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Language as an arbitrary system in the *Novels of Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange*

Dr. Kusumita Mukherjee
Department of English,
Kalyani Mahavidyalaya
Nadia (Dt), West Bengal, INDIA

Metafiction being a fiction that eludes the category of fiction becomes emblematic of the transient nature of postmodernity. In the fiction of Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange the metafictional mode has been deployed to jolt the reader into accepting the reality of the self-reflexive narrative technique.

Origins of Metafiction

Theorists of African American literature and theorists of Western literature also agree that self-consciousness is as old as the story-telling tradition itself. Roland Barthes defines work as story and also as everything that the story hermeneutically suggests; that is, it involves all thematic readings and character analyses, including the psychological and ideological positioning of the fictional narrator in relation to the story being told. In contrast, he defines the text as the language of that literature, which is unanchored to the fiction and produces its own autonomous, constantly changing systems of meaning. Unlike the work, text for Barthes is never predetermined; rather, it is always in process and always in production.

Barthes once envisioned this practice as launching with Flaubert and Mallarmé and brought to literature that admixture of literature and critical thought about it. Next came Proust's anticipation of a literary evasion of the tautology. Stage four began, for Barthes, with the surrealists' multiplication of meaning of language, the refusal of the unique and ended in the 'whiteness of the writing' that he perceived in the work of Robbe-Grillet.

According to Bakhtin, metalinguistic structures are often there within the larger arrangement of the novel's language formats and thus give the narration a dual function—to tell the story and, at the same time, to expose the limitations of another literary language through imitation of that language. The particular strategies of metalinguistics—exaggerated stylization, *skaz*, and oppositional character zones—are carried on simultaneously with the narrating of the fiction, but they also perform textually on a separate parodic level and create a narrative discourse that is inherently double-voiced. Bakhtin says that these metalinguistic strategies, which are the stylistic foundation of his theory of literary dialogism, have historically been used by novelists to explore and perform textually specific ideas of genre. The novelist employs them in order to “discourse with” established literary convention and to suggest, in contrast, new ideas. Michel Foucault shows how, after the eighteenth century, objects gradually became self-centered as if searching for the principle of their intelligibility in their own development and abandoning more and more the conventional space of representation. Novels then begin to reflect upon their own genesis and growth. The realistic story trappings are finally reduced to an allegory of the functioning of the narration.

The origins of the self-reflecting structure that govern many postmodern novels might as well be traced back to that parodic intent basic as it began in *Don Quixote*, an intent to unmask dead conventions by challenging, by mirroring. The protagonists of Part Two of *Don Quixote* become the readers of Part One, the creators of themselves. The self-consciousness of Cervantes' text has been handed down, through the likes of Sterne and Diderot, to the Romantic artist-hero of the *Kunstlerroman*.

Language as an arbitrary system

Most of the readers share a twisted habit of seeing language as a kind of lens through which we see the internal thoughts of others; through stories told by people, we believe that we can actually reach out to past times to see how they “really” were through the means of language. All this is an illusion for most scholars of postmodernism.

Toni Morrison

The foreword and the afterword provided by Toni Morrison in her earlier novels are a treasure trove in themselves in as much as they delineate the author’s intention and targeted results. The using of the sentence “Quiet as it’s kept” to begin the novel at once divulges the ambiguity of the language of this novel. Morrison explicates such a choice in the afterword of *The Bluest Eye*:

The opening phrase of the first sentence, *Quiet as it’s kept*, had several attractions for me. First, it was a familiar phrase, familiar to me as a child listening to adults; to black women conversing with one another, telling a story, an anecdote, gossip about someone or event within the circle, the family the neighborhood. The words are conspiratorial. *Shh, don’t tell anyone else*, and *No one is allowed to know this*. It is a secret between us and a secret that is being kept from us. The conspiracy is both held and withheld, exposed and sustained. (Morrison 1970: 169)

