of Sethe. His presence provides information to the viewers about the life at Sweet Home, and later how and why Sethe killed her daughter. He is shown in the beginning of the film before Beloved appears in physical form, but after Beloved acquires presence, he is pushed out of the house and Sethe's life.

The film does not mention the songs Paul D sang in the novel which are used by him as a coping mechanism. The film also deletes the song sung by Amy Denver to Sethe when they are on the run. Paul D sang the 'Sis Joe' work song, which is an adaptation of the railroad work song indicating the real-life atrocities suffered by the enslaved.¹¹¹ Furthermore, he also sings a variation of the blues song 'Trouble in Mind' after he throws out the baby ghost from the house.¹¹² He presents a canon of songs which enslaved (and workers post-slavery) had performed to keep their hope and faith intact during hard labour. He also sings while cleaning the house and mending the things that were broken during the fight between him and the baby ghost. At the same time, the song represents the mending of broken souls and spirits. Like quilts, songs were a medium of potentially complex communication, rather than works of art. They marked time, but also represented doing that on your own terms. Demme erases this essential music. The film's inability to show a precise interest in all of its characters means that its concern is less engaged with the particular experience of people in a particular environment, and instead focuses on a

¹¹¹ Sis Joe work song: *Little rice, little bean,
No meat in between.
Hard work ain't easy,
Dry bread ain't greasy (Beloved 48).*

¹¹² *Trouble in Mind:*
*Lay my head on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind.
If I had my weight in lime,
I'd whip my captain till he went stone blind.
Five-cent nickel,
Ten-cent dime,
Busting rocks is busting time (Beloved 48).*

more generalised sense of historical injury. The film fails to engage thoroughly with many folkloric elements present in the novel. Not only Paul D and Amy Denver's songs were eliminated, but those of Baby Suggs and Sethe's are not mentioned either. Each song in the text expresses the intense feelings and emotions of the characters, giving voice to the plantation workers who were often denied speech. The millions of voices which were silenced (sixty million and more), unspoken, unheard, required a different medium to express themselves which was music that gave them an opportunity to express their painful memories and present realities. Folksongs addressed the trauma of their forced silence.

Baby Suggs' songs were inspirational to heal the community and uplift them, which towards the end of the novel is used by the community women to save Sethe from the haunting past. Moreover, Sethe's lullaby is another song that she sang for Denver, and later for Beloved, therefore performed in two different parts of the text resembling scattered and dismembered lives that can nevertheless connect. The same song is heard towards the end of the novel, when Sethe is laying on the bed and Paul D hears her humming: "Someone is humming a tune. Something soft and sweet, like a lullaby. Sounds like 'high Johnny, wide Johnny.' Sweet William bend down low" (*Beloved* 319).

Morrison's incorporation of different forms of folkloric communication in *Beloved* generates a complex understanding of how experience arises out of a particular predicament in a very precise time and place. Individual performances of different modes of expression feed the communal resolve of the people. Every instance, every stitch, every song, every story is an actor in the story of the community. Generally applicable lessons might be drawn from the fiction about slavery and its horrific impact, but at the same time emphasis has to be upon the particular ground from where the haunting and the horror emerged, by the Ohio river, tantalisingly close to the promised freedom of the Northern

states. The particularity of the place is what gives Morrison's tale its peculiar authority, just as a folktale takes its authority from its accountability to the people who have told it. Hollywoodisation weakens these connections.

6. "Take Liberties": Folk Wisdom in *Kothanodi*

Kothanodi binds four different folktales with the theme of death or, more precisely, 'the killing of a child.' The director seizes the viewers through using the recognisable material of bedtime stories, but then presents a radically dark side to these. He shows how this darkness can not only disrupt, but dominate, the apparently simple and peaceful common realities of a community. He also queries the forms that folk knowledge might take, and how wisdom passed on for generations requires query and revision, whatever its apparent authority. Folklore has to be dynamic, reflecting the need for communities to tell and retell their stories, rather than keep on monotonously repeating the same stories without modulation or adaptation. Hazarika argues that such re-telling is a necessary and vital act:

This is my cultural heritage, and I can take liberties with it. I like dark and macabre stories, and I changed the endings – for instance, the original elephant apple story is about a king and his seven queens, one of whom gives birth to the fruit. I made the story about common people. (Ramnath)

Hazarika adapts what are conventionally stories of kings and queens to show that such tales are in fact applicable to all facets of experience; a revolutionary levelling that resists the hierarchical structures of class and caste that have conventionally presided over Assamese culture. Even as it seeks commonality of appeal, however, the film contains violence and horrific imagery, making the viewers shiver in disbelief from the grotesque scenes of hatred. In this, it also suggests the proximate violence of cultural and political change, the painful birthing of a new reality.

Kothanodi is also a form of 'folk horror' film because it depicts the horror caused by uncritically living by beliefs that in any other context would seem bizarre or murderous. In addition, from a larger viewpoint, it raises the question of the abuse of power and the danger inherent in the absolute authority of the mother figure. The film narrates the story of four different families from different class groups, showing how the problem of uncritical belief in elders pervades all sections of society. The opening of the film announces four chapters whose titles relate to social ritual, social justice and social violation: 'A Wedding', 'A Rebirth', 'An Acquittal', and 'A Murder'. As indicated above, these are based on renditions of the stories 'Champawati', 'Ou Kuwori' (The *Outenga* Princess), 'Tawoir Xadhu' (The Story of Tawaoi) and 'Tejimola' from the collection *Grandmother's Tales*. The most evident common thread connecting the first three folktales is child-killing, although the third tale pivots into asserting a girl's right to life, which then prepares for the fourth tale's account of rebirth.

Infanticide is illegal and a sin or taboo worldwide, to state the obvious; however, in the folklore of Assam, it here appears as an inevitably awful part of life. Each instance of the killing of a child in the film is thematically defined, with Hazarika highlighting jealousy, trust and greed as a motive in each instance. Such acts, even if concealed under the name of tradition and culture, reveal the darker aspects of a community and culture. However, Hazarika does not ask the viewer to accept such horrors, but rather to raise the question of how such unethical and vicious acts might happen. Furthermore, he asks viewers to question their respective responses when they witness such crimes, whether they enjoy it or question their beliefs. A related question appears about the way in which cultures might take some degree of pleasure (however slight) in hearing or reading a story about the killing of a child, and whether that says something profound and implicating about the nature of a particular place if the life of a child appears to be so vulnerable. Do

such stories become manifest in Assam because the harshness of living conditions there had made life seem very cheap, even the life of a child?

Such questions add depth and darkness to how the film aims to highlight the mysteriousness of the beautiful land of Assam as 'The River of Fables'. The title suggests metaphorical readings at different stages, in one it suggests that the river flows to narrate the folktales, another understanding can be to read how a river's top layer might look beautiful and crystal clean but also how it does not reveal what flows beneath that. Similarly, the film highlights how Assam holds mysterious hidden beliefs and practices that are apparently alien to the world. Hazarika re-narrates and re-visions the elements of good and evil in the folktales by invoking figures of the demon and the python. The python in the film is created to be volatile, for in one moment he is a God, and the other time he is a wild and dangerous python, the real thing.¹¹³ Moreover, the demon introduced in the film resembles a python, at least in its eyes.¹¹⁴ This multiplicity apparent in one creature is a medium to raise the productive distrust of Gods. It further encourages the viewers to see the flaws in the community's wisdom, to query how their beliefs might require disruption. Folklore is not merely a set of rules by which communities traditionally live, as communities cannot only rely on tradition and custom as a guide for how to live. Folklore also shows how tradition sometimes needs to be resisted, and that you should not always obey those who presume to teach you. Above all, you should live by your wits.

The first killing represented in *Kothanodi* is when a mother (Dhoneshwari) (Seema Biswas) forces her daughter to marry a python, believing that the python is a God in disguise who will furnish her daughter, Bon, with gold and silver jewels (this had already

¹¹³ In Hindu mythology, the supreme God- Shiva, one of the principal deities, wears *Vasuki* the second king of *Nagas* (snakes) as an ornament around his neck. *Shesha*, the first king of snakes, elder brother of *Vasuki*, is the bed for Lord Shiva. Shiva is the prime God associated with snakes. However, there are many snake deities worshipped among different castes and tribes.

¹¹⁴ See Figure 3 for the image of the Demon

happened to her husband's daughter from his first marriage). Unfortunately, but unsurprisingly, as the python is not a deity but a deadly snake, the daughter is killed and eaten, rather than rewarded. Solely because of her greed, the mother offers up her daughter. Despite hearing her child screaming as the python entangles her, the mother ignores everything, waiting desperately to see the jewels appear. Others had warned the mother and father many times that this would end badly, especially her priest and the man's first wife. Their refusal to heed such counsel is tantamount to killing. The python killed the girl, but her parents effectively commissioned it to perform the act. This demonstrated brutally how superstition can blind people and encourage them to act immorally, especially if a promise of material gain exists. Just because something happened once does not mean that it will happen again.

The film accounts for the wife's greed through the description (by her daughter, Bon) of how she witnessed the marriage of the daughter (Champawati) of her husband's first wife to a python. The people of the village considered this particular python an angel (a dogmatic belief) because it had the power to talk like a human and showed its interest in marrying the daughter. If a python has such divine powers, it is a blessing, and marriage is condoned. The second wife trusted that the same experience would befall her daughter, and even willed it to happen. However, the python in her case had no voice and therefore did not promise to be anything other than a poisonous snake. Despite this, she willed the magic to happen again, even as the python crushes her daughter. Her fantasy of getting jewels brings out the monstrosity of her greed, even showing it to be murderous.

The next story sees a couple (Poonai and Malati) (Kapil Bora and Asha Bordoloi, respectively) burying their three newborn children, one after the other, because the eldest person of their family, the husband's uncle, who is respected as a soothsayer, tells them to commit such an act. According to him, the first three children will bring bad luck to the

parents and cause their destruction. Despite this making no rational or practical sense, the couple initially conform; they assume that they should believe in soothsayers and their elders without question. The sayings of elders represent the best advice and should be followed without a doubt, and such justifications tend to overcome all acts or expressions of resistance. According to this, the three children die. The parents were only doing what they were told, and the soothsayer can rationalise his behaviour by claiming to be a protector of the family. Inheritance and deference to tradition are murderous here, just as material greed was in the previous story. The husband (Poonai) trusted the uncle blindly because his father's 'last wish' was to obey his uncle. However, after burying three children, the mother, on the birth of the fourth child, resists and determines to save it from her husband and the uncle's prophecy. The twist in this tale was that all the first three newborns buried were males, and the fourth child allowed to live was a daughter. Hazarika asks the viewers to view the tale critically through the character of the wife (Malati), who is enraged with the feeling of resistance and decides to kill the uncle (soothsayer) and not follow him blindly. This spirit of resistance ultimately enabled her to keep her daughter. This suggests that not all community wisdom is genuinely wise, and that therefore it should not be trusted. This restructuring of the folktale by Hazarika also throws a dramatic contemporary light onto how there has been a tradition of killing a girl child in many parts of India. The story is remade to indicate how reality itself should be remade. Assam becomes a folkloric ground upon which to enact forms of social revolution.

The film encourages audiences to view critically the flaws and blind trust that lead to such crimes, and it makes the self-justified pillars of the community, the greedy mother or the soothsayer, no less than murderers who should be punished. This understanding also informs how the wife in the second tale questions her husband whether they are 'happy' with all their wealth and comfort after following their uncle's guidance. Is his

version of human sacrifice the only way to live a good life? Should the idea of a good life only be measured in terms of material wealth? Even as folk beliefs can provide solidarity to a community, folklore also demands that these beliefs have always to remain in question. Hazarika sees folkloristic material as an opportunity for exploring multiple forms of freedom, from the bodily to the intellectual, the aesthetic to the political. It is where Benjamin's "liberating magic" of the folk-tale remains possible and relevant (101). It asks the viewers and people of the community to think about impediments to justice and freedom, and the possibilities for enacting change by removing them. The father's unethical act in acquiescing in the shamanistic ritual of killing his children blurs the wall/line between good and evil. He obeys the sacrificial law of the community, but not the natural law of nurturing and parenthood. The film here reminds the viewers of false prophecy, and that if there are soothsayers, there is a possibility of pseudo-soothsayers as well.

