

THE BURDEN OF BLACK IN TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ

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Abstract:

Morrison's novel Jazz shows that she is a humanist and her fictions echo the voices of the wounded psyche of her people but the controversial aspect of her work is the delineation of heterogeneous nature of the African-American community and the exposure of the violence and sexual abuse that her women and children suffered at the hands of both African men and white men. Her novels are concerned with people who in terms of their ancestry are displaced, dispossessed, and separated from their identity and history. But there is a strong recognition throughout the writings and this identity and history should not be seen as stable or essentialist. Boundaries and limits are perceived as signifying spaces in which cultural, political, and economic powers are contested, and negotiated and reaffirmed.

Key Words: Jazz, Slavery, African-American, suppression, oppression.

Introduction:

I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.
I am the sign of the letter
and the designation of the division.

“Thunder, Perfect Mind”. The Nag Hammadi.

Toni Morrison's capability as a writer lies in her ability to create a densely lyrical narrative texture that is instantly recognizable as her own and to make, the particularity of the African-American experience the basic for a representation of humanity *tout court*. She uses blackness consciously as a symbol of racial identity that her female protagonists must rename and reown by reclaiming their cultural history rooted in slavery and white imperialism for an integrated African-American identity.

Morrison has effectively fused western literary models with her African oral traditions, to argue for evolving an African-American consciousness in her female protagonists and has, consistently given authenticity and voice to the interior life of the most complex African and female experience in America. Her commitment to her people as a writer enables her to refigure the nature of African American literary canon: Morrison's “intervention in the canon debates and her revisionist reading of canonical American literature function in part to secure a central place of that literature for her work and the African-American literary traditions with which she chooses to affiliate herself” (Novten 153).

True to the title *Jazz*, music permeates throughout the novel, which provides the historical background that the narrative voice incompletely supplies. It reconstitutes the coupled journey of African immigrants fleeing to Southern American. Toni Morrison hereby stresses that the primary feature of *Jazz* age is “invention.” In fact, her *Jazz* is about improvisation. Hence, her narrative style is innovative and original.

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison, reiterates that, by preserving the continuity of the black culture and history through every generation, it is possible to establish Africans as an individual people in the American continent. The point of conflict in *Jazz* is to say how her various characters are thwarted to keep their “African” identity. While *Beloved* is poised in the historic reconstruction that symbolically delineates Sethe’s attempts and realization of her integrated self, and the horrors of slavery explored in retrospect by Sethe, *Jazz* is poised in the historic Harlem Renaissance and symbolically explores Violet’s fostering on an integrated self and the impact of racism on the individuals in reconstruction and its aftermath. This has created a fragmented psyche or double consciousness that Violet needs to resolve which she does at the end of the novel for completing her selfhood.

As the title *Jazz* suggests, Morrison attempts to integrate the African and American cultures in her female protagonist in whom arises the conflict when she encounters the acquired culture namely the American culture for her survival in America. Violet is poised in the historic Harlem Renaissance when Jazz flourished in America. The story in *Jazz* begins with a tragedy that shocks the whole community. As the nameless narrator introduces the protagonist, Violet and her disfiguring Dorcas’s face, Violet’s own improvised riff articulates the painful trauma of her aborted adolescence that the dead Dorcas personifies. Contrary to the reading of Dorcas as the child that fled Violet’s womb, it is stated here that Dorcas embodies Violet’s own adolescence that suffered foreclosure due to white racism and Violet’s consistent repression of it as a painful reminder of her lost mother. It is further argued that unlike the reading of Dorcas as epitomizing Joe’s mother, she likewise symbolizes Joe’s foreclosed adolescence. As his learning of his “wild” mother creates conflict in his life and his name “Trace” has ended in an attempt to repress his adolescence.

But the narrator’s response to Wild’s whereabouts converging in the revelation of Dorcas suggests that Dorcas like Wild defies both white racism and black patriarchy and hence, seen as a parallel identification of Wild. Morrison draws a historical parallel in the “Reconstruction” that devastated Rosa Dear in her ability to combat white racism which consequently ended in her suicide or phonating her children. Violet is traumatized by the death of Rosa Dear who fails to transcend white racism that causes dispossession of their lives, through poverty, “lifting out what they wanted – what was theirs, they said although we cooked in it... They took the table out from under her... they came back and tipped the chair she sat in” (*Jazz* 98). Rosa Dear’s futility in fighting white racism that dispossessed her and her children, accentuated by her husband’s desertion, forces her to terminate her life. The unnatural death of her mother causes irrevocable damage to Violet’s psyche and remains a painful riddle throughout her life. Alice lives with the painful memory of an unfaithful husband and Dorcas is haunted by vision of her parents being burnt alive in their house during the East St. Louis race riots. These tragic experiences unconsciously shape the actions and attitudes of the characters even in their adult life. *Jazz*

begins with a recap of Dorcas' murder and Violet's attack on her corpse. The couple that kills and defaces the young girl seem immediately to be evil and immoral. But surprisingly, Morrison goes on to flesh them out and explain in part that their cruel acts stem from suppressed anguish and disrupted childhood. Morrison traces the arrogance of the city characters back to Virginia, where generations of enslavement and poverty tore families apart. Subtly, Morrison suggests that African on African violence of the city carries over from the physical and psychic cruelty committed against the race as a whole. She interweaves allusions to racial sadism into her story with a neutral tone that lets the historical facts speak for themselves.