The author also keenly underscores the linguistic ambiguity of her novel in the afterword of the same. She acknowledges the purposeful difficulty infused in the language as being necessary in its adherence to African American culture. The incorporation of silences has been explicated here as well:

My choice of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate co-conspiracy and intimacy (without distancing, explanatory fabric), as well as my attempt to shape a silence while breaking it are attempts to transfigure the complexity and wealth of Black American culture into a language worthy of the culture. (Morrison 1970: 172)

That language alone is insufficient for communicating the meaning of her novel is clarified yet again by Morrison in the foreword to her 1981 novel, *Tar Baby*. It is here that she acknowledges her role in the narration of the story as a part of a long process of reading and listening. If her narrative escapes the conventions of narration it is because she does not rely upon words alone while trying to convey her story:

All narrative begins for me as listening. When I read I listen. When I write, I listen----for silence, inflection, rhythm, rest....I need to use everything----sound, image, performance----to get at the full meaning of the story...(Morrison 1981: xi)

The foreword to *Jazz* (1992) was a necessary appendage to the comprehension of its convoluted narrative structure. In the foreword Morrison elucidates her choice of the title and the musical cadence of jazz that she has chosen to employ in the novel. *Jazz* was the most challenging narrative project that Morrison had undertaken till then. It was thereby of ample importance to try to spell out the challenge she was placing before the readers in creating a narration based on the rhythm of music:

I had written novels in which structure was designed to enhance meaning; here the structure would *equal* meaning. The challenge was to expose and bury the artifice and to take practice beyond the rules....I wanted the work to be a manifestation of the music’s intellect, sensuality, anarchy; its history, its range, and its modernity. (Morrison 1992: xix)

In describing the lingo of the people migrating into the city the narrator has commented upon their use of language. The use of language as a ‘malleable toy’ by these people is actually the enterprise of Morrison herself that she skillfully delineates as being the occupation of others:

However they came...and who, when they spoke, regardless of the accent, created language like the same intricate, malleable toy designed for their play. Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind. (Morrison 1992: 33)

The narrator has no qualms in accepting that her conjectures about the motives of her subjects may not be always flawless. Therefore she lays down possibilities instead of pinpointing the root cause of some dire event like the suicide of Rose Dear:

What was the thing, I wonder, the one and final thing she had not been able to endure or repeat?...Might it have been the morning after the night when craving (Which used to be hope) got out of hand?...Or was it that chair they tipped her out of?...What could it have been, I wonder? (Morrison 1992: 101-102)

The concluding lines of this novel are dedicated at revealing the narrator's mind thus showing the important place that she has occupied in this piece of fiction. The lines intend to bring to fore the motivation of the narrator in telling the story of somebody else's love and hatred. It is because of this that the narrator gives a free hand to the readers to 'make' or 'remake' her as they please:

If I were able I'd say it. Say make me, remake me. You are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look. Look where your hands are. Now. (Morrison (1992: 229)

In the essay, "Toni Morrison, intellectual," critic Dwight A. McBride has noted the discrepancies in the narrative of *Jazz* and commented upon the exceptional ending of the novel that chooses to caress the impossibility of the 'Now'----something that narratives are not allowed to do:

Jazz's narrator gives us a glimpse of what, by necessity, gets lost. The envy, the lack of public affection, the desire for another and the desire to have another desire you are not only laid bare for us as readers to look upon, but the 'narrator-become-talking-book' offers itself to us when the narrator says, *you are free to do it and I am free to let you because look, look where your hands are. Now.* The book ends with the word that signifies the impossible in the realm of narrative---- that is, the ability to narrate the present, the 'now'. (Tally (ed.) 2007: 173)

The gossipy narrator of *Jazz* finds a counterpart once again in Morrison's eighth novel *Love* (2003). Here the narrative voice is even more intriguing since it belongs not to a human but to a ghost. L, had been the staff of the Cosey hotel and privy to all the details of the Cosey household. It is this voice who claims herself to be a 'discreet' and 'mature' person in order to draw the attention as well as the credulity of the readers:

As a child I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet. Later on I was thought to have the wisdom maturity brings....The words dance in my head to the music in my mouth. (Morrison 2003: 3)

The narrative voice of Florens that opens Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008) is similar to that of L in the previous novel *Love*. More importantly the ploy used by the narrator of the later novel of asking the readers to not be afraid of her sets the mood of the narrative that is going to be about a menacing woman:

Don't be afraid. My telling cannot hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark---weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more....Stranger things happen all the time everywhere. You know. I know you know....Another is can you read? (Morrison 2008: 1)

Florens is battling her emotions as she penning her confession. She knows that it had been imprudent to murder the blacksmith so she hopes that the spirit of the blacksmith would make an effort to come to her for an explanation of that grave crime and then her words would offer him that. It is also an invitation to the reader to try to uncover the mininarratives within Florens' confessions:

These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me....You Won't read my telling. You read the world but not the letters of talk. You don't know how to. Maybe one day you will learn. (Morrison 2008: 158)

If the blacksmith's spirit never reads her writing Florens apprehends none other will. Her words would talk unto themselves. But like any author, Florens too wishes that these words see the light of day and are appreciated for what they are bringing what she needs most, the identity of being 'free' from the slavery of love that the blacksmith had accused her of:

If you never read this, no one will. These careful words, closed up and wide open, will take to themselves....Perhaps these words need the air that is out in the world. Need to fly up then fall,

fall like ash over acres of primrose and mallow....I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full....Slave. Free. I last. (Morrison 2008: 158)

Gloria Naylor

Gloria Naylor's *1996* (2005) is the author's attempt at constructing a memoir of the year of 1996 in her life that changed its course forever. Language becomes the medium through which Naylor explicates the trauma that she was forced to undergo. It is up to the readers to discern, if they choose to do so, whether to believe or to disbelief whatever the author has to say in her defense. Part of the problem is perhaps solved when the author claims to begin to tell a 'story' like other good ones. The word memoir or autobiography could have been used instead of the word 'story' because that unquestionably brings to mind the established view of the imaginary paradigm of a story. The opening lines are a case in point:

I didn't want to tell this story. It's going to take courage. Perhaps more courage than I possess, but they've left me no alternatives. I am in a battle for my mind. If I stop now, they'll have won, and I will lose myself. One of the problems I have is where to begin. I guess, as with most good stories, I should start at the beginning. And, as with most good stories, tell it simply. (Naylor 2005: 3)

Ntozake Shange

Ntozake Shange in her *Liliane* (1995) has played around with language in such way as to rivet the readers' attention to what is being said and how. This language game of the author has been accentuated by her insertion of the passages that are actually conversations between Liliane and her psychiatrist but since the speaker of the lines is not clarified hence the intent of the words become ambiguous:

Sometimes our work is talking. Sometimes our work is simply being, experiencing feelings and thoughts we've put so far away we have no words for them. Then, the silence and our breathing allow these feelings to find the shapes and sounds of the words we need. (Shange 1995: 169)

The subjective is made objective when Liliane is candidly declared to be a representative of other black American women. But the readers are cautioned against likening the character to the creator and this is where the ambiguity of metafiction is called into action:

We all were blessed, to have the privilege to love her, Liliane, anybody's colored child, anybody's daughter, just like me. Stop. Stop. You are too close. (Shange 1995: 252)

The above discussion entailed the ways in which Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange have tried to defy readers' expectations by frequently engaging the metafictional technique in their novels. Each author herself claims to have no power over her narrative thus perplexing the readers to fend for themselves about the possible meaning of the text. The device of intertextuality has been implemented to merge classics of English literature with the present works often not to integrate but to question the validity those works that have been branded as 'classics'. Parody of eminent texts and genres has been engaged in by these afore mentioned novelists. Most importantly the arbitrary nature of language has been upheld for the scrutiny of the readers.

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