The third killing we witness in the film is despicably cruel, where a stepmother, Senehi (Zerifa Wahid) kills her daughter, Tejimola (Kasvi Sharma) with a rice pounder, an everyday instrument of Assamese life, as discussed above. As in the first killing, greed is shown to be a primary motive, as well as jealousy; the stepmother resents the love, care and money that her husband offers to his daughter. The murder committed is brutal and shown in sadistic clarity, to an extent that there is no mitigation for the stepmother. Audiences witness her meeting a demon figure every night across the river and voicing her feelings of hatred towards her stepdaughter. This demon figure's pythonic green eyes reflects the projected evil of the stepmother and relates back to the python-wedding tale. The viewers witness the mental collapse of the stepmother into a world of fantasy when each night she goes on a boat to the other side of the river and meets this ghost-like figure. Through this demon figure, she can project her inner devil and hatred towards her

stepdaughter, and plan out various ways of torturing her. It reflects on the assemblances and disruptions of the two worlds, real and fantasy, humans and ghosts, the kind of thing that folklore can make happen. The fantasy creature in the woods enables the stepmother to enact a murderousness that might otherwise have remained unexpressed in her thoughts.

The stepmother calls Tejimola to help her churn the rice in the night-time, but her actual plan is to hurt Tejimola for her having spoiled the dress that had been a legacy to the stepmother from her own mother. It starts from Tejimola pouring the rice and her stepmother pounding the *dheki* with her foot. *Dheki* itself is a risky instrument used in the Assamese traditions, which involves two people, one who pounds the rice by using her foot to beat the rice grains, the other uses her hand to make the movement of rice back and forth to get it churned. It has been used for generations by tuning the rhythm of pounding and moving the rice. The stepmother asks Tejimola to move the rice back and forth, and she will pound the *dheki*. At a point, the stepmother starts to pound the *dheki* rapidly, which results in Tejimola injuring her right palm. She begs her stepmother to stop, as she was hurting and will not be able to move the rice anymore, but the stepmother asks her to use her other hand and continues the process of churning. Tejimola injurs her left hand, as the pounding escalate in speed. Even hurting both her hands does not make Senehi the stepmother stop the process; rather, she orders her to use her legs. Poor Tejimola, crying in pain and seeking forgiveness, continues to move the rice through her right foot and left, one after the other is hurt. She then makes an effort to make Tejimola rest on a bamboo pillar and use her foot. At a point when both her hands and legs are injured, Senehi asks her to use her head. She also asks her to accept her guilt in spoiling the dress.

The moment Tejimola knows she is going to be killed, she lies to her stepmother and claims that she deliberately spoiled her mother's dress, as she hates her. At this, Senehi is confused and surprised, as she was not expecting Tejimola to own up to something that

she has not in fact committed and is now not sure of what to do next. Here, we see the demon figure from the forest reappear, perhaps to guide Senehi to kill Tejimola completely and not to leave her merely injured. The ghost reminds Senehi that Tejimola has confessed to ruining the dress. Secondly, and most importantly, Senehi would be liable to answer to her husband for his daughter's atrocious condition, if left in her current injured state. The brutality of this scene is further taken forward by how Senehi increasingly finds sadistic pleasure in torturing her stepdaughter and goes to the extent of killing slowly, savouring the process. She makes her work until her last breath and kills her slowly, enjoying the pain. When Senehi asks Tejimola to use her head, the girl starts crying out for her father's help. Senehi brutally thumps her head back and forth, escalating the speed of the pounder until Tejimola's flesh is churned. We see the flesh falling off the pounder in the reflection on the wall. The stepmother, who is ecstatic with cruelty, forgets to stop and goes on pounding insanely. She might be insane, overpowered by the feeling of jealousy, or she might have been bewitched, yet none of this matters. The excruciating cruelty of the killing keeps bringing the audience back to the material suffering of the girl rather than what might have motivated the stepmother.

The stepmother's first meeting with the audience is when she slaps her innocent stepdaughter as soon as her husband leaves on a journey. From that moment, the viewers' attention is fixed on the sadism of the stepmother. In this, they tend to forget about the daughter until we witness her actual killing, which raises a question of why the audience only sees the daughter when she is suffering. The torture and abuse by the stepmother occur in the presence of neighbours and visitors, but there is no kind of resistance from them, and Hazarika troublingly asks whether this echoes the partial disinterestedness of his audience. Does this scene imply how horrifying the folkloric can be, or does it depict the real-life consequences of a relationship between a stepdaughter and a stepmother? The

killing of Tejimola with a rice pounder is an act of sheer cruelty. It also draws attention to the reality of the lives of the Tea Garden labourers, and the inhuman conditions imposed upon them by plantation owners. If one asks the question, in what sort of a place can a child be worked to death, the answer here might be a place like the plantations of Assam, where being worked to death was not age-exclusive.

The last story does not depict a murder, but rather the abandonment of a child (that has magically taken the form of a fruit, the *outenga*) by a mother, Keteki (Urmila Mahanta) and her community. The *outenga* is a fruit central to Assamese culinary identity; it is a wild fruit mainly found in the dense jungles of Assam. According to folk beliefs, a woman who bears anything other than a human child is a witch, an outcast, and a bad omen for the family and the community. The woman in the film is consequently banished by her native village because she gave birth to an *outenga* and is declared cursed. In the world of Assamese folklore, there are infinite possibilities due to divine power and beliefs; science has no bearing on events. It does not matter whether or not it is scientifically feasible that a woman could give birth to fruit. What happens, happens. In such a context, it is also therefore acceptable that a rebirth then occurs, as the fruit turns into a baby girl. Confirmation of the possibility of such strange events comes when Devinath (Adil Hussain), a merchant and traveller who has travelled around the nation, claims that these phenomena exist in many other parts as well and are known as magic and mystic, but not dangerous. He says that a girl somewhere in some other culture or part of the state was nurtured and brought up by a bird: “A woman gave birth to a kitten in Sadiya [...] a bird had raised a woman; A girl was hatched out of a duck’s egg one morning” (Hazarika *Kothanodi* 00:39:50).¹¹⁵ He also says that a woman gave birth to kittens, and so on; these folkloric tales are ever-present, despite their apparent irrationality.

¹¹⁵ See Figure 5 where Devinath informs Keteki about several other similar instances.

Devinath indicates how the world might seem strange or improbable, but that this is no reason to fear things. Accept that the world might not always look conventional, and you will experience a kind of peace. Through this, Hazarika also addresses the contemporary issues faced by any woman in society who fails to follow social norms, and the risk they run of being shunned or punished as evil or cursed as a practitioner of witchcraft. Thus, the bearer of *outenga* is thrown out of the culture and community and has to live like an outcast, an outsider for the rest of her life, but her predicament is a reminder to communities that they should not treat the unorthodox or different in such a way. Through such adaptations of bedtime stories, Hazarika invites the viewers to read and see folktales critically, and to intelligently apply them across time and place. His film locates its audience in pre-modern Assam, but in such a way that it speaks urgently to the abiding injustices of twenty-first century life.

In addition, it can be noted the way folklore works and never loses its temporal relevance. When the baby girl is born from the *outenga*, she is shown as if she had lived the same period of time in which the *outenga* has been taking her place. In this way, the story invites comparison with what happens to Beloved, killed as a baby but who then came back at an age equivalent to the years she would have acquired if she had lived. There is no rationality or logical reasoning behind the appearance and disappearance, birth or death in the folklore, and it works differently for each community according to their respective beliefs.

7. Folklore Adapted in *Beloved*

In her article, “Freak Shows, Spectacles, and Carnivals: Reading Jonathan Demme’s *Beloved*” Anissa Janine Wardi shares her experience of watching the film adaptation of *Beloved* in the cinema, frustrated by the mocking reactions of the restless audience who

were comparing it to *Poltergeist*.¹¹⁶ She describes how she wanted to inform them that there was much more to *Beloved* than its ‘horror’ elements. She sadly reflects after the screening that ‘the book was better than the film’, which is not an untypical complaint about a film adaptation. To prove the point, she adds a list of infractions against the novel caused by the adaptation process (especially the cutting or adding of scenes, dialogue, characters, and so on). Yet Wardi’s conclusion is that the film ‘*Beloved*’ failed not because it diverged from the novel, but because there is no representational analogue to Morrison’s textual project, specifically insofar as *Beloved* her-self evades cinematic representation (513). Morrison describes *Beloved* as a child, whose voice was:

low and rough, new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands
[...] baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under her
hat [...] breathing like a steam engine. (*Beloved* 62)

This vivid and textured description of *Beloved* shocks and intrigues readers, asking them to come up with a reaction that is as complicated as the character herself. The writing appeals to every available sense, making her seem innocent yet evil, childish yet scary, protagonist and antagonist. *Beloved* (Thandiwe Newton) in Demme’s representation is a moaning and distorted girl, defined by a form of enraged victimhood and pathos, and is much less mysterious than she was in the novel. In the film, *Beloved* is continuously shown grunting, wheezing and drooling all the time, unable to speak, but when not met with her demands she becomes angry and starts to throw things around (as in the time when Sethe could not feed any more sugar to her). In the novel, she comes across as a child trapped in a young girl’s body who needs care and affection and is unable to function

¹¹⁶ *Poltergeist* (1982) is an American supernatural horror film directed by Tobe Hooper. It is about a family house, which is haunted by demonic ghosts.

her hands and legs: “stood up on her soft new feet which, barely capable of their job” (*Beloved* 64).

Demme’s attempts to infuse the film with the elements of folklore were limited to visual representations of *Beloved* as a ghost who takes ungainly human form. *Beloved* is mostly represented as a child in an adult body throughout the film through her unbalanced body movements, stuffing herself with food and unsteady walking. Effectively, she is like a toddler. Yet in the novel, *Beloved* is introduced with a voice “low and rough” (62) and her walk to “a heavier one or an older one” (67) as she walks around by holding on to the furniture. *Beloved*’s walk is expressed by Sethe as if her mind and legs are “barely capable of their job” (64) and sounds “a little lumbar” (67). In Demme’s adaptation, the issue with this representation of *Beloved* is that it is too bodily in emphasis, and the unknowable mischief of her as a kind of tricksterish spirit is diminished. As such, she does not quite inspire such a complexity of response as the ghost we met in the fiction. The arrival of *Beloved* on the screen is disturbing and abhorrent. She is shown leaning and resting her body on a tree, breathing heavily while insects were crawling all over her body, covering most of her face. However, the visual effects of this scene are different from her depiction by Morrison in the novel and nowhere near as disturbing. There, she is shown leaning against the tree, breathing shallowly and smiling (60). The novel’s vivid description of her skin, eyelids and the unbearable heaviness of her neck is absent in the film.

Morrison’s *Beloved* is presented as a trickster figure who takes various shapes to make Sethe accept and let go of her past, then further to invite Sethe into the community which has abandoned her, bringing everyone together. *Beloved* as a trickster also helped Denver to gain answers to all the questions she had which her mother could not or was not willing to explain, as she was afraid to recall her brutal past. The tricksterish aspects of *Beloved*’s representation are lost in the film; *Beloved* is presented there as the memory

which Sethe should be ashamed of and depicts her anger towards her mother by possessing her in all forms. She embodies shame, rather than the power of healing and community in the film.

The film's version of the book emulates the factual description of the novel by starting in 1865, towards the end of the Civil War and just before the abolition of slavery. Passers-by strangely stare from a safe distance at house 124 Bluestone Road, on the outskirts of Cincinnati, because of the strange things they have heard about in the house, such as the presence of ghosts. The novel begins its narrative in 1873, however, and gives a flashback to 1865 where the readers are introduced to all the characters, some of whom are now absent. The description of the house in the novel as "spiteful. Full of a baby's venom"(3) is reflected in the film, firstly through the shaking of the house and the subsequent use of red filters to colour interiors in a red glow when Paul D arrives. Violence is also explicit through the throwing of household objects against the walls, which explains the comparisons to *Poltergeist*. The problem with this is that the effects are almost too explicitly visual, and that the menace and melancholia of the book's descriptions are diminished. The film looks fairly like a generic horror movie. In the novel, the supernatural announces itself more nuancedly. Sethe calls upon the ghost for tiring herself, Baby Suggs and her little daughter Denver and not for scaring them all. She knew the ghost is of her dead daughter, and that she is just angry and does not understand well. Just the shattering of the mirror, and two tiny handprints on the cake, made Howard and Buglar run away.

Despite being directed by an award-winning director, whose successful achievements are *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Philadelphia* (1993), audiences did not appreciate the film. One of the issues faced by Demme necessarily centred on questions of structure. *Beloved* is a novel that is unusual in structure and tone, as was explored

previously, but the film was constrained by Hollywood conventions of genre and expectation about what represents a well-made structure. If the film was alternatively constructed, for example in the episodic model of a contemporary limited series, it might have been understood and appreciated by a larger audience. This might also have allowed the folkloric elements to emerge more pervasively and more powerfully. The time between the episodes would have allowed the audience to think about the previous scene and imagine the next. It would give the viewers time to understand each event at their own pace, the presence of the ghost, and some level of acceptance of the horrors of slavery. A more patient storytelling would have allowed these separate strands to emerge.

