
Representation of marginality in Toni Morrison's narrative

Dr. K.C. LALTHLAMUANI

Associate Professor

Department of English, Mizoram University

India

Abstract:

Fictional narrative is a social construct which evolves out of a long history which in turn defines the present. Literary writing as a practice is both meaningful and discursive. Narrative literary discourse has certain linguistic characteristics and produces certain kinds of value and truth. From the slave narratives of the 19th century to contemporary African-American writing, the discourse of the marginal has followed different trajectories. This paper examines the narrative of Toni Morrison's fiction which represents the marginality of African-Americans.

Toni Morrison's narrative explores the representation of marginalized social groups and shows specific concern with the identities of subordinated groups, classes, races, genders. The marginalized African-Americans and the doubly marginalized African-American woman is excluded into a liminal space, endowed with voicelessness and dispossessed of history and identity. Morrison negotiates the discourse of the marginal that has formed out of a process of otherisation. Revisiting the black oral tradition to find a voice for the silent and silenced people, Toni Morrison provides her own theory that encourages multiple critical responses to her works. Through an analysis of her language that we can reconstruct an idea of the political and artistic revolution constituted in her work.

Key words: Narrative, Marginality, Identity, Voicelessness, Discourse

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I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of social superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive “othering” of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work.

(*Playing in the Dark* x – xi).

Racial and cultural marginalization has been to a large extent the story of human history. Philosophers like Kant were one of the earliest major European philosophers to conflate color with intelligence; positing the correlation between blackness and stupidity as self – evident. Basing his observations on the absence of published writing among blacks, Kant noted that “blacks are lower in their mental capacities than all other races” (Kant 111). There could be no presence of Africans in history without the power of representation “possessing no true self consciousness, as signified by the absence of voice and therefore no history, ... blacks lay veiled in a shroud of silence...” (Gates, Jr. *Figures in Black* 104). The exclusion of African – Americans or ‘Blacks’ in the United States is based on racism. While explaining the discourse of marginality, what is implied, is the development of the ex – slaves in the United States in a stage of being voiced. This position is achieved through their self-articulation.

The first African – American to win the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison (b 1931-), is a product of a community that has been historically and creatively subjected to racism and marginalization. Interrogating and documenting white America’s representation of ‘race’ and ‘gender’, her fictional works inverts traditional hierarchies that originate as far back as the Bible, and depicts conflicts that are extreme expressions of the double consciousness possessed by women and African – Americans. For Morrison, fictional narrative is an exploration of representations of marginalized social groups which urges cultural change. She maintains:

... This carefully observed, and carefully invented, Africanist presence has become an informal study of what I call American Africanism. It is an investigation into the ways in which a non-white, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses this fabricated presence served. I am using the term "Africanism" as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Euro-centric learning about these people. Africanism has become, in the Euro-centric tradition that American education favors, both a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and representation, formations and exercises of power, and meditations on ethics and accountability (*Playing* 6 – 7).

Morrison's novels explore issues of racial and sexual identity in stories that integrate elements of the oral tradition, postmodern literary techniques, and magical realism to give voice to the experiences of African – Americans living on the margins of white American society. She offers complex examinations of their problems within the community, power dynamics between men and women, and issues of racism in relations between black and white America. Her primary interest lies with the experiences of African – American women, whose quests for individual identity are integrally intertwined with their community and their cultural history. Her concern with myth, legend, storytelling, and the oral tradition, as well as with memory, history, and historiography, demonstrates the importance of the past to the struggles of contemporary African – Americans. She employs strong elements of Black English in her dialogue and narration to express the importance of language in the formation of identity and claims:

My work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African – American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world. . . My project rises from delight. . . from what I know about the ways writers transform

aspects of their social grounding into aspects of language, and the ways they tell other stories, fight secret wars, limn out all sorts of debates blanketed in their texts. . .

There seems to be a more or less tacit agreement among literary scholars that, because American literature has been clearly the preserve of white male views, genius, and power, those views, genius and power are without relationship to and removed from the overwhelming pressure of black people in the United States... the contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination (*Playing* 4 – 5).

Morrison speaks from the standpoint of a black woman in America where the repression and subjugation of African – Americans through centuries has proceeded along the lines of cultural imperialism. Morrison's narrative makes a statement. She writes as and for the marginalized, the dominated, and therefore her act of narration becomes an act of subversion of the hegemonic power paradigm. In compelling, large-spirited novels, she richly weaves together the complex identities of black people in a universal manner. *The Bluest Eye* (1970), her first novel, is set in the 1940s and addresses issues of race and beauty standards through the figure of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old African – American girl who dreams of having blue eyes and long, blonde hair. Exploring issues of African – American history and myth in the formation of individual identity *Song of Solomon* (1977) centers on the character of Milkman Dead, who is born in the North but journeys to the South, where he discovers that he is a descendant of Solomon, a member of a mythical West African tribe whose members can fly. According to legend, these Africans, captured and enslaved in America, escaped their bondage by flying back to Africa. *Tar Baby* (1981) examines the dilemmas of assimilation and cultural identity among middle-class African – Americans. Morrison's subsequent three novels, *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz*

