

Research Article

Resuscitating Hoodoo culture – Tracing African roots in Toni Morrison's works

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Abstract

The concept of the Black Atlantic is based on a like affinity that people of African descent possess on both sides of the Atlantic. This resonates in both the language, and the themes employed by the writers of the Black Atlantic. Toni Morrison is also an author to fit into this cliche with her use of the technique of signifying. The authors display a double consciousness of aesthetics and politics which this paper attempts to analyse from the standpoint of the works of Toni Morrison. Aspects of attire, medicine, music, dance, and several other features of being broken asunder from the roots are utilised by Morrison to capture the lived experience of former slaves.

Keywords : Hoodoo culture, African roots, conjuring, ecology, dream reality.

Introduction

Toni Morrison, Nobel laureate and writer par excellence was born Chloe Ardelia Wofford on the 18th of February 1931, and christened Anthony, a named that she continued to retain through her rising popularity as a writer. She attempted to bring to prominence a memorialisation of the emancipation struggles that generations of the African American community have experienced through the ages. Her writings, in her own words are an endeavour to produce the kind of literature that she would have herself enjoyed reading. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* came out in the year 1970. However, Morrison came to the forefront with the publication of *Song of Solomon* in 1977, which won her the National Book Critics Circle award. Besides her passion for writing, Morrison also displayed several other passions like editing, and academics. Her book *Beloved* was also made into a major motion picture starring Oprah Winfrey, and winning wide critical acclaim.

Morrison introduces an element of postmodernism into her works by engaging the feature of self-reflectivity in her novels. Many incidents in her books are drawn from personal experiences, such as the setting of the St. Louis riots in *Jazz*, based on an incident of lynching that she had heard her father, Mr. George Wofford narrate. An act that had caused her father to leave his home state of Georgia, and move to the racially inclusive town of Lorain, Ohio. Such experiences, coupled with other incidences of second-hand trauma like the reading of the Margaret Garner case, and the viewing of a photograph of a lady who had been shot dead by her lover, taken by James Van Der Zee, which Morrison encountered during her stint as an editor at Random House, have lead

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Morrison to become a writer of Trauma Literature, encompassing several generations of her community.

Tracing an ancient past

Anthropology has of late emerged as a dominant field of study across many disciplines. This interest in the study of one's cultural roots has always remained central to African American Literature however, with many writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Ralph Ellison dwelling on diverse angles. Morrison's inclination has been a little more than many other writers, having been influenced by writers like Jane Austen, and Leo Tolstoy, who have themselves been forerunners in the study of culture and society in their own countries.

Paul Gilroy in his treatise on the Black Atlantic has scrutinised the double consciousness exhibited by writers of African descent. A desire to blend aesthetics with a political cause. This is particularly prevalent in Morrison's use of poetic prose, combined with the elements of the signifying elucidated by Henry Louis Gates Jr.----synecdoche, litotes, metalepsis, metaphor, irony, and metonymy. Morrison's prose rebounds with the cadence and flow of a beautiful dance. The primer of the Dick and Jane story of *The Bluest Eye* is a fine example of a slow melody of a family setting raising to the high crescendo of the struggle of a little, lonely child.

Their conversation is like a gently wicked dance: sound meets sound, curtseys, shimmies, and retires. Another sound enters but is upstaged by still another: the two circle each other and stop. Sometimes their words move in lofty spirals; other times they take strident leaps, and all of it is punctuated with warm-pulsed laughter---like the throb of a heart made of jelly. The edge, the curl, the thrust of their emotions is always clear to Frieda and me. We do not, cannot, know the meaning of all their words, for we are nine and ten years old. So we watch their faces, their hands, their feet, and listen for truth in timbre. (1999, *The Bluest Eye*, p.9-10)