Yet this is just speculation, and Hollywood in the 1990s was still primarily focused on the concentrated format of the two-hour movie. The film was a product of that mainstream Hollywood culture; but it failed to achieve the mass appeal that such a format demanded. It also failed to capture and represent the cultural and idiosyncratic significance of Morrison's novel. However, that should not surprise, as so much of the popular appeal of the book lay in its method of folkloristic narration and intimate knowledge of how to tell a story in provocatively angular ways. To adapt Emily Dickinson, Morrison tells things 'slant', but Hollywood tends to tell them straight (Dickinson 494). This created a problem for movie audiences, as it meant they had the horror of slavery presented to their face more directly than they could handle. Morrison's trickster methods had offset such horror and made it curious and weird. Hollywood made it crudely evident. A commentator at the time in *The Guardian* complained that the film seemed to be nothing more than a collection of cinematic clichés and racial stereotypes:

When I finally saw *Beloved*, I was astonished by how bad it was. Not just bad: cheesy. A lot of the mythical black figures - the daughters of darkness, the oversexed male boarder, the sturdy mother with a tree of scars whipped into her back - seemed

as stereotypical as characters from the blaxploitation movies of the seventies. *Beloved* is the kind of movie that makes you wonder about film-making: after all, given the resources at hand - the charisma and energy of Winfrey, plus the talent of director Jonathan Demme - it seems like this had to work. (*Beloved? Not Likely*)

This anonymous commentator says that they had not read Morrison's novel when they saw the film, and they also were resentful of the degree to which the film had become a project defined by Oprah Winfrey's dominance over it as both its producer and principal actor. The subtlety and playfulness that Morrison had brought to narration had been replaced by a combination of industry generics and the urge to turn *Beloved* into a 'life-changing experience' for the mass market. There was no room in this vision for nuances of locality and a specific sense of community.

Kothanodi's success as a film lies in its intimacy and modesty of ambition; it tells stories from Assam and spends much of its time giving an audience a particular feel for what life in that setting means. Ironically, such a vivid rendering of a particular locality is what opened the door for the film internationally. An audience in Dublin or at a film festival in Bavaria could understand and respect that they were experiencing an intimate portrayal of a culture that was as recognisable and locally coherent as their own. The more clearly defined it is in its own terms, the more one locality can speak to another. If *Beloved* was a film product designed to please everybody, it did that to nobody. It looked like a film set in a studio, not on the banks of the Ohio River. Morrison's ghost belonged to a precise place; Demme's was merely another form of screen monster.

The use of red lighting to indicate the supernatural force of *Beloved* in the film exemplifies the problem of trying to find a cinematic technique to match the weird subtleties of Morrison's style, which allows for gaps in memory. She stresses fallibility as part of the urgent project of trying to relate both how we remember and how we forget. In

a film context, it is hard for viewers to connect to the unknown names and events as Sethe describes them. For instance, at the time when Paul D enters Sethe's home, he witnesses the red light flashing and instead of seeing the kitchen door, he sees the door of the shed in which Sethe killed Beloved, with a little glimpse of Sethe standing with Beloved, blood on her hands. He sees the door of the past (the past he is unaware of) rather than the door of the present. Demme tries to retain the folkloric features from the novel to some degree but cannot convey how Morrison continually dramatises what it is like to try and tell a story in a gap, when experience is so unbearable that it is almost impossible to give words to it. Eric Pfeffinger indicated how inhospitable Morrison's achievements were to the film medium:

As in the novel, the ghost in the house is literally haunted, but its poltergeist antics and blood-red light are made believable and unremarkable by the indirection of Morrison's prose; her narrative camera only glimpses these phenomena on the periphery or sweeps over them incidentally, as in a quick pan. On film, divorced from Morrison's language, reduced to their scary-movie elements, the fantastical phenomena feel distanced and hollowly melodramatic. (“*Beloved*’ is Surprisingly Good”)

As a collaboration between a white American director and an African American actor and producer, the film could be represented as an unprecedented sharing of a lens between descendants of the enslaved and their enslavers. Demme described the project in this way, and that both himself and Oprah were an apt choice because of this:

I was able to embrace the material in such a beautiful way without ever sentimentalising it. We understood that the miracle of the collaboration between us was that she is the descendant of slaves (*sic*), has racial ancestral connections and I

am the descendant of slave (*sic*) owners, and we could now do this together.

(Jonathan Demme Interview on '*Beloved*' (1998) 00:05:07- 00:06:43)

Winfrey's contention was that they made a successful film to reach a wide audience without sacrificing the distinctiveness of the novel. This seems unfounded, however, and on all counts. The film did not reach its desired audience (it took close to 30 million dollars at the box office in the USA, having cost 53 million to make), and it had also shed its distinctiveness of tone, narration and location ('*BELLOVED* – Bomb Report').

8. Folk-Cinema, Translocality and the Online Audience

In comparison with, *Beloved*, Hazarika's *Kothanodi* was a relatively huge success, reached a great variety of audiences through appearing at international festivals, and has inspired a multiplicity of positive comment and reception online. Film reviewers on YouTube, Rick Segall and Korbin Miles, mention how this film is not about the actors but the storyline. They argue that the film is peculiarly gripping and does not let its audience move for a second. Segall and Miles are from California, home of Hollywood, and their interest in *Kothanodi* speaks to the film's reach at an international level, despite the determinedly local nature of its material (Miles and Segall). As said earlier, however, this sense of sharply-drawn locality is what generates the translocal and international potential of the film. The folklore of Assam comes alive, and as such reminds audiences of how other folklores can do the same thing, if rendered in an intelligent and flexible way. That is, if it is rendered in a way that is as flexible and adaptive as folklore itself. The means should reflect the matter. Hazarika thus establishes the unravelling mystery of all four of the intertwined stories in a sinister, shocking and implicating way.

Kothanodi's success at international film festivals has led to its release on digital platforms worldwide, such as the worldwide film-screening platform MUBI, where the film received a rating of 8.2/10 from its viewers (Ratings & Reviews). Several viewers

posted reviews of the film on the MUBI website, and their comments demonstrated the transglobal resonance that people discovered in the film's representation of folklore. One reviewer mentioned how they were able to learn about the fruit *outenga* and then the abundance of herbs and fruits that they associated with it, adding it reminds them about the wood-apple jam tucked in their cupboard. Another reviewer looks at it through dual lenses of black magic and motherhood, a mostly unidentified or untouched connection in culture. It is a taboo analysis, not least because the figure of the mother is customarily associated with love, tenderness and care. Yet such automatic associations are exactly what the stories of *Kothanodi* question, and Hazarika's particular daring lies in showing that real folk wisdom exists in questioning everything. In order to live, nothing should be assumed, everything must be tested; he summons a tricksterish refusal of piety. Viewers have remarked on this quality of the impious, identifying it both as a local and broadly human phenomenon:

Diabolical and mysterious, mixing the real with the ethereal [...] this film digs deep into the nether regions of the human psyche.

[It]...mercilessly pulls up a mirror, showing society its dark underbelly.

[It]...digs up the sinister undercurrent from the depths of each text of the Assamese folktales.

It's dark, greasy, set in the mystic perpetual miseries of Majuli islands. (Ratings & Reviews on MUBI').

Hazarika's telling of folktales shows to the world the hidden crimes that happen in the house's backyard, behind the veil of uncritically held beliefs and unquestioned customs.

He establishes an ecological perspective on the co-dependence of humans, plants, and animals, and then indicates how the natural domain is further entangled with the supernatural, and that fear is as necessary a part of everyday life as cooking rice or going for a walk. The use of eerie music and soundtracks enhances the feeling of implicit terror in Assam among the viewers; wailing sounds and cries of babies are used on the soundtrack to shock the viewers to acknowledge the potentially dire fates of the children depicted.

Hazarika works insistently in sight and sound to communicate the authenticity and rawness of folk-life, whether through the violent churning of the rice pounder, the weaving of the cloth, or the graininess of the sound of the *outenga* rolling on the dirt. Curiously, but very effectively, the film also gives voice to the fruit; in part this adds to the strangeness of what is happening, and generates a sense of the supernatural, but it also serves to naturalise the transformation of the *outenga* into a girl who is seeking love and acceptance from her mother. What seemed absurd or ridiculous now metamorphoses into organic and revitalising reconciliation, the kind of transformation that folklore often promises. Hazarika carefully chose the tales in order to reflect upon motherhood and its responsibilities. He develops a related query within that exploration into the maltreatment of children, sometimes even to the point of murder.

The story of the stepmother killing her husband's daughter shows that to take on the role of being a mother is not necessarily the same as actually being a mother, and that it is dangerous to assume that a woman will naturally mother a child with love, especially if that child is not her own. As soon as the father leaves on a journey, the stepmother shows her real anger and jealousy towards her stepdaughter, which manifests as escalating cruelty. The worse her rage gets, the more it seems as if the stepmother cannot help it; she is in the grip of a form of mania that has no cure. Despite her cruelty, the stepmother is

represented by Hazarika as wretched rather than demonic, someone apparently beyond help but not some degree of understanding. Continuity to another tale comes when the father of the murdered girl encounters the woman who gave birth to the *outenga*. He was not able to protect his own daughter from his second wife, but is able to help the woman, advising that she should accept the *outenga* as her child. He offers up the folkloric wisdom that such strange things might and do happen in the world. Prior to her murder, the man's daughter had led us to the girl who was forced to marry a python by her mother for the greed of jewels. In this case, a natural mother's covetousness relates to the envy that apparently motivated the stepmother, and both culminated in the killing. Finally, the wedding preparations lead us to the successful fisherman, who has been burying his newborn babies on the advice of his uncle. The fisherman's wife finally rises up to resist the cyclical sacrifice of her children and resolves to take justice into her own hands by planning to kill the uncle and protect her fourth-born child. In doing this, she refuses to accept the patriarchal teachings of her husband's family line, and rejects the superstition that her husband's success in work is dependent upon anything other than his own ability to fish. This is a matter of ecology and hard work, rather than theology or patrimony.

This last story affirms the film's particular location on the river island of Majuli, an island which enjoys a reputation in the Indian context as an island of mysteries and stories. Hazarika fulfills this reputation and plays with the apprehension that it creates. However, he also eradicates clichés, destroys assumptive models of righteousness and dives deep into the darkness to bring out a more implicating version of reality. The film reflects the abiding presence of horror and wrong in Assam. Heinous acts occur in the darkness (the man burying his newborn) but also in broad daylight (the torture and death of Tejimola). Yet redemption and kindness are also shown as equally possible and present. The portrayal of greedy and evil motherhood in the two stories counters the protective

courage and caring in the other two stories. Hazarika addresses the binaries of good and evil, destruction and protection, and jealousy and caring, showing how the art of storytelling is the necessary way of negotiating a path between these extremes. Lewis Hyde addresses these binaries in a trickster, he asserts that “Trickster embodies and enacts that large portion of our experience where good and evil are intertwined”, and he further mentions Paul Radin’s take on the trickster: “[Trickster] knows neither good nor evil, yet he is responsible for both” (qtd. in Hyde 10). The film ends with the *outenga* being reborn as a girl. This can be read as Hazarika’s attempt to restore faith in the human ability to survive, yet the memory of the accumulated killings is not erased by the survival of the other girls.

What remains is a cautiously positive awareness of how magic both destroys yet protects. In the end, the viewers are shown a reincarnation of Tejimola, and the malign voices of the buried babies can be heard, plotting against their parents. This remarkable final twist suggests either that the uncle was right, or that rather the babies have been prompted into vengeance, and that the cycle of prophecy and violence might well continue. Similar to the characteristics of a folktale that conventionally ends with a message or a moral lesson, the film ends by stressing the need for life to re-assert itself despite horror and tragedy. Tejimola reincarnates into a plant, which is reflected by the sprouting of a sapling at the same place where her stepmother buried her. The couple (Poonai and Malati) visit the forest at night to see the buried babies, whose’ heads rise from the ground and talk amongst themselves.

