

Women Representation in Select Indo-English and Indian English Dalit Literature

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Abstract

Toni Morrison never liked that old seventies slogan “Black is beautiful.” It was superficial, simplistic, palliative – everything her blinkered detractors called Morrison’s complex novels when the 1993 Nobel Prize transformed her into a spokeswoman and a target. No better were those blinkered admirers who invited themselves to touch her signature gray dreadlocks at signings, as though they harbored some kind of mystical power.

Keywords: Harbord, Mystical, Novel, Spokes, Village

Critical Introduction of Toni Morrison Comedy

Still, even at 81 sporting both a new novel and a new hip, Morrison is as grand as she’s ever been. When we meet in her many-gabled house in the aptly named village of Grand View on Hudson, about 25 miles north of Manhattan, that bountiful woolen hair matches the lower half of a soft, enveloping sweater. Her face is polished in places and fissured in others, like the weathered stone of Mount Rushmore : the first black woman – Nobelist, who’s lived long enough to speak to the first black president. Born only two years after Martin Luther King, she’s a great grandmother of assimilation – and she looks the part.²

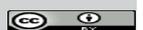
The house built in its place is warm and colorful, enlivened with African sculptures and tureens and abstract art and a spiral staircase. But there’s something a little too new about it. Though Slade was an abstract painter, none of this work is his; it’s been put into storage. One closet hides an elevator,

which Morrison presciently installed not long before her hip replacement in 2010. “I have gotten up to fourteen minutes of walking,” she says. “I go outside, around the decks.” Before she retired from teaching in 2006, Morrison had two other homes, one in Princeton and a skylighted split-level in Nolita. She also owns a couple buildings upriver. And just a few weeks ago, she rented a new Manhattan apartment. She’s attributed her house - gluttony to all those childhood evictions.

Morrison’s fifties were very different from those of her haunted hero. She had opted for college at historically black Howard University, expecting some sort of Utopia for African-American intellectuals. Instead, she found herself in a segregated city (Washington, D.C.), on a campus segregated *de facto*

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by skin tone instead of race. The cruelties of racism were starker than in Ohio; even worse was the realization that its victims could be almost as cruel to their own kind. That Morrison's firsthand political awareness came relatively late might, paradoxically, explain its importance in her work. "I had friends who lived in the South, and they absorbed it, and it doesn't stand out as foreign to them," she says. "But it does to me. So I look at it." Yet it's only now that Morrison is reexamining that decade for the first time. "Emmett Till was killed in 1955. It was all lying there, like seed corn – seeds that blossomed in the sixties (Bjork, Patrick Bryce, 1993).

DISCUSSION

Narrative identity is shaped in Toni Morrison's work through the interplay of binaries, white, black, male, female, individual, collective, centre, margin, civilization, wilderness, continuity, fragmentariness etc. However this occurs in a process in which mere dichotomy is subverted in favor of ambivalence, hybridity, or hyphenation. In Toni Morrison's novels dualistic, polarized structures often become synergistic and binary logic is disrupted through multiplicity, inconsistency and paradox, while tension between opposing ideologies, perspectives, or images can be catalytic, leading to a redefinition of values and to a revision of meaning. We could say that many novels suggest a deconstruction of fixed identity marker's related to race, class, or gender, emphasizing the role of 'institutionalized' discourses – or, to use Holstein's notion, "discourses in practice" as well as of projections in the complex and dynamic relation between self and other or between individual and community, reflecting the interplay between the political and the psychological. As Roland Walter notices. Toni Morrison develops her character's search for identity, a negotiation of a place within African American culture and within a multi-hyphenated society, through the tension laden polarization of forces and hierarchical structures and she pushes these dichotomies to the edge by turning their separating slashes into linking hyphens. This "reconciliation" is not always a rule in Toni Morrison's novels, but it is obviously present, which also goes hand in hand with the deconstruction of old traditionally supported hierarchies and binary oppositions. A study of the dismantling of conventionally supported dichotomies throughout

her novels implies an exploration of the contexts and the degrees in which polarity turns into hybridity, unity or redefinition of values and the relationship between opposites becomes a dynamic one, even a dialectic process in which tension is a catalyst for a new level of significance, a new sense of self, or for different social and cultural values.

Toni Morrison's writings humor is rendered as an effect of a propensity towards ambivalence, paradox and tension of opposites that can be regarded not only as an essential part of her poetics, but also as a characteristic of African American culture in general, starting from what I consider the most significant instances that exploit paradox in her novels through a blend of comic and tragic and employment of humor, the most important rhetoric and stylistic means as well as the underlying psychological factors through which African American experience, irrevocably tragically flavored, could be transfigured through a "humorous twist."