Morrison also employs an immense amount of intertextuality, and though various novels move back and forth in time, using a stream of consciousness narrative, by the utilisation of intertextuality Morrison is able to weave an intricate tale of racial discrimination through the ages. A discrimination that is so strong that people of African descent had once even considered a return to Africa (Liberia). Those for whom this return was not viable were left to live a life of racial scarring, arising out of an internalisation of the stigma related to colour, the stress of having to eke out a living in a land that was hostile to offering jobs to the coloured, and the inability to acquire a sense of safety, security, and identity in a land which continued to appear alien to them. This story has its beginnings on the slave ships:

They are not crouching now we are they are floating on the water they break up the little hill and push it through I cannot find my pretty teeth I see the dark face that is going to smile at me it is my dark face that is going to smile at me the iron circle is around our neck she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face

I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken I am falling like the rain is I watch him eat inside I am crouching to keep from falling with the rain I am going to be in pieces he hurts where I sleep he puts his finger there I drop the food and break into pieces she took my face away (2005, *Beloved*, 250-251)

...'I mean, I don't know what the fuss is about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own. The only thing they want to do is cut off a nigger's privates. And if that ain't love and respect I don't know what is. And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed. I knew a white woman wouldn't leave the house after six o'clock for fear one of you would snatch her. Now ain't that love? They think rape soon's they see you, and if they don't get the rape they looking for, they scream it anyway just so the search won't be in vain. Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children – white and black, boys and girls – spend all their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them. And if that ain't enough, you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man. You hear of solitary white men, but niggers? Can't stay away from one another a whole day. So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world.' (2005, *Sula*, p.103-104)

'I don't limit anything. I just don't believe some stupid devotion to a foreign country – and Africa is a foreign country, in fact it's fifty foreign countries – is a solution for these kids.'

'Africa is our home, Pat, whether you like it or not.'

'I'm really not interested, Richard. You want some foreign Negroes to identify with, why not South America? Or Germany, for that matter. They have some brown babies over there you could have a good time connecting with. Or is it just some kind of past with no slavery in it you're looking for?' (1999, *Paradise*, p.210)

The African American community was caught in limbo. Aspects of traditional African culture like traditional music and dance – the cakewalk, the Black Bottom, and the banjos had successfully been forced underground during the period of slavery, and the African American community did not have much culture to fall back on, as in the case of Sethe being unable to recollect her mother's language. This rootlessness and isolation could however not be replaced by the foreign culture of America, but the African American community was successfully able to fall back on African traditions of the Blues and the Jazz. In fact Morrison has most successfully used the Jazz and Blues aesthetic in two of her novels. The Bluest Eye has Mrs. MacTeer alleviating her everyday trials and tribulations by the singing of the Blues, and the Jazz aesthetic forms the backdrop of New York city.

...A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep. It's the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it. When I look over strips of green grass lining the river, at church steeples and into the cream-and-copper halls of apartment buildings, I'm strong. Alone, yes, but top-notch and indestructible – like the City in 1926 when all the wars are over and there will never be another one. The people down there in the shadow are happy about that. At last, at last everything's ahead. The smart ones say so and people listening to them and reading what they write down agree: Here comes the new. Look out. There goes the sad stuff. The bad stuff. The things-nobody-could-help stuff. The way everybody was then and there. Forget that. History is over, you all, and everything's ahead at last. (2016, *Jazz*, p.7)

...on quiet days people in valley houses could hear singing sometimes, banjos sometimes, and, if a valley man happened to have business up in those hills – collecting rent or insurance payments – he might see a dark woman in a flowered dress doing a bit of cakewalk, a bit of black bottom, a bit of 'messing around' to the lively notes of a mouth organ. Her bare feet would raise the saffron dust that floated down on the coveralls and bunion-split shoes of the man breathing music in and out of his harmonica. The black people watching her would laugh and rub their knees, and it would be easy for the valley man to hear the laughter and not notice the adult pain that rested somewhere under the eyelids, somewhere under their headrags and soft felt hats, somewhere in the palm of the hand, somewhere behind the frayed lapels, somewhere in the sinew's curve. (2005, *Sula*, p.4)

The African heritage

Morrison also alludes to minuscule features of African culture like the traditional headrags worn by older women, the asafoetida bags around their necks, as well as the option of alternative forms of medicine, as practised by M'Dear, not to mention Soaphead Church, and Baby Suggs' laying on of the hands in batheing Sethe in sections, which prevents her from fragmenting. The hoodoo practice of exorcism is also implemented in unison by the Black women of Cincinnati, to exorcise the ghost of Beloved. Morrison's work of rememory in making Beloved recollect the slave ships also has a uniquely African quality in its narrative.