9. Folk-Networking

Kothanodi was not a cosmopolitan product with Bollywood appeal, but a film created to address the culture, mystery and traditions current among the community and people of Assam. In addition, however, it sought to communicate these aspects of folklore to an

audience beyond India. In this, it succeeded. *Kothanodi* was not necessarily a massive hit at the box office, but it succeeded in raising awareness on a global level and generated new connections and readings. Unanticipated relationships with other films and other folktales began to emerge through interpretative communities online. A reviewer on MUBI compared it to the Japanese genre of *Kwaidan Geki*, made famous cinematically by director Masaki Kobayashi's *Kwaidan (Ghost Stories)* (1964), also an adaptation of four folktales. Other reviewers remarked on comparabilities with Bengali stories from *Thakumar Juli (Grandmother's Bag, bag of tales)*, and Americans expressed their gratitude over learning about the folklore of Assam and the benefit of thinking about folklore translocally and transglobally. These responses demonstrate how folklore is present in each and every culture, religion, and country; it also shows how quick people are to recognise this. They express the potential for commonality that such tales and structures manifest. It can be argued that Hazarika's implicit audience was neither the consumer of Bollywood nor the Assamese community but an international audience literate in the transglobal possibilities of folklore. He claims that nobody in mainstream Bollywood takes such films (with folkloric elements) into serious consideration. As the director aimed to talk about the folklore of Assam globally, he put the film into the global network of the international film festival circuit, where it prospered. It was first screened in October 2015 at Busan International Film Festival from October 1-10, 2015, followed by the London Film Festival in the same month (Hazarika *Film Companion* 00:2:49-00:2:54).

Networking had already helped the film in other ways. Interestingly, due to budget constraints, Hazarika used crowdfunding to meet production costs for the film. He raised INR 21 lakhs (26,334.73 Euros) from a community of ninety-seven backers, which was rewarded when the film won the National Film Award for Best Assamese Feature Film

(2015).¹¹⁷ According to Hazarika, the main idea behind screening the film at a film festival was to approach where a market is attached; you get your foot into the sea and see if you can make a sail internationally (Hazarika *Film Companion* 3:52- 3:55). Crowdfunding could help to push a film onto the festival circuit. Furthermore, crowdfunding is not only about helping the person (a director and producer here) but also supporting the film and the story to reach a broader audience to promote the culture and heritage of such films through a medium which is easily accessible and appreciated by everyone. People from Assam and elsewhere formed a community to support the film and, as such, showed the initiative and constructive creativity which folklore itself cultivates.

11. Local Knowledge(s)

Rivers are central to the imagination of both films: the Brahmaputra (*Kothanodi*) and Ohio (*Beloved*) reflect the deep secrets they carry with them and signify the horrifying and traumatic histories that they have witnessed. Europeans set up tea plantations in Assam because the Brahmaputra afforded irrigation for easy cultivation and a helpful trade route. The land was an ideal location for a plantation. Similarly, the lower Mississippi River basin was a gateway to commerce for Europeans in the Americas, and the first large populations of enslaved Africans were brought to the Delta region ('History and Culture of the Mississippi Delta Region'). The river, therefore, carries a traumatic history of forced labour, slavery and exploitation. It facilitated horror when Africans were sold and transported to the cotton plantations of the Deep South in Mississippi and Louisiana. Yet the same river also necessarily became a route for the enslaved to escape slavery, both to the nearest swamplands for refuge or, more ambitiously, to the free states upriver. Escape on the river was inevitably dangerous, bringing about encounters with other humans,

¹¹⁷ Backers refers to the people who supported and funded the film.

animals and disease. Yet the potential for suffering at the hands of nature was preferable to enduring slavery.

The Mississippi river was both an oppressor and a liberator for African Americans. Much of *Beloved* is set by the river Ohio, which empties into the Mississippi and therefore represents an extension of the trepidation which the latter generates. While escaping from slavery, Sethe describes her vision of Ohio as “one mile of dark water, which would have to be split with one oar in a useless boat against a current dedicated to the Mississippi hundreds of miles away” (*Beloved* 98). Even more significantly, Ohio describes a border between North and South, freedom and slavery, which makes Sethe’s predicament all the more agonised in *Beloved*. Crossing the Ohio, she is walking a line between the promise of freedom to the North and the terror of being drawn back towards the South. If the river appears to have a mythic force, it also appears to be entirely indifferent to the fate of humans, presiding over experience with divine indifference. If the Ohio-Mississippi system is where anything can happen, bringing life or death, devastation or prosperity, it is also vast in scale, connecting everything. The film *Beloved* was shot in studios and at five different locations: Old New Castle, New Castle, Delaware, Fair Hill Natural Resources Area, Maryland, Landis Valley Museum, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Eckert James River Bat Cave Preserve, Mason County, Texas, and Philadelphia Civic Center Boulevard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA (*Beloved* (1998) - IMDb). The film, unlike the novel, had to forcefully create the scenery to resemble the narrative at different locations, risking the loss of authenticity and taking the viewers away from witnessing the story on the same ground of narration as the world that Morrison generates.

Similar to the quilt in the text, the film was also necessarily a production of assembling and joining the fragments together to make a whole. The director is American, the main producer is African American, and the shooting locations are different for each

scene. Perhaps inevitably, it lacks the powerful sense of place and story that *Kothanodi* transmits. *Kothanodi* was shot on location entirely, at Majuli Island in Assam, which allowed Hazarika to highlight the powerful imagery of the place and link it directly to the folklore Assam produces. Hazarika is Assamese by birth, and he directed, produced and shot the film on the lands of Assam in the Assamese language. Moreover, the actors were also cast from the Assam film industry. The rawness of the location and people depicted by Hazarika makes the film speak out to the viewers about the land of Assam and view its fusion of mysticism and hard reality as a first-hand experience.

In *Kothanodi*, the river is portrayed mostly in the background and appears much less turbulent and violent than the coursing flows of the Mississippi-Ohio. Yet it is the need to work the river that prompts the man to obey his uncle's demands for sacrifice, and the stepmother crosses the water to visit the shadowy figure in the forest as if it represented a gateway into transgressive fantasy. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, even the Ohio river marks a gateway of freedom for Sethe and other enslaved, a fantasy world of freedom (which turned into reality) they longed for which was stolen from them.

Kothanodi points out the unique position of folklore in the discourse of modernity's racialized capitalism, witnessing how the Tea Garden community experienced exploitation and how stories evolved to express their impact. The plantation is not visible here, it is not the apparent setting of any of the stories, and yet it is the essential background to all that happens in the film. The evident violence and cruelty on show have to be understood within the context of populations being displaced and cultures unmoored in the cause of cultivating tea. In *Violence* (2007), Slavoj Žižek describes the problem of defining violence and understanding its essential relationship to the apparently 'peaceful' ground against which it has to be understood. There is an immediately recognisable "subjective" violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent',

which can be seen in the killing of Beloved or Tejimola (1). However, Žižek contends that such “subjective violence is just the most visible portion of a triumvirate that also includes two objective kinds of violence” (1). The first of these is the “‘symbolic’ violence embodied in language and its forms” (1), and the other is “‘systemic’ violence, or the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems” (1). What links the killings of the two girls in Assam and the American South is not so much the subjective events, therefore, as the systemic contexts in which they became possible. One economic system delivered the tea to consumers in London and elsewhere, and the other gave the cloth to a similar market. This implacably rational violence produces the subjective explosions encountered in narratives such as *Beloved* and *Kothanodi*. These texts call upon folklore because it has the ability to warn about the damage that such systems might generate. The uncle-soothsayer recommends human sacrifice, but he does so in the name of preserving prosperity; as such, his superstition is founded upon the idea of a profit margin. His “beliefs” are fundamentally identical to those who believe that the dividends of shareholders are worth more than the lives or safety of workers.

Hazarika draws inspiration for his direction from Japanese horror films such as *Onibaba* (1964) and *Kwaidan* (1964), which explore folklore’s capacity for blurring the line between human and non-human. He also shows how society is incapable of processing such blurring. Women in *Kothanodi* struggle to escape the binaristic categorisations of Assam’s social structures and are, therefore, especially susceptible to social condemnation, as when the community denounces Keteki as a witch. They do so principally because they do not know what else to call a woman who has given birth to an *outenga*. Hazarika refuses to indulge in such confident judgements. Senehi might appear thoroughly evil, yet she also might be understood to be deranged or mentally ill; one online

observer concluded that she was ‘schizophrenic’ (‘Ratings & Reviews’). There is not enough evidence to diagnose what motivates Senehi’s actions because it remains sufficiently obscure to resist definition. This makes it both more terrifying and fictionally powerful. In order to save her daughter, Malati has to break out of the submissive role that society demands; in resolving to disobey her husband’s uncle, she also resolves to kill him. Effectively, the two things amount to the same thing for her, with the same amount of risk. If she disobeys the men in her family, she may as well have done away with them; such would be the condemnation she faces. To break out of the nightmarish cycle in which her husband acquiesces, which currently means her children must be buried alive, she must contemplate an act of violence that will turn the order of things on its head. So, to change things, she must not only disobey her husband and her uncle but also confirm that resistance by undertaking to break the law and the objective violence it sustains.

Yet we also see that the uncle was right in protecting Poonai from his first three evil children. The buried kids reveal their evil plans to kill their father:

Boy 1: my plan has been destroyed by the uncle, I would have strangled father to death at the age of 15;

Boy 2: at the age of 14, I would have hacked father to death;

Boy 3: I would have taken all the wealth and poisoned him. (*Kothanodi* 01:34:57-01:35:12)

This raises a conflict among the viewers about whether to live by such revelations. The uncle still wants to keep the authority and wants not only Poonai but also Malati (now) to follow him for every decision of his life. During the birth of her fourth child and before knowing of the evil planning of the buried children, Malati took a radical decision of killing the uncle (she hides a knife in her saree). She takes her life decision into her own hands. This can be seen in comparison to Sethe, who took a radical decision for the lives

of her children. Both Sethe and Malati decided to take the authority of their child's life into their own respective hands. They both refused to accept the authority of the 'shaman uncle' and the 'schoolteacher' and thus were prepared to go to any limit in order to protect their child.

Beloved and *Kothanodi* illustrate and prove the centrality of women's experiences in folklore. We see Sethe, Denver and Beloved as protagonists, and in *Kothanodi*, we see Keteki (whose *outenga* turns into a baby girl), Senehi (who kills her stepdaughter Tejimola), Dhoneshwari (who offers her daughter to a python) and Malati (who saves her fourth newborn, a girl, from being buried). The films revolve around these womenfolk. They are the figures who make decisions and live with the consequences. Of course, there are males in the films, but the power of decision in each film belongs to women, and we see men on the periphery.

12. Translocal Violence

The cinema medium certainly helps to preserve folklore and to continue its effective and inventive work. *Beloved* vividly shows the experience of African Americans to a degree, and the importance of their culture and tradition in the face of horror is acknowledged. However, unlike the novel, the film fails to show the roots of African folklore and traditions in specific and tangible terms. Even as the film talks about the gruelling experience of the brutal life on plantations, it is not as bold as Morrison's writing in conveying the intimate terror of what happened. In particular, the scenes from the novel featuring the sadistically rational punishments of the schoolteacher are almost impossible to emulate, as in the rape of Sethe by the schoolteacher's sons. One problem of dealing with 'horror' in *Beloved* is that there are so many different types of it.

To return to Žižek's terminology, it might be argued that the obvious horrors of Morrison's story are what a filmmaker primarily would seek to represent; the haunting, the blood-red light, the killings, whippings and serial cruelties. Yet these examples of 'subjective' violence are not as insistently or inescapably horrifying as the objective violence that the system of slavery made inevitable. 'Real' horror lies in the schoolteacher's reliance on Enlightenment values, the kind of philosophy that facilitates good business.

As was indicated earlier in the chapter, Demme does touch upon the folkloric elements of *Beloved*, putting disparate fragments of folklore (such as the presence of a quilt and episodes of Baby Suggs' preaching) together in a frame. Yet it omits to acknowledge the significance of the quilt in the lives of African American culture and in the lives of the characters to mark belongingness and continuity. Moreover, the ghosts in African American lore can be seen as forlorn and marooned members of their community rather than threats to it, a poignancy that Demme failed to highlight. As Sethe states: "it is not evil, just sad" (*Beloved* 10). Ghosts signify a complex of emotions and the impossibility of reconciling oneself entirely with the depredations of the past. Hollywood converts this into a simple rage. A poltergeist is not something American conventionality can accept, it is an unwelcome invader, and Hollywood ghosts tend to require expulsion. Sethe and Denver welcome *Beloved* the ghost home, refusing the distinction between the living and the dead, just as they make the distinction between free and enslaved. Demme struggles to achieve this tolerance, as his version of the film medium is required to repeat time-honoured and market-tested antagonisms. It cannot blur or productively muddle things, unlike Morrison's tricksterish genius.