As Sethe in *Beloved* suffers as a mother to fight against white atrocities, Violet in *Jazz* painfully relates how she hated motherhood after experiencing the trauma of white suppression. The psychic tension of Sethe and Violet as mothers certainly drags the conflict of the novels to the pinnacle that delineates the white racism. The motherhood in Sethe becomes almost nothing when she encounters the traumatic experiences under white's oppression. She thinks that instead of suffering slavery in the white dominant America her children can be killed. She tries to kill her children, but she could not succeed in killing all but one, her two-year-old daughter, Beloved. Violet goes one step further and kills her baby in her womb itself.

The reality of poverty and her own orphan state, intensified by her mother's failure to foreground her in African culture forces Violet in her most vulnerable years to defeat poverty and abort motherhood. Morrison draws historical parallel in the white racism that kept the African illiterate and underpaid as Joe loses his own lands to the white man because of his failure to realize the white's duplicity, being an illiterate.

Dorcas, in her conventional role of a commodified sexual object is forced, against her willingness to become a victim to Joe's latent hunting instinct which is nurtured in rural South were subdued following his migration to Harlem. As a sexual prey to Joe's violent desire, Dorcas becomes the hunted that leads to her death through shooting by Joe, while Wild, successfully outwitted him and managed not to be conquered as a prey. The narrator improvises on Dorcas' abandoned life, symbolically loss of self, following the death of her parents and her consequent life with her aunty Alice Manfred.

Morrison draws a historical parallel in the race riots during Harlem Renaissance that caused the inhuman killings of thousands of innocent Africans who were victimized by the racial whites. Dorcas' father "was pulled off a street car and stamped to death" (*Jazz* 57). while her mother met death likewise "when her house was torched and she burnt crispy in its flame" (*Jazz* 57). Dorcas, who only saw the fire, was paralyzed into immobility and finally was rescued and taken care of since then by her aunt Alice Manfred. Having herself suffered self-denial since her betrayal in marriage she instills the feeling of hatred on men in her niece. Ironically as Dorcas grows older, she fashions a life of a body alone: "for resisting her aunt's protection and restraining hands, Dorcas thought that life below the sash as all the life there was" (*Jazz* 60). In the delineation of Dorcas, Morrison suggests that as a female, Dorcas, is unable to transcend the trauma of loss of parents in the race riots. But unlike Wild, her female prototype who could and succeeded in defying whites racists, by sheer ingenuity being nurtured in rural Virginia, Dorcas,

deprived of such a nurturing victimized by the city. So Dorcas embodies: "...the self-destructive aspects of African American communities which historically have been shaped by fragmentation, dispossession and the lack of concrete identity" (Andrews 102). Harlem community feels disempowered by their race, sex and class status. Violet's awareness of her own objectification by her husband, Joe, hitherto not realized which is reinforced by her discovery of Dorcas as her husband's lover re-invokes her traumatized foreclosed adolescence.

Memory is the site of history and memory is essential for reclaiming the "self". Wild's story is ultimately inconclusive as she appears naked and pregnant and her physical presence disappears "without a trace" after Joe's birth. Her origin is never disclosed, yet Wild's story becomes integrated within the novel when it is taken in conjunction with other characters, stories of abbreviation, and dis-connectedness. Indeed, Wild is the embodiment of motherhood and a history which has been silenced. Unwilling mother to her son, her disappearance results in Joe's loss of history. Wild, like the history of slavery itself, an enduring legacy that cannot be denied, exists always on the fringes of consciousness, influencing the action and emotion of those who cannot help but sense her often threatening presence.

Theme and structure work together as theory and practice in an effort to highlight and offer solutions to problems. *Jazz's* structure does not just enhance theme, but vice versa. Just as in *Jazz*, the story and the telling of the story are one in *Jazz* where the theme and structure are blended together to suggest the unity that must exist among the African people. The first word "Sth" (1) of the novel sounds like buzz which is an onomatopoeia. Hence in Jazz music, the songster, song and song telling are one and the same. Toni Morrison assimilates the best of the African literature and moves the tradition forward by testing its limb in *Jazz*.

Toni Morrison uses jazz music and flashback technique. A listener knows that a creative musician plays a version of an original melody. This is because the musician travels to the past and picks the melody as it was played by the original artist and gratefully acknowledge the originator and shows the invisible but unbreakable link between the original and his version. Similarly in *Jazz*, Morrison shows the connection between Wild and Dorcas in her account of Joe's search for Dorcas.

As Joe's relationship with Dorcas leads to his relationship with Wild, Morrison moves back and forth between the two stories. As Joe searches for Dorcas, he remembers his search for Wild. Thus when his search for Dorcas begins, (*Jazz* it begins with Joe's search for Wild closely followed by his search for Dorcas and so on. Sometimes, Morrison presents the connection between the two women in one an the same description as found in the last paragraph (*Jazz* 182). And the concluding sentence structurally and emphatically links Dorcas and Wild.

By employing various literary techniques and tools Toni Morrison highlights the historically important events and incidents in her works. In fact, she has synthesized the history and fiction in such a judicious proportion in her works as to throw on light the pathetic plight of her people. In doing so, she is true to her conscience and careful that fiction must not over lap each other. Morrison love 'unity' and for her unity is a kind of spiritual exercise through which they seek fulfillment. She strongly considers writing a powerful tool to generate social

awareness, particularly in the minds of the marginalized they feel that “writing” gives them a kind of release and they use every opportunity to express the trauma of her people in her works.

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