...Their voices blended into a threnody of nostalgia about pain. Rising and falling, complex in harmony, uncertain in pitch, but constant in the recitative of pain. They hugged the memories of illnesses to their bosom. They licked their lips and clucked their tongues in fond remembrance of pains they had endured – childbirth, rheumatism, croup, sprains, backaches, piles. All of the bruises they had collected from moving about the earth – harvesting, cleaning, hoisting, pitching, stooping, kneeling, picking – always with young ones underfoot.

But they had been young once. The odor of their armpits and haunches had mingled into a lovely musk; their eyes had been furtive, their lips relaxed, and the delicate turn of their heads on those slim black necks had been like nothing other than a doe's. Their laughter had been more touch than sound.

They had grown. Edging into life from the back door. Becoming. Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, 'Do this.' White children said, 'Give me that.' White men said, 'Come here.' Black men said, 'Lay down.' The only people they need not take orders from were black children and each other. But they took all of that and re-created it in their own image. They ran the houses of white people, and knew it. When white men beat their men, they cleared up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. The hands that felled trees also cut umbilical cords; the hands that wrung the necks of chickens and butchered hogs also nudged African violets into bloom; the arms that loaded sheaves, bales, and sacks rocked babies into sleep. They patted biscuits into flaky ovals of innocence – and shrouded the dead. They plowed all day and came home to nestle like plums under the limbs of their men. The legs that straddled

a mule's back were the same ones that straddled their men's hips. And the difference was all the difference there was.

Then they were old. Their bodies honed, their odor sour. Squatting in a cane field, stooping in a cotton field, kneeling by a river bank, they had carried a world on their heads. They had given over the lives of their own children and tendered their grandchildren. With relief they wrapped their heads in rags, and their breasts in flannel; eased their feet into felt. They were through with lust and lactation, beyond tears and terror. They alone could walk the roads of Mississippi, the lanes of Georgia, the fields of Alabama unmolested. They were old enough to be irritable when and where they chose, tired enough to look forward to death, disinterested enough to accept the idea of pain while ignoring the presence of pain. They were, in fact and at last, free. And the lives of these old black women were synthesized in their eyes – a puree of tragedy and humor, wickedness and serenity, truth and fantasy. (1999, *The Bluest Eye*, p.107-109)

Though the African American community seems to have assimilated into the Christian spirit, the quality of prayer is especially their own. Baby Suggs imbues the African spirit into the gatherings at the Clearing, and Reverend Misner's sermons are a call to arms for the Black youth of Ruby to resist racism.

After situating herself on a huge flat-sided rock, Baby Suggs bowed her head and prayed silently. The company watched her from the trees. They knew she was ready when she put her stick down. Then she shouted, 'Let the children come!' and they ran from the trees toward her.

'Let your mothers hear you laugh,' she told them, and the woods rang. The adults looked on and could not help smiling.

Then 'Let the grown men come,' she shouted. They stepped out one by one from among the ringing trees.

'Let your wives and your children see you dance,' she told them, and ground life shuddered under their feet.

Finally she called the women to her. 'Cry,' she told them. 'For the living and the dead. Just cry.' And without covering their eyes the women let loose.

It started that way:laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced;men sat down and cried;children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (2005, *Beloved*, p.102-103)

Morrison also returns to the hoodoo tradition with the alternative remedies used in *A Mercy* as contrasted with the cruel allopathy employed against Ycindra in *Home*. *Song of Solomon* shows the unbelievable flight of Macon Dead, and also the occurrence of Pilate saving the mortal remains of her father.