Kothanodi manages to adapt film better to the way in which folklore can query the world and conventional representations of it. Hazarika communicates the adaptive power

of folk myths and how they can discover significance over time and in different locations. The global reach of *Kothanodi* was ironically achieved through its intensely local feel and its confident aura of what folkloric Assam feels like. Out of this, audiences recognised the authentic aspects of their other local traditions and tales and their ability to offer necessary resistance to the blandly brutal demands of modernity. Its promotion of folklore as a mode of enquiry challenges viewers, asking those viewers questions about ethics and justice, leaving them contemplating the relationship between lived reality and the world of folk imagination.

13. Conclusion

The comprehension of violence is vital to this in both films. What might appear fantastic and impossible ultimately becomes comprehensible, even if it also comes with a sense that not everything can be controlled or rationalised. Both films summon folk culture and ghosts and ask their audiences to learn from them. The world of folktales, if viewed critically, produces an instructive awareness that there is a need for communities to change and reshape according to the exigencies of reality. It exposes the cruelty, horror and sins that can be protected under cover of beliefs in tradition and demands that they be dismissed. *Kothanodi* fulfils the characteristics of re-telling the folktales as Morrison does. It queries, it adapts, and it sings. It also suggests that such a capacity for playful multiplicity offers the most tolerable and productive way to live. This is a practical lesson, however, rather than a moral one. Hollywoodisation saw *Beloved* go in the other direction, turning Morrison's complex and confounding narrative into a much more didactic statement of anger and indignation. Yet the film adaptation of *Beloved* should not be seen as some kind of terminal failure. It is only one telling amongst many, and in many respects, it sharpens appreciation of what Morrison was able to do in words. To view various tellings and versions in a folkloristic way means that they exist in confluence rather than

in competition. Thus, the adaptation of folklore through the medium of cinema suits well in the case of *Kothanodi*, but it did not work with the film *Beloved*, which is not to say that the story can never be retold again. Morrison said: “the hunger for stories is permanent, eternal, and it is never going to end” (“Home | Toni Morrison | Talks at Google” 51:07). Stories in culture never die if they are re-created, replenishing the folklore from which they came.

CONCLUSION

The Story to Pass On is “Not the Story to Pass On”

The affective and concentrative power of folklore is jeopardised in moving from orality to either literary or cinematic transmission. This concern centres on the idea of the audience. Even if Toni Morrison’s stated intention was to produce an Africanist mode of writing that can awaken a similar sensibility and potentiality in African American consciousness, she also must work through the implications of conveying the singular experiences of African Americans to a literary readership that might well be white. The film version of Morrison’s *Beloved* was susceptible to alteration and manipulation by the market forces of the film industry. It was made with Hollywood profit margins in mind and aspirations towards Oscar nominations, something made clear by hiring the high-profile Jonathan Demme to direct it. Rather than focusing on the particularity of the tale and its peculiar horrors, the film became an example of a liberal-minded film about slavery rather than demonstrating how particular people in a unique time and place felt its viciousness. Morrison’s book overcomes the anxiety of authenticity through its unapologetic strangeness, its genre-busting communication of a world that is made believable because (rather than despite) its strangeness. Her fiction does not pander to a white audience but demands that they bend to understand the distortions of history. In Morrison, Sethe is Sethe, a person made strange by the particular terror of her lived experience but entirely herself. In the film version, she must bear the work of representing broadly categorised African American womanhood. *Beloved*, too is just another Hollywood ghost rather than the more troubling and disruptive manifestation of a tricksterish haunting that manifests in the novel.

Arguably, the cinematic remodelling in *Kothanodi* of the folklore created on the Assam Tea Plantation also ran the risk of deterritorializing those tales to produce a cosmopolitan subject made palatable for broader consumption by the present generation. Yet cinema is not necessarily a limiting or compromising medium for the transmission of folklore, and *Kothanodi* proves it. The film is deeply invested in the folklore of Assam and maintains a sense of its grainy connection to the soil. It also intensifies an appreciation of how a small locality might be home to a form of diverse and pluralistic society. Its portrayal of village life in fact intertwines materials from four different local tribes, all of whom contribute to the shared imaginative concourse of that local reality. The inclusive consciousness represented in the film reflects the indigenous beliefs, practices and rituals across social classes and ethnic groups. This suggests an imminent solidarity of purpose and consciousness, and is communicated to the audience, incorporating them into that inclusivity and intersubjectivity. Watching *Beloved*, the audience in the cinema feels like an audience in a cinema; watching *Kothanodi*, the audience feels part of its world as they are initiated into the patterns of its practices and lore. Furthermore, the film's innovations in the plot are still performed through accountability to the framework of the oral tale.

The folkloric impact of *Kothanodi* can also be appreciated through how viewers of the film used online forums to generate further discursive and comparative possibilities for the text. It sprouted a digital community that immediately began generating its own lore. This shows how Walter Benjamin's apprehension of folk wisdom in the face of technology might be overcome (88). William Ong supports the adaptation of folklore into the digital medium:

This new orality [electronic media] has a striking resemblance to the old in its participatory mystique, fostering a communal sense, concentration on the present moment, and even its use of formulas. (136)

Every transmission to different mediums sees folklore adapt. It absorbs the new and remodels the old, in the process keeping the memory alive. New folklore is created, and in doing so all folklore is regenerated.

Through summoning the spirit and practice of folklore, Morrison challenges how history records the lives and experiences of enslaved people. Revisiting oral history through the medium of folkloric writing creates awareness of a multi-layered and many-stranded truth. Similarly, the tea plantations folklore manifests the complex diasporic ties that indentured labourers had, and how oral histories preserved their humanity, keeping alive their diverse but complementary storylines. Morrison's motive in adapting folklore into fiction is to achieve access to a broader range of audiences, and to move beyond the conventional "literary" reception which might be expected. Even if Oprah's film version of *Beloved* was not an aesthetic or commercial success, her championing of the book (and other fictions by Morrison) is significant in stressing the way in which Morrison found a way to reach communities of readers and interpreters beyond a narrowly defined "literary" class. Looked at in conventional generic terms, the audience is different between reading, watching a film and listening to music. Looked at folklorically, everyone is involved in the same transmissive labour, and every mode of cultural production or artefact should be seen as a mode of lore or story. How people might relate the events of *Beloved* to one another over a phone call is yet more of this lore, even if "this is not the story to pass on" (*Beloved* 324).

To orientate reading towards the folkloric is to engage in the necessary work of ethical query and the challenge of finding a response to the abiding pressure of reality. In Assam, it provides a means of understanding the fundamental disillusionment that workers experienced when they perceived the chasm between the reality of their situation and what they had been promised. Rather than merely enshrining myth and legend, Assamese

folklore insists that you do not believe what you are told, and that you have to understand that the “truth” is something communicated to you by often malign forces. Trudier Harris argues that the products of folklore need to be understood as expressions of an idea or ideas: “[F]olk traditions are as much a concept as they are examples” (12). In Assam, one dominant idea is that of productive distrust in authority. If a rumour or anecdote might take generations of repetition to become a legend, it always needs to be remembered that one time, the legend was merely a rumour. Memory must always be a mode of questioning. If an Assamese plantation song might have become a matter of ritualised celebration or dance, it must be remembered that it is rooted in prior suffering. The suffering and the celebration are all part of the folkloric totality.

Folkloric understanding demands a peculiar accountability to both deep history and the pressures of the contemporary moment. Both Morrison and Hazarika force their readers to ask fundamental questions of what is right, wrong, or justifiable, but not in an abstract sense. In a different framing, it might be easy to condemn Sethe or the stepmother, but the folkloric query always involves a dimension of asking the reader or viewer what they might have done in the same circumstances. That question becomes increasingly difficult to answer the more context that emerges around the situation becomes apparent. To kill a child is wrong, but thinking about it properly involves an apprehension that any parent might be capable of it. This is the peculiar discomfort but truth of these fictions. Hazarika and Morrison offer a right of judgement to their audiences, but simultaneously make it hard for them to simply condemn or condone what has happened. The bitter lesson is not about good or evil, but about what is possible, what you might have to live through.

This thesis showcases how folklore provides the potential for connecting and interrelating two apparently unconnected cultures, but it also shows the practically infinite possibilities which come with such transcultural reading. Not only that, it suggests

methods and means by which imperilled traditions and cultures might be recovered. Not every community has a Toni Morrison, but her work shows how the life of a community might be reimagined and re-energised to sustain a sense of its reality and integrity. Every community has its stories, and people must remember to keep on telling them. Whatever the medium.

“As long as the folk-the people—exist there will be folklore.”

- John Flanagan

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Figures

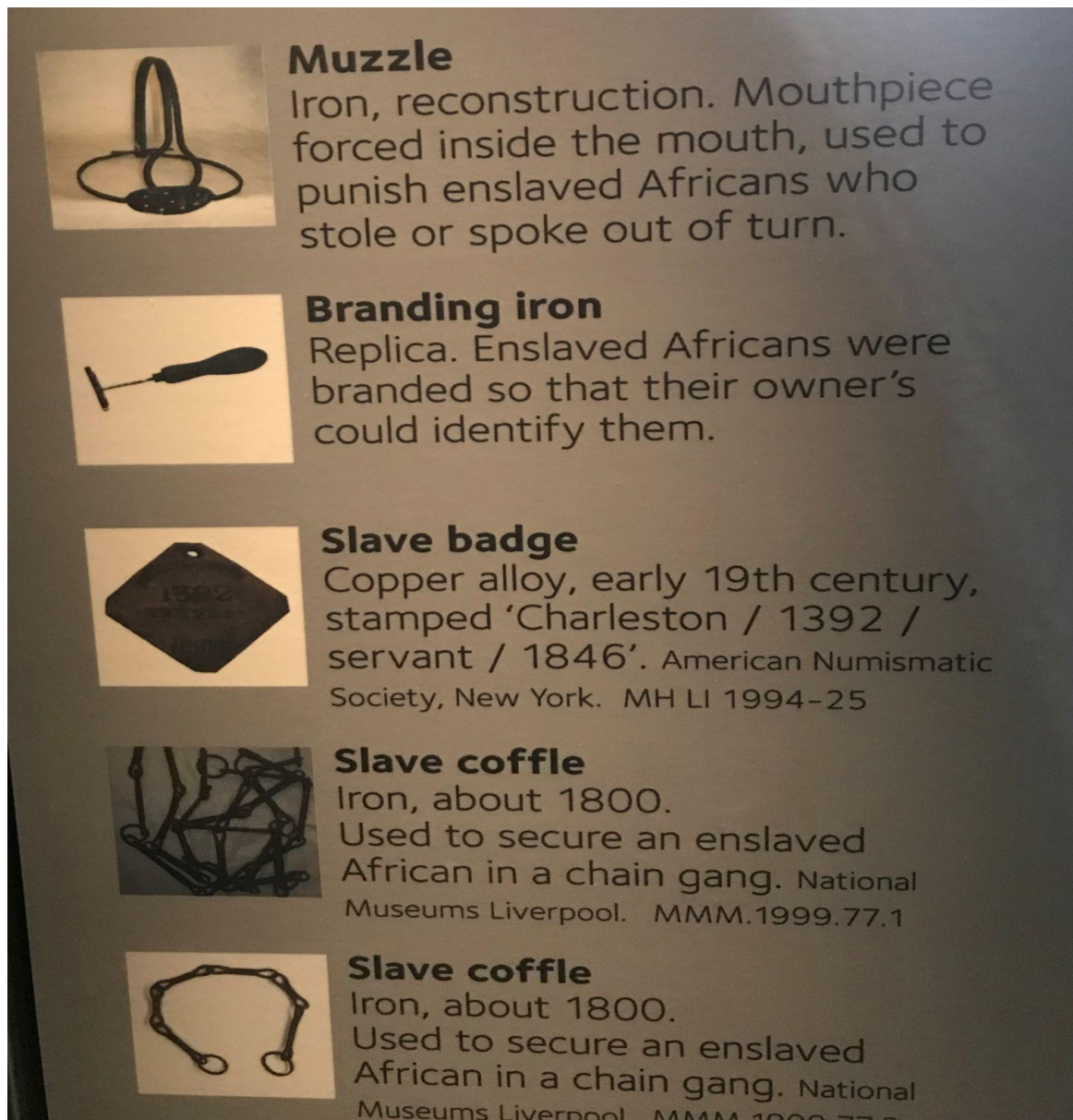


Figure 1: Tools used during slavery. 'A bit in the mouth', which Paul D talks about, is a muzzle (Slavery Museum, Liverpool, UK).