Toni Morrison's rendering of humor as a means of perspective shift and of empowerment can be situated in the broader, cultural context minutely analyzed by Henry Louis Gates in which the rhetorical games of the signifying Monkey, rooted in African American's need for a parallel discursive universe, were shaped on an axis of signification that constantly referred to the language used and institutionalized by whites through parody or other forms of inter textually. As far as Toni Morrison's use of humor is concerned, critics such as Barbara Christian, Roberta Rubenstein, Donald Gibson or Michael Awakward have referred to the significance of irony in name pointing out the way in which bitter humor can and new meaning to a figure otherwise dry, bland or involved in serious or tragic situations. At the same time, as Roberta Rubenstein observes, names are sometimes important as emblems of the black community's resistance to white culture's negotiation of its world. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin, in their analysis of Toni Morrison's referral to and transformation of elements of white tradition, also mention her use of parody." Other critics such as Patrick Bjork, Houston A. Baker, Eva Boesenberg or Jill Matus have written about Toni Morrison's rendering use of humor as a ritual for survival referring mostly to famous instances such as the genesis of Bottom in the novel *Sula* or to Shadrack's celebration of National Suicide Day.

A means by which African Americans faced the implications of slavery was a rich tradition of humor that, instead of diminishing the perniciousness of racism, highlights it. Thus laughter becomes for African Americans a counterpoint of their traumatic experiences, as in a melody that reflects a tendency to both conceal and fight domination and tragedy. This is precisely what Ralph Ellison refers to in his essay *An Extravagance of Laughter*, where he underlines several particularities of "Negro laughter":

Only rarely can one find pure comedy in her novels, as humor is usually either part of a double discourse in which traumatic experiences are "confronted" through a game of perspective, or a means of emphasizing a tragically flavored situation rooted in the historical setting shaped by slavery and racism by means of putting it in a broader, more nuanced context. Through a counterpoint technique, a traumatic incident is sometimes echoed and doubled by a less significant and rather comical one, as in *The Bluest Eye*, where Pecola's abuse by her father is indirectly anticipated by the comic scene of her "ministrating". In that sequence humor is not actually intertwined with painful experience, but employed in a form of parallelism so as to create a strong contrast or a background for the following tragic incident. The doubling in this case is not a matter of collective psychology, but a game of construction, a process in the poetics of the novel, since the childlike attitudes, the clumsy and funny attempts of Claudia and Frieda at solving the minor problem, exaggerated in the girls' eyes, of Pecola's "ministrating" and thus being ready to have babies are sharply juxtaposed to the subsequent experience of her being raped by her father that disrupts the girl's childhood and in itself allows for no "humorous relief." As a form of tragic irony or irony of fate, the humorous and the painful are still blended through the inevitable connection between the two incidents in the novels, while the sense of incongruity is preserved. After Pecola is represented as a girl ready to have children if somebody loves her, in the end of the novel all that is left is the haunting image of her isolation and insanity after an experience of brutality and the death of her baby. Even the sarcastic perspective on middle-class and bourgeois African Americans labeled as "colored people" in Toni Morrison's novels conceals serious

and sharp notes, echoing a caustic quality of traditional African American humor directed towards whites and towards those within their own ethnic group who, in the view of the others, deny their identity and heritage. These bourgeois African Americans are intensely ridiculed for trying to imitate the habits and mannerisms of whites to such an extent that they almost "shed" "original" personality they could have enjoyed on account of social position and myths. They are described as leading an artificial life in which they identify too much with their class and money, getting very far from what is regarded as a typical African American "spirit" characterized by wildness, passion and eroticism unbridled by norms, after having learned how to get rid of 'the funkiness' :

Nor do they know that she will give him her body sparingly and partially. He must enter her surreptitiously, lifting the hem of her nightgown only to her navel while he moves inside her, she will wonder why they didn't put the necessary but private parts of the body in some more convenient place.

CONCLUSION

All forms of humor imply a parallelism, a game of doubling, while contradictions are inevitable and even necessary in jokes. Based on a conjunction of contraries, irony can be considered a balancing of serious and comic or fanciful and prosaic, as a recognition of the fact that "the world in its essence is paradoxical and that an ambivalent attitude alone can grasp its contradictory totality" also demanding an opposition or incongruity of appearance and reality even in its most simple verbal or situational kinds. At the same time, the doubling is related to the "inner and peculiarly essential process of humor which is one that inevitably dismantles, splits and disrupts" implying a "feeling of the opposite," an underlying contrast between an expected, desired or ideal situation and a real one.

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