The quality of communal harmony is also something that Morrison dwells on – there are frequent droppings in among the Black community of the Bottom of Medallion, as well as in New York city, the slaves of Sweet Home gather in the shade of a sycamore tree that they have named Brother, the Black people of Cincinnati gather in the Clearing, and the people of Ruby gather around the Oven, like the village gatherings mentioned by Soyinka in *The Lion and The Jewel*. The African feeling of the community does not die out for the African Americans.

...because the Bottom had been a real place. These young ones kept talking about the community, but they left the hills to the poor, the old, the stubborn – and the rich white folks. Maybe it hadn't been a community, but it had been a place. Now there weren't any places left, just separate houses with separate televisions and separate telephones and less and less dropping by. (2005, *Sula*, p.166)

Conjuring also holds pride of place in Morrison's novels with characters like M'Dear and Ajax's mother, who is in fact aided by all of Ajax's brothers. People also seem to ardently believe in ghosts and witches, like Beloved, Mavis being haunted by Merle and Pearl, and the Bottom being haunted by Sula. Lone Dupres is also lauded for her midwifery through generations, and when the young mothers begin to prefer nursing homes, she diversifies into the art of stepping in, to pull people back from the brink of death. An art that she passes onto Connie (Consolata Sosa).

'Step in. Just step on in. Help him, girl!'

Consolata looked at the body and without hesitation removed her glasses and focused on the trickles of red discoloring his hair. She stepped in. Saw the stretch of road he had dreamed through, felt the flip of the truck, the headache, the chest pressure, the unwillingness to breathe. As from a distance she heard Easter and July kicking the truck and moaning. Inside the boy she saw a pinpoint of light receding. Pulling up energy that felt like fear, she stared at it until it widened. Then more, more, so air could come seeping, at first, then rushing rushing in. Although it hurt like the devil to look at it, she concentrated as though the lungs in need were her own. (1999, *Paradise*, p.245)

Morrison's writing can also be analysed ecologically to discover the rootedness of the African American community to nature, like Pauline's joy in rustic environs in Kentucky and Alabama. The slaves of Sweet Home, though enslaved, enjoy their closeness to nature, the enjoying of roasted corn and baked potatoes under the sycamore tree.

'When I first seed Cholly, I want you to know it was like all the bits of color from that time down home when all us chil'ren went berry picking after a funeral and I put some in the pocket of my Sunday dress, and they mashed up and stained my hips. My whole dress was messed with purple, and it never did wash out. Not the dress nor me. I could feel that purple deep inside me. And that lemonade Mama used to make when Pap came in out the fields. It be cool and yellowish, with seeds floating near the bottom. And that streak of green them june bugs made on the trees the night we left from down home. All of them colors was in me. Just sitting there. So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together. Cholly was thin then, with real light eyes. He used to whistle, and when I heerd him, shivers come on my skin.' (1999, *The Bluest Eye*, p.90)

Morrison introduces folk tales and characters of African American tradition into her stories, like the reference to Tar Baby, of the Brer Rabbit series. Connie also employs the notion of dream reality to alleviate the sorrows of the women of the Convent.

Gradually they lost the days.

In the beginning the most important thing was the template. First they had to scrub the cellar floor until its stones were as clean as rocks on a shore. Then they ringed the place with candles. Consolata told each to undress and lie down. In flattering light under Consolata's soft vision they did as they were told. How should we lie?

However you feel. They tried arms at the sides, outstretched above the head, crossed over breasts or stomach. Seneca lay on her stomach at first, then changed to her back, hands clasping her shoulders. Pallas lay on her side, knees drawn up. Gigi flung her legs and arms apart, while Mavis struck a floaters pose, arms angled, knees pointing in. When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. Unspeaking. Naked in candlelight. (1999, *Paradise*, p.262-263)

Conclusion

Thus, folk tradition acts as a yoke that holds the African American community together, creating a familial support structure, helping them to stay rooted, and simultaneously pull each other up during the most difficult of times. In a country that still appears foreign to them in many ways, their culture is a breath of fresh air, helping to keep spirits up. The parents are able to offer to their children a legacy, not only of traumatic postmemory, but also a colourful cultural heritage of African roots.

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