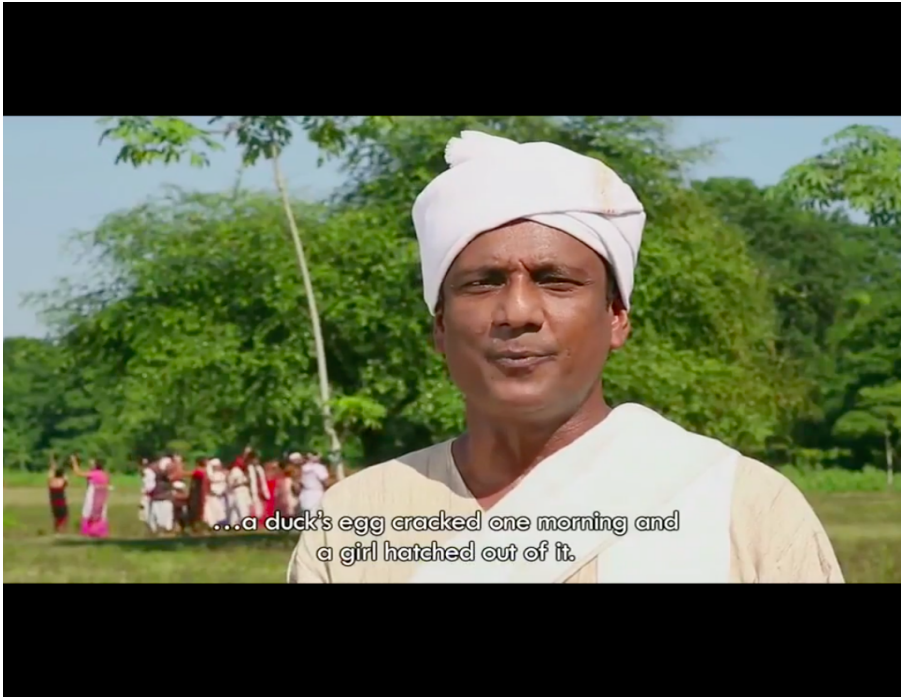
Figure 2: A rice pounder used in pre-technology times. One end of *dekhi* is pressed by the foot and the other end pounds the rice. It is a communal activity where all the women from household gather and pounds rice and wheat (*Kothanodi* 00:26:25).



Figure 3: *Tamul Paan* (Betel Leaves and Areca Nut) (*Kothanodi* 00:37:39).



Figure 4: Demon with Python look-alike eyes (*Kothanodi* 00:18:00).



...a duck's egg cracked one morning and a girl hatched out of it.



In Maibong, they say a woman once gave birth to a kitten.

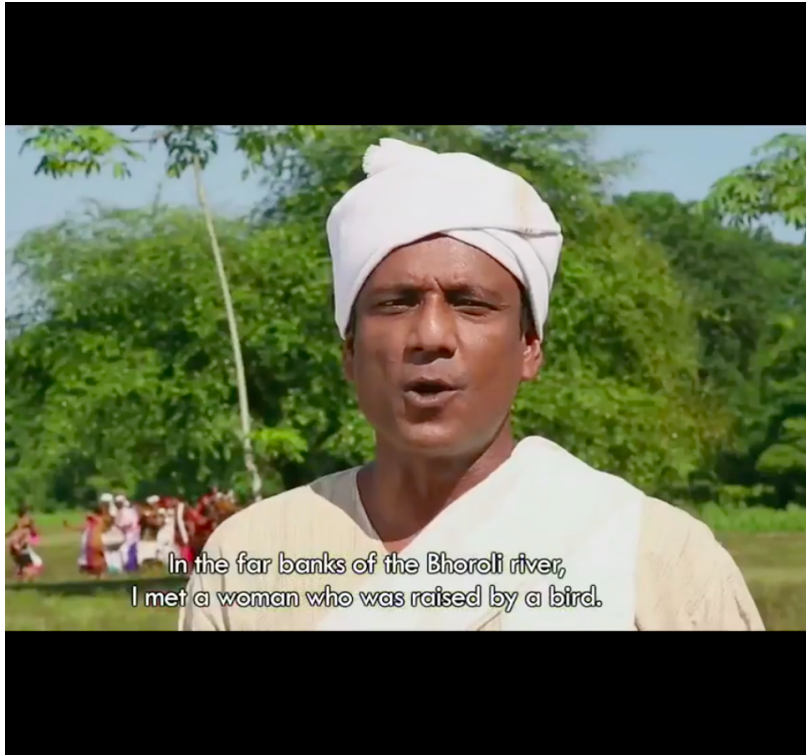


Figure 5: In all the above three figures, Devinath informs Keteki about the phenomena of giving birth outside generalised norms. He ensures her that this is the magic directed by divine powers (*Kothanodi* 00:39:50).

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Appendix

The Wonderful Tar Baby Story

“Didn’t the fox never catch the rabbit, Uncle Remus?” asked the little boy the next evening. “He come mighty nigh it, honey, sho’s you born--Brer Fox did. One day atter Brer Rabbit fool ‘im wid dat calamus root, Brer Fox went ter wuk en got ‘im some tar, en mix it wid some turkentime, en fix up a contrapshun w’at he call a Tar-Baby, en he tuck dish yer Tar-Baby en he sot ‘er in de big road, en den he lay off in de bushes fer to see what de news wuz gwine ter be. En he didn’t hatter wait long, nudder, kaze bimeby here come Brer Rabbit pacin’ down de road--lippity-clippity, clippity -lippity--dez ez sassy ez a jay-bird. Brer Fox, he lay low. Brer Rabbit come prancin’ ‘long twel he spy de Tar-Baby, en den he fotch up on his behime legs like he wuz ‘stonished. De Tar Baby, she sot dar, she did, en Brer Fox, he lay low. “‘Mawnin’!” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee - ‘nice wedder dis mawnin’,’ sezee. “Tar-Baby ain’t sayin’ nuthin’, en Brer Fox he lay low. “‘How duz yo’ sym’tums seem ter segashuate?” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. “Brer Fox, he wink his eye slow, en lay low, en de Tar-Baby, she ain’t sayin’ nuthin’. “‘How you come on, den? Is you deaf?’” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. ‘Kaze if you is, I kin holler louder,’ sezee. Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low. “You er stuck up, dat’s w’at you is,” says Brer Rabbit, sezee, ‘en I;m gwine ter kyore you, dat’s w’at I’m a gwine ter do,’ sezee. “Brer Fox, he sorter chuckle in his stummick, he did, but Tar-Baby ain’t sayin’ nothin’. “‘I’m gwine ter larn you how ter talk ter ‘spectubble folks ef hit’s de las’ ack,” sez Brer Rabbit, sezee. ‘Ef you don’t take off dat hat en tell me howdy, I’m gwine ter bus’ you wide open,’ sezee. “Tar-Baby stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low. “Brer Rabbit keep on axin’ ‘im, en de Tar-Baby, she keep on sayin’ nothin’, twel present’y Brer Rabbit draw back wid his fis’, he did, en blip he tuck ‘er side er de head. Right dar’s whar he broke his merlasses jug. His

fis' stuck, en he can't pull loose. De tar hilt 'im. But Tar-Baby, she stay still, en Brer Fox, he lay low. "'Ef you don't lemme loose, I'll knock you agin,'" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, en wid dat he fotch 'er a wipe wid de udder han', en dat stuck. Tar-Baby, she ain'y sayin' nuthin', en Brer Fox, he lay low. "'Tu'n me loose, fo' I kick de natal stuffin' outen you,'" sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, but de Tar-Baby, she ain't sayin' nuthin'. She des hilt on, en de Brer Rabbit lose de use er his feet in de same way. Brer Fox, he lay low. Den Brer Rabbit squall out dat ef de Tar-Baby don't tu'n 'im loose he butt 'er cranksided. En den he butted, en his head got stuck. Den Brer Fox, he sa'ntered fort', lookin' dez ez innercent ez wunner yo' mammy's mockin'-birds. "'Howdy, Brer Rabbit,'" sez Brer Fox, sezee. 'You look sorter stuck up dis mawnin', 'sezee, en den he rolled on de groun,' en laft en laft twel he couldn't laff no mo'. 'I speck you'll take dinner wid me dis time, Brer Rabbit. I done laid in some calamus root, en I ain't gwineter take no skuse,' sez Brer Fox, sezee.'" Here Uncle Remus paused, and drew a two-pound yam out of the ashes. "Did the fox eat the rabbit?" asked the little boy to whom the story had been told. "Dat's all de fur de tale goes," replied the old man. "He mout, an den agin he moutent. Some say Judge B'ar come 'long en loosed 'im - some say he didn't. I hear Miss Sally callin.' You better run 'long.' (Harris *Uncle Remus* 57-59)

HOW MR. RABBIT WAS TOO SHARP FOR MR. FOX

“UNCLE REMUS,” said the little boy one evening, when he had found the old man with little or nothing to do, “did the fox kill and eat the rabbit when he caught him with the Tar-Baby?” “Law, honey, ain’t I tell you ‘bout dat?” replied the old darkey, chuckling slyly. I ‘clar ter grashus I ought er tole you dat, but old man Nod wuz ridin’ on my eyeleds ‘twel a leetle mo’n I’d a dis’member’d my own name, en den on to dat here come yo mammy hollerin’ atter you. W’at I tell you w’en I fus’ begin? I tole you Brer Rabbit wuz a monstus soon creetur; leas’ways dat’s w’at I laid out fer ter tell you. Well, den, honey, don’t you go en make no udder calkalashuns, kaze in dem days Brer Rabbit en his fambly wuz at de head er de gang w’en enny racket wuz on han’, en dar dey stayed. ‘Fo’ you begins fer ter wipe yo’ eyes ‘bout Brer Rabbit, you wait en see whar’bouts Brer Rabbit gwineter fetch up at. But dat’s needer yer ner dar.”

W’en Brer Fox fine Brer Rabbit mixt up wid de Tar-Baby, he feel mighty good, en he roll on de groun’ en laff. Bimeby he up’n say, sezee: “Well, I speck I got you dis time, Brer Rabbit,” sezee; “maybe I ain’t, but I speck I is. You been runnin’ roun’ here sassin’ atter me a mighty long time, but I speck you done come ter de een’ er de row. You bin cuttin’ up yo’ capers en bouncin’ ‘roun’ in dis neighborhood ontwel you come ter b’leeve yo’s’e’f de boss er de whole gang. En den youer allers some’rs whar you got no bizness,” sez Brer Fox, sezee. “Who ax you fer ter come en strike up a ‘quaintance wid dish yer Tar-Baby? En who stuck you up dar whar you iz? Nobody in de roun’ worril. You des tuck en jam yo’s’e’f on dat Tar-Baby widout waitin’ fer enny invite, sez Brer Fox, sezee, “en dar you is, en dar youll stay twel I fixes up a bresh-pile and fires her up, kaze I’m gwineter bobby-cue you dis day, sho,” sez Brer Fox, sezee.

Den Brer Rabbit talk mighty 'umble. "I don't keer w'at you do wid me, Brer Fox, sezee, so you don't fling me in dat brier-patch. Roas' me, Brer Fox sezee, but don't fling me in dat brierpatch," sezee.

"Hit's so much trouble fer ter kindle a fier," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "dat I speck I'll hatter hang you, sezee." "Hang me des ez high as you please, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "but do fer de Lord's sake don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

"I ain't got no string," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "en now I speck I'll hatter drown you, sezee." "Drown me des ez deep ez you please, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "but do don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

"Dey ain't no water nigh," sez Brer Fox, sezee, "en now I speck I'll hatter skin you, sezee." "Skin me, Brer Fox," sez Brer Rabbit, sezee, "snatch out my eyeballs, t'ar out my years by de roots, en cut off my legs, sezee, but do please, Brer Fox, don't fling me in dat brier-patch," sezee.