(1992), and *Paradise* (1998), are often loosely grouped as a trilogy, each set in a different period of African – American history: *Beloved* takes place during the post – Civil War era, with flashbacks to the years of slavery in the South; *Jazz* is set during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s; and *Paradise* is set during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s. *Beloved* combines elements of magical realism with the tradition of the African – American slave narrative in the story of Sethe, a former slave struggling to raise her children in the post – Civil War era. Sethe once killed her own infant in order to save it from a life of slavery, and the ghost of this dead child comes back to haunt her home as an adolescent girl called Beloved. Morrison's narrative structure and voice in *Jazz* are based on the structural elements of jazz music. *Paradise* explores the tensions between the all – black town of Ruby and an all – women convent located on the outskirts of the town. Threatened by the empowerment of women within the convent community, the men of Ruby invade it and massacre the women living there. *Love* (2003) examines among other things patriarchy and its effects on women as well as the role of language in both disrupting and making visible the discourse of oppression.

Literary texts articulate values or structures of feeling which are embedded in the social and ideological discourse of the time. The marginalized, viz. Blacks or African – Americans and the doubly marginalized African – American woman is excluded into a luminal space, endowed with voicelessness and dispossessed of history and identity. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak raised this issue in “Can the subaltern speak?” (1995)

Literary writing as a practice is both meaningful and discursive. Terry Eagleton's definition of literature places it within the larger field of discursive practices. In spite of their humanistic impulse and claims to universality implicitly or explicitly, literary writings represent dominant cultural concerns in that the subordinated and the voiceless always already historically constituted deconstruct the homogenizing

impulse of literature. Race and gender sensitive writings always move through conflicting trajectories underlining the nature of language and status of communication as the basic principles of discourse formation and problematize social and political phenomena in which the author and the text are located.

Language is the source of our sense of reality and is responsible for producing meaning. Literary discourses have certain linguistic characteristics and produce certain kinds of value and truth. The concept of discourse negotiates the social world as composed of a range of discourses, which function around institutions they are part of. The discourses of gender and race/colour have operated with modifications throughout western history in ways that privileged certain groups. Each discourse is a product of power and authority relationship which produces different subjectivities. The subjectivities that are formed under race and gender discriminations exist on the margins. Thus a discourse of the marginal is instituted as an alternative to the dominant either in its subjection, subordination or resistance.

Language and representation are important factors in the constitution of black literary identity. Although the African – American is a complex construct, he carries with him a history that Toni Morrison calls fragmentary and dispersed. As writing provides authentication to the speaking voice, black writing is reflexive of the historical otherness that the community has suffered. Language in this context becomes an important vector to appropriate and adapt in accordance with his intentions. In making the white man's language their own, black writing in the United States contests otherness and articulates the self. Although marginality still constitutes the dominant trend in the black writing nevertheless it has been self – reflexive, attempting to produce authentic black experience.

In voicing the voiceless African – American, Morrison negotiates the discourse of the marginal that has formed out of

a process of otherisation; biologically, culturally and politically deprivileged as a category in order to signify the superiority of the whites and their culture. Gates Jr. says that when the black Africans came to the New World they were:

Violently and radically abstracted from their civilization and culture. But they carried with themselves aspects of their cultures that were meaningful, that could not be obliterated ...their music their myths, their expressive institutional structures, their metaphysical systems of order; and their forms of performance (*The Signifying Monkey* 4).

Although marginality still constitutes the dominant trend in African – American narratives nevertheless it has been self – reflexive attempting to produce authentic black experience. From the slave narratives of the 19th century to contemporary black/African – American writing, the discourse of the marginal has followed different trajectories. Toni Morrison maintains that writing to her is a kind of literary archaeology wherein she revisits the black oral tradition to find a voice for the silent and silenced people. She provides her own theory in representing the marginalized African – American blacks that encourages multiple critical responses to her works. However, these tributary strands register a common conspectus of concerns, which derive from her concerns on race/colour and gender that underline the decentredness of the human subject, the transgression of textual, social or ethnic boundaries, and the surfacing of heteroglossic story – telling in place of discredited ‘grand narratives’.

Morrison's narrative makes a statement. She writes as and for the marginalized, the dominated, and therefore her act of narration becomes an act of subversion of the hegemonic power paradigm. Ambivalence in the narrative of Morrison is a reflection of her world view which is all inclusive for she wanted to project a totality of experience, a consciousness and identity of the African – American. Through her fiction, she attempts to take possession of the voice denied them by imperialism, racism and marginalization. Her novels frequently make the reader

aware, directly or indirectly, how inherited Euro – American language organizes and structures its culture relations with the world so as to exclude African – Americans or at best to marginalize them.

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