Co'se Brer Fox wanter hurt Brer Rabbit bad ez he kin, so he cotch 'im by de behime legs en slung 'im right in de middle er de brier-patch. Dar wuz a considerbul flutter whar Brer Rabbit struck de bushes, en Brer Fox sorter hang 'roun' fer ter see w'at wuz gwineter happen. Bimeby he hear somebody call 'im, en way up de hill he see Brer Rabbit settin' crosslegged on a chinkapin log koamin' de pitch outen his har wid a chip. Den Brer Fox know dat he bin swop off mighty bad. Brer Rabbit wuz bleedzed fer ter fling back some er his sass, en he holler out: "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Brer Fox - bred en bawn in a brier-patch!" en wid dat he skip out des ez lively ez a cricket in de embers. (Harris *Uncle Remus* 62-64)

OU - PRINCESS (Outenga Princess)

A king had two queens. Both of them conceived. One day, both of them gave birth to their off-springs. The elder queen gave birth to a male baby and the younger queen begot a sour fruit called ou-tenga. The younger queen was very sad when she saw that her off- spring was merely a fruit and threw it away into the garbage pit. But it was seen that the fruit used to roll over and come to the queen whenever she was at work and when she was sleeping. Even when the queen used to throw it away, it used to roll back to be near her. One day, at noon, when there was no one around, the fruit rolled over to the bathing place on the river-side and stood there for some time. At that time, a prince was angling at a lonely spot near the bathing place. The prince noticed that out of the fruit, an exquisitely beautiful maiden emerged and bathed in the river. As she dried her lock of hair, her beauty brightened even the surroundings. Then, she entered the fruit again and rolled back to her mother's home. Charmed by the maiden's beauty, the prince dropped the fishing-rod, went home and entered the solitary chamber to express displeasure. Failing to find the prince anywhere, the parents started to search for him. Finally, they found him asleep in the solitary chamber. When they asked him the reason behind his sullen displeasure, the prince said, "At a certain king's house, there is a rolling ou-tenga. I want to marry the fruit." At first, the king and the queen tried to make the prince understand that it was a ridiculous and impossible thing. But the prince was adamant. Unable to put an end to the contention, the king sent a marriage proposal for the ou-tenga through a message to the ow-princess's father. On hearing about the proposal, the ou- princess's mother started to cry and said, "Why am I being put to shame in this way?" Finally, unable to refuse, she agreed and 'bathed' the fruit before giving it to the prince in marriage. The prince married it with

display of great splendour and brought it home in a palanquin. The prince stayed with the fruit in the same bedroom. At night, when the mother of the prince sent him dinner, he took a part of the food and left the rest. Then he went to bed. But when the prince was asleep, the girl came out of the fruit, ate the remnant of the dinner and again entered into it. Each morning when the prince used to wake up, he was surprised not to see the food left over by him at dinner. Unable to understand the reason behind, the prince used to sit cheerlessly. One day, an old beggar-woman came to the prince to ask for rice as alms. As she saw the prince sitting sad, she asked him, "Son, you are sitting sorrowfully. You have married but we have not seen the bride." Hearing the old woman, the prince told her everything in detail. At this, she said, "Son, your princess is inside the ou-tenga. In your bed-room, keep a fire of paddy-husk and a bowl containing a mixture of curd, milk and mashed banana."

You lie on your sleeping-mat and pretend as if you are in deep sleep. Thinking you to be asleep, as the girl ventures to come out of the fruit to have dinner, you get up immediately and throw it into the fire. But then, you will see that the girl faints and falls on the ground. You will hurriedly bring the mixture of curd, milk and banana from the bowl and apply it on her head.

On doing so, she will regain her senses. At the old woman's advice, the prince was delighted and let her go with a reward. That night, acting according to the old woman's advice, he succeeded in gaining the ow-princess.

The next morning, when the parents of the prince heard of the incident and saw their daughter-in-law, their hearts were filled with immense joy. When this news was sent to the ow-princess's parents, they too were delighted and solemnised the marriage ceremony of their daughter again with great pomp and splendour. (Bezbaroa 15-17)

TEJEEMOLA

A merchant had two wives. The elder one had a daughter Tejeemola by name. The younger wife had no issue. Tejeemola's mother died when she was an infant. As such, she was brought up by her step-mother. The same Tejeemola who was the apple of her father's eyes, was hated by her step-mother to a degree. It was only out of fear of her husband that she brought up Tejeemola.

As days passed, Tejeemola attained girlhood. Her father made her make friends with a girl of her age from a respectable family of the same village. Tejeemola's father was a trader; it would not do if he did not go out on business. As such, he had to go out to far away places for trade and commerce. This time, he had to go to a distant place for months on business. As such, at the time of departure, he called his wife and entrusting his loving daughter to her, said, "This time, I am going to a foreign country for months. I am handing over my Tejeemola to you. She is a beloved girl, treat her with tenderness and care."

The wife of the merchant thought, "This time it will be very convenient for me. Within these months, I will do away with my 'eye-sore'. I will fulfil my desire by thrashing her."

And she thought, "I won't let her go only by thrashing. If I leave her like that and if he somehow comes to know of her fate on his return, a noisy dispute would ensue. I will put an end to this danger completely. When marrying her off, I will have to give her a handsome dowry. Things from my house. She is the daughter of my husband's first wife. I didn't have the fate to beget any children of my own — of what use is taking care of the daughter of hers? The wealth which her father may give her on her marriage would be beneficial to me if I take it away to my mother's house. Therefore, before her father

returns, I have to plan out and put an end to her.” Thinking so, since the day the merchant departed on his voyage, the step-mother began to find fault as a pretext to harm her and finding Tejeemola alone, she began to punish her as much as she could.

Meanwhile, the friend of Tejeemola was getting married. The marriage was scheduled to be held on the day after the next. Tejeemola was invited to attend the marriage-ceremony. She was to stay at her friend’s for a few days, have fun and frolic, anoint the bride with requisite preparations, bathe her and take part in her marriage. Tejeemola too had a great desire to stay at her friend’s house during the days of marriage and have fun and frolic.

Thinking that the possibility of accomplishing her plot was approaching , the step-mother permitted Tejeemola to attend the marriage. Pretending to show that she was taking out clothes for Tejeemola to wear on the occasion of the marriage, she opened different caskets and chests. “Will this dress suit you, our daughter ? Will these items of dress please you ?” Saying such things, the step-mother did a nice show. She had a beautiful set of silken dress and a shawl delicately embroidered with golden thread. Finally, her step-mother gave those to Tejeemola to wear at the marriage and said, “Dear, I will tie this set and the shawl in a bundle for you. Now you go to your friend's house in your casual dress. When you reach near your friend’s house, you change for the clothes in the bundle. If you wear those clothes now on, they would become dirty with dust on your way as you go there on foot.” Saying this, the step-mother secretly placed a mouse and a burning piece of coal in the shawl. Then she made a bundle and handed it to Tejeemola.

When Tejeemola was about to reach her friend’s house, according to her step-mother’s instruction, she untied the bundle in order to wear the dress. As soon as she untied the bundle, a mouse jumped out of it and a piece of burning-coal fell from the shawl. Tejeemola was perplexed to see that the set was gnawed by the mouse and the shawl was

burnt at places. Tejeemola's face became ashen out of fear. She trembled and began to cry pathetically. The people who saw her were also surprised at that unusual incident.

Finally, after solace and consolation, Tejeemola was taken to her friend's house. A set of dress and a shawl were brought for her. She was dressed up in them to attend the marriage-ceremony.

As the marriage was over, Tejeemola returned home. When her step-mother asked her about the clothes, she trembled in fear and cast down the bundle containing the burned and gnawed clothes in front of her.

On seeing the condition of the clothes, in her false show of fury, she abused and beat Tejeemola mercilessly. Even after beating Tejeemola, she was not satisfied. Later, the step-mother dragged Tejeemola to sit near the dhekee (paddy-husking pedal). Then she made Tejeemola push forward the paddy and began to pound it with great force. While her step-mother was pounding, she suddenly dropped the pedal on Tejeemola's right hand. Her right hand being pounded, Tejeemola began to scream in agony. At this, the step-mother began to strike Tejeemola's back with a broom-stick and ordered her to push paddy into the right place using her left hand. When Tejeemola was pushing the paddy with her left hand, the step-mother caused injury to her left hand too. After injuring the left hand, the step-mother told Tejeemola to push forward the paddy using her right foot and pounded it. Then she pounded her left foot too in the same way. Finally the step-mother asked Tejeemola to push forward the paddy using her head. The step-mother then smashed her head. As a result, Tejeemola died.

In this way, the merchant's wife killed her husband's beloved daughter Tejeemola. Without anyone noticing her, she dug a pit in the ground just below the eaves of the shed where rice was pounded and buried Tejeemola there.

After some days, a plant of bottle-gourd grew luxuriantly at the place where Tejeemola was buried. It bore nice fruits. On the other hand, when the neighbours didn't see Tejeemola for many days, they enquired of the stepmother about her. The step-mother replied, "Tejeemola has not yet returned from her friend's place."

One day, on seeing the gourds growing on the thatched roof of the shed, an old beggar-woman came to the merchant's wife and asked for a gourd. Since the day the step-mother killed Tejeemola, she did not go to the shed. So she did not notice the gourd-plant. As such, she replied to the old beggar-woman, "Where shall I find a gourd for you ? I myself have not eaten gourd for many days." The beggar-woman said, "Why do you say like that ? The thatched roof of your shed is full of gourds." On hearing the old woman, the merchant's wife was surprised and said, "I have not seen any. If you have seen, go and take as many as you want." At this, the old woman came near the plant. As she extended her hand to pluck a gourd, the plant wailed out.

On hearing the gourd-plant speak, the old woman was terrified. "Don't extend your hand, don't pluck a gourd. Where from have you come beggar ? Alongwith the silk-clothes, my stepmother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola."

On hearing the plant speak, the terrified old woman didn't pluck any gourd. She came up to the merchant's wife and said, "Madam, when I extended my hand to pluck a gourd, the plant spoke out to me. I don't want any gourd. I am taking leave." Saying this, the old beggar- woman left. Then the merchant's wife understood the actual meaning behind the matter. She took a knife and cut the plant. She pulled it out and threw it away in the backyard.

After a few days, a plant bearing citrus fruits grew up in the place where the gourd-plant was thrown and the branches were full of delicious fruits. The tree bore such an abundance of fruits that it was bent under pressure. One day, some cowherds noticed the plant while grazing cows and wanted to eat the fruits. They came to the merchant's wife and said, "Madam, would you give us a few fruits to eat?" The merchant's wife said, "Where shall I find them?" Then they said, "Why Madam? At our backyard, there is a plant which is fully loaded with the fruits." On hearing them, the merchant's wife was surprised and said, "I have not seen any such fruit in our premises. If you have seen any, go and take as many as you want."

With the permission of the merchant's wife, the cowherds went near the plant. When they were about to pluck a fruit, the tree wailed out saying

"I call you my brothers. Don't extend your hands, don't pluck a fruit, but go back home. Alongwith silk-clothes, my step-mother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola."

On hearing this wail, the cowherds thought that the plant was haunted by some evil spirit or ghost. They reported the incident to the merchant's wife and went away. The merchant's wife suddenly remembered that she threw the gourd-plant at that spot after cutting it. Remembering this, she understood that it was Tejeemola in the guise of a plant. Thinking this, the merchant's wife cut the plant and threw it into the river.

The plant floated along the river and stuck on the mud near a mooring for boats. It turned into a lotus-plant and was blooming with beautiful flowers. After some days, Tejeemola's father was returning from trade on a boat by that river itself. On seeing the beautiful lotus flowers on the plant, he thought of taking one for Tejeemola. He asked a boat-man to pluck a flower and fetch it. When the boat-man stretched out his hand to pluck one, the lotus wailed as it sang

“Don’t extend your hand, don’t pluck a flower. Where from have you come boat-man ?
Alongwith silk-clothes, my step-mother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola.”

On hearing the flower wail out, the boatman was terrified. When he told the merchant about the incident, the merchant went near the plant in curiosity. As he stretched out his hand to pluck a flower, it again wailed out

“Don’t extend your hand, don’t pluck a flower, dear father. Alongwith silk-clothes, my stepmother pounded me, I am only Tejeemola.”

The father knew the nature of his wife. So he thought, “She must be Tejeemola for sure !” Thinking this, the merchant took a chewed mixture of areca-nut from his mouth in his left hand and a sweetmeat in his right hand. Then he said, “If you are my Tejeemola, then you would surely turn into a *saalika* (bird), fly and come to eat this chewed mixture. And if you are not my daughter but someone else, then you would take the sweetmeat.” When he said this, the lotus-flower turned into a *saalika*, flew to him and ate the chewed mixture by resting on his hand. Then the father was doubly sure that it was Tejeemola and put the *saalika* into a cage and took her with him.

On reaching home, the merchant asked his wife, “Where has Tejeemola gone ?” She replied, “She has gone to her uncle’s house.” The merchant elicited the truth from her by cross-examination and made her confess. After that, he threw his handkerchief on the ‘bird’ and said, “If you are my Tejeemola and if I have love for you, you will turn into a human-being by putting on this handkerchief.” The ‘bird’ turned into Tejeemola herself then and there. On his part, the merchant instantly drove his wife out from house.
(Bezbaroa 10-13)

CHAMPAWATI

Once upon a time, in a certain place, there lived a rich man. He had two wives. The elder one was *Laagee* (favourite) and the younger one was *Aelaagee* (alienated). Each of the two wives gave birth to a daughter. According to the advice of the elder wife, the husband made a hut in the backyard for the younger wife and her daughter to stay. *Aelaagee* lived alongwith her daughter in misery. Her daughter was named Champawati. One day, her father ordered Champawati to look after his paddy- field. Everyday she used to keep a watch over the crops from a high platform and drove away the birds. Many days passed in this way. One day, climbing onto the high platform in order to guard the paddy, she sang out “Go away quails; don’t eat my paddy. I will give you parched rice instead.” As she said this, someone from the nearby forest replied - “I will eat paddy as well as rice. I will marry Champawati and take her home.”

Hearing this, Champawati looked around. She was surprised as she didn’t see any human-being. After her return in the evening, Champawati narrated to her mother about the day’s incident. The next day, her mother accompanied Champa to the paddy-field in order to be sure. Her mother asked Champa to sing out as on the day before. As she did so, the same reply came out from the forest.

The mother was amazed. She asked Champa to sing out once more and the same reply was heard. Both mother and daughter returned home. *Aelaagee* told her husband about it. He alongwith *Aelaagee*, Champa and a few neighbours went to the paddy field. When Champa was told to sing out, she did so. The same reply was heard again. They all went into the forest to find out the one who made the reply. But they didn’t see anyone. After

that, Champa's father looked towards the forest and called out, "If you really went Champawati, then whoever you are, appear before us. I promise to give her in marriage to you."

On hearing this, a huge python came out from the forest. The people started to run away out of fear. But Champa's father asked them not to do so and they again assembled together. Then, he invited the python to his house. Aelaagee and her daughter started to cry in each other's arms. *Aelaagee* pleaded to her husband not to marry off their daughter to the python. But, on *Laagee*'s advice, he gave his daughter in marriage to the python. Then he arranged a separate house for the mother, the daughter and the son-in-law. *Laagee* was overwhelmed with joy as Champawati would be devoured by the python that very night. The python was kept with Champawati in the same room. Thinking that the python would swallow her, Champawati prayed to God for mercy. Next morning, her mother got up hurriedly and went to her daughter's place. She saw that Champawati's body was decked with gold ornaments. But the python was not there. When her mother woke up Champawati, she was elated to find herself adorned with gold ornaments. On the other hand, thinking that the python had devoured Champawati, her father came along with *Laagee* to see for themselves. But they were wonder struck to see her glitter in gold ornaments. Seeing that, *Laagee* was jealous and kept pestering her husband to bring a python for her daughter too. As such, he took some men along with him to a dense forest in order to search for a python. They found one and brought it home. *Laagee* too married her daughter to the python.

Like Champawati, her daughter too was made to sleep with the python. *Laagee*'s joy knew no bounds as she thought that her daughter too would get gold ornaments to wear. She didn't sleep that night but she sat beside the bed-room. On the other hand, the python started to swallow *Laagee*'s daughter from the foot upwards. The daughter said to her

mother from inside “Mother, my foot tickles.” The mother replied from outside “Dear, my son-in-law adorns you with anklets.” Gradually, the python reached the waist. The daughter said- “Mother, my waist tickles.” The mother said — “Dear, my son-in-law dresses you in a waist-band.”

After that, when the python reached the chest, the daughter called out “Mother, my chest tickles.” The mother replied - “Dear, my son-in-law dresses you with a shawl.” When the python reached the neck, the daughter called out- “Mother, my neck tickles.”

The mother replied “Dear, my son-in-law adorns you with a string of beads.”

Slowly, when the python reached the head, the daughter’s voice ceased. The mother thought, “On getting the ornaments, my daughter must be happy and has gone to sleep.”

So thinking the mother was delighted and went to bed. In the morning, the mother woke up in a delightful mood and went to see her daughter. She didn’t see her daughter. But, the python lay pot-bellied after devouring her daughter. Then only she realised what had happened and started to cry aloud. On hearing her cry, her husband came out and asked what had happened. When she told him about the incident, he fell flat on the ground.

Aelaagee and *Champawati* cried too. All the villagers came and ridiculed the couple. Then they took out the corpse of the daughter from the python’s belly by splitting it open and cremated her. After that, the husband and *Laagee* didn’t even want to see *Aelaagee* and *Champawati*. All the time they used to think of some means by which they could get rid of the two. One night, when they went to do away with them taking alongwith them their swords, the python came out suddenly and swallowed the two conspirators. Then, it lifted *Champawati* and her mother who were fast asleep and took them to a house amidst a forest.

The next day, when they woke up, they started to cry as they found themselves in an unknown place. The python said, “You have nothing to worry about here; I have brought you here.” He narrated about the previous night’s incident. When he finished, both the

mother and the daughter were grateful to him. The three of them began to live happily in the forest. While staying there, one day the mother suddenly fell ill and died. After a few days, an old woman turned up in that house when the python had gone out.

One day, an old woman turned up at the python's house. Champawati had not seen any human-being for a long time. As such, she was very happy to see the woman. She received her with due courtesy. When she inquired about her whereabouts, the woman said, "Dear, the python who is your husband is in reality, a god. Every night he makes sure that you are asleep by pinching you. Then he sheds the skin of the python and leaves for heaven. There he whiles a few hours away with the gods. If you want to see your python in the form of a god, pretend to be asleep tonight. When he sheds his skin and goes to heaven, you bum it in fire. As soon as you bum the skin, there would be a burning sensation on his body. Unable to tolerate it, he would come back and appear before you. Then you fan him hurriedly and let him repose. Soon he would fall asleep. In the morning, you tender your hearty greetings and garland him. He is none other than your husband who appears in the form of a python." On hearing the old woman, Champawati was elated.

She gave her a potful of silver and a potful of gold before bidding her to leave. When she did as she was told, a healthy man appeared before her and she bowed to him. After that, the two lived happily for months. One day, when the husband was away from home, the old woman came again. Champawati asked her to take a seat and enquired of the reason behind her visit. This time, the woman said with duplicity, "Dear, I have come to say something for your well-being. You ask your husband tomorrow to have lunch with you from the same dish. When he does, you too eat alongwith him without any hesitation. As a result, he would be mesmerised and won't be able to part from you even for a moment. After you finish eating, you tell him that, while having food, it seemed that you had seen many villages inside his mouth. So, you ask him to open his mouth wide so that you could

see the entire world. At that, he would be angry with you and he may ask you to choose between him and the world. But you insist that you want to see the world. He would show you the world by opening his mouth and then plunge into the river. He would say that you will see him after six years. But don't be carried away by it. You keep sitting on the bank of the river. After a while you would see him coming back to you again." At this, Champawati was delighted. As before, she bade farewell to the woman by presenting her with a potful of gold and a potful of silver. Finding that she had been successful in her evil design, the old woman left happily. Next day, Champawati sat to eat alongwith her husband from the same dish. The husband said, "Your intentions are slowly getting dubious." But he ate from the same dish. After having lunch, she asked him to show her the world just as the old woman had told her. At that, her husband said, "In that case, you shall not see me again." As Champawati didn't pay attention to his words, he went to the river and asked her if she would prefer to have him or would like to see the world. She said that she wanted to have him as well as to see the world.

Her husband opened his mouth and showed her the world. Then he gave her a gold ring and said to her, "The old woman under whose instruction you have done this is my mother's head- maid. My mother is a cannibal. I married you instead of the girl she chose for me. She wants to part you from me so that she can devour you. The old woman deceived you in order to succeed in their conspiracy. They thought that if my mother devoured you, I would be compelled to marry that girl of her choice. So, I am giving you this gold ring. Keep it properly. If you keep this with you, no demon or malicious being would be able to harm you. If you ever part with the ring, great danger would befall you. Under the influence of this ring, you will find me at my mother's place after six years. Now I have to keep my word and take leave. Be careful, don't lose the ring." Saying this, her husband plunged into the river. Then Champawati came to realise the situation and

she started crying. After that, she left home. She held the ring close to her bosom and kept on crying as she wandered through forests. Her husband's mother tried to devour her by different means. But the ring protected her. Days rolled on. It was the sixth year of their parting. One day, suddenly Champa found her husband. Both of them were highly delighted and they continued to live together again.

On the other hand, the mother was very angry to see her daughter-in-law come back. As soon as Champawati met her husband, the ring disappeared. Still she couldn't do her any harm as her son was near. One day, she secretly wrote a letter in such words as, "This is my prime enemy. Slay and devour her but send a portion of her flesh to me." Then she handed over the letter to Champawati and sent her to a certain demon. According to the order of her mother-in-law, she hastened to deliver the letter without the knowledge of her husband. At about that time, he arrived and suspected malice. So he rushed behind her and stopped her. He snatched the letter from her hand and read it. The contents of the letter made him mad with rage. He went home and without any exchange of words slew his mother. After that, both of them left that house and the village of the demons. They set up a separate town of their own and lived happily thereafter with family and friends.
(Bezbaroa 40-42)

THE TALE OF TAWOI

There were two very intimate friends. When one of them was about to die, he entrusted his son to the other and said, "Friend, I am handing over my son to you. You give him advice and bring him up." He also said to his son, "I am handing you over to my friend. Do whatever my friend tells you to do. Never disobey him. Whenever you have to do something, consult him first."

The father died. His son too lived on by obeying his Tawoi's (the friend of his father) words. One day, his wife gave birth to a son. He went to deliver the news to Tawoi. But Tawoi said, "Go and bury your son in the dumping pit in your backyard just now." He was astonished at these words. But recollecting his father's order, he didn't utter a word in protest but acted accordingly. A year after this, again a son was born to him but as on the earlier occasion, Tawoi asked him to bury the baby. At this, he was sad but he did as he was told to do. One and a half year later, his wife gave birth to a girl-child. This time he thought that Tawoi wouldn't tell him to bury his daughter. But he was surprised when Tawoi told him to bury the girl as he said on earlier occasions. He was helpless but keeping his grief to himself, he did accordingly. Two years after this, his wife gave birth to a son again. This time he thought of giving the news to Tawoi but, whatever be the consequences, he would not bury the baby even if he was told to do so. Thinking so he went to Tawoi's house to tell him about the birth of a son. Tawoi said, "Son, you bathe

this baby and keep it. But let me tell you something, Tonight, you place a stool near the spot where you buried your off-springs and keep watch as you sit on it.” According to Tawoi’s words, he bathed the baby and accepted it. That very night, he placed a stool near the dumping pit, sat on it and kept watch.

It was midnight. About this time, the eldest son called out from inside the pit, “Brother ! I could not live on. If I were alive, I would have put my father on the stake. That fellow had a nice escape.” The younger son called out, “Well brother! If I were alive, I would have put a noose around his neck. His Tawoi spoiled all our plans.” After this, the daughter called out, “Oh brothers, If I were alive, I would have stripped him of his wealth. What am I to say, I was undone.”

Hearing this conversation, the man fully understood about the favour Tawoi had done to him. Then his faith in Tawoi became all the more firm.

A few days after this, it was time for him to sell paddy. He reported to Tawoi, “I want to sell my paddy.” Tawoi asked him, “What is the price of paddy now?” He answered, “12 puras for a rupee.” Tawoi said, “Don’t sell it now.”

After some days, he went to Tawoi’s place and said, “Tawoi, the price of paddy has fallen. What to do now? It seems that it would gradually fall further.” Tawoi asked, “How many puras is it now?” He answered, “Now it is 20 puras.” Tawoi said, “Go and sell it now.” Accordingly, he sold 20 puras for a rupee and took the money to show the amount to his Tawoi. Tawoi said, “Good. Now go and buy gold with this money and ask the goldsmith to shape it into a bead.” So, he got a bead made of gold and brought it to show Tawoi. Tawoi said, “Throw it into the river.” He was sad to hear those words but having no alternative, he threw the gold bead into the river.

A few months later, a fisherman brought a large fish to his house for sale which he bought. But when he cut the fish, a gold bead fell out from its belly. On showing it to Tawoi, he

said, “This is your own thing because it has come back to you again. Go and keep it with care. You might have thought me to be your enemy till the other day. I am grateful to God as He enabled me to win your trust through these two incidents. Go my son, be pious, depend on God, do your duty and live happily. There is nothing to worry. May God help you to prosper.” (Bezbaroa 43-47)