

Issam El Masmoudi

Mapping the Postmodern in Toni Morrison's "Jazz"

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Mapping out the Postmodern in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

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Abstract

This paper comes as an answer to the question of what does jazz means in Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz*. It is an attempt to dismantle those literary techniques used by Morrison, which derives from the music of jazz. It also tries to trace some postmodern literary elements such as metafiction, the unreliability of the narrator, intertextuality, and the rewriting of history. Jazz and postmodernism are interrelated terms since many postmodern writers especially those of the Beat Generation for instance rely on the rhizomatic improvisation of jazz during the process of writing.

Introduction

The moment someone glances at the title of *Jazz* on Morrison novel, he/she wonders what is jazzy about it. After *Jazz* came into being in 1992, one year later, Morrison was the first African American laureate of Nobel Prize for literature. The novel of *Jazz* is probably the reason why critics and readers as well lingered at works such as *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, *Sula* and *The Bluest Eye* and thus reconsidered the literary heritage of Toni Morrison. *Jazz* is the second novel in the trilogy of Morrison, which includes *Beloved* and *Paradise*. Morrison did not consider them as a trilogy. Yet, the fact that they bring some historical moments such slavery, Reconstruction and Civil Wars from the past into the African American memory makes critics perceive them as the same. Although Morrison has written *Jazz* in 1992, the narrative takes place in the nineteen twenties. This period is very significant in the history of the African Americans particularly the Harlem renaissance movement. As its name indicates, the Harlem Renaissance witnessed a rebirth of the African American arts especially jazz music and literature with different poets and novelists such as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston and others. *Jazz* tells the story of Dorcas, Joe and Violet as a triangle of love. Therefore, the novel sheds light on themes like sexuality, violence and love. Jazz is an umbrella term covering all these themes because of the etymology of the term jazz as well as what the music of Jazz is about meaning its lyrics. This essay tries to provide an answer to the former question of what is jazzy about Morrison's *Jazz*. Postmodern literature has a strong relationship with the music of Jazz particularly the Beat Generation including figures such as Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg. *Jazz* is a postmodern jazz novel. Throughout the novel, there are many postmodern elements in terms of literary techniques of writing such as metafiction, the unreliable narrator as well as intertextuality.

Jazzthetics

First, it is interesting to examine how jazz music has survived ages of time. Jazz is crucial in the construction and the understanding of the African American identity since Jazz has African roots particularly during the middle passage. Thus, this shift from slavery to freedom shows how jazz intersects with race and culture. Therefore, the development of jazz music “will help to re-create a clearer sense of the particular social and cultural circumstances – what anthropologist Clifford Geertz called the “flow of social action” and “conceptual structures” (Kenney, xi). In this way, the evolution of jazz resembles Raymond Williams’s conception of culture as a long revolution. Jazz depicts the zeitgeist of America in the first half of the twentieth century. It is also linked to his second concept of “structure of feeling”, which is “the culture of a period: it is the particular living result of all the elements in the general organization” (Williams quoted by Browitt and Milner, p35). At first, Jazz was the low culture of blacks afterwards, it became of high taste. It was no longer restricted to black but also played by white musicians such as David Brubeck and others. Thus, Jazz music blurs the distinction between what is high and low. Postmodernism challenges the modern distinction of high and low polarities. Therefore, art and literature become hybrid. (Barry, p91)

The nineteen twenties are the heyday of Jazz music starting with musicians such as Louis Armstrong and the Original Dixieland Jazz Band. This period coincides with the migration of African American from the south to the north, which is a major theme in Morrison’s *Jazz*. Migration is also a metaphor of the relocation of Jazz from Kansas to New York and Chicago especially with the invention of records and the radio. F. Scott Fitzgerald gave this period the name of Jazz Age. (Morangeli, p15-16). This decade witnessed one of the greatest movements in the African American literary history, the Harlem Renaissance. The poet Langston Hughes for instance was famous for his jazz poetry and the use of the jazz technique of improvisation while writing poetry for instance in his poem of *The Weary Blues* which celebrates the music of blues “O blues! ... Sweet Blues!” (Hughes, p50). Blues is a metaphor here for the suffering of black people as it is illustrated in Du Bois’s prophetic statement “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color – line” (p, 12). The color line stands for racism. Jazz has always been related to “race”. Jazz is also one of the main influences along with drugs on the Beat Generation, which was coined by Jack Kerouac. The term “beat” in Beat Generation has its origin in African American Jazz and it means exhausted or broke. (Russell, p. 10). The Beatnik writers depict the zeitgeist of the postmodern era. They were fed up with the decadence of the after war America. Thus, they created their own counterculture and lived most of their lives outside the land of Uncle Sam. However, what characterizes this period is the emergence of a groundbreaking genre of jazz. Charlie Parker coined Bop. Thus, he became the modern equivalent of Louis Armstrong. (Morangeli, p. 24). The influence of Bop music can be seen in Jack Kerouac’s *The Subterraneans*. The language of this novel is a reflection of Charlie Parker’s Bop. Thus, the structure of the novel becomes as a jazz song. The “experimentation emerged from Kerouac’s interest in what he calls ‘spontaneous prose’ ... the kind of writing that he wanted to produce was like ‘jazz and bop, in the sense of, say, a tenor man drawing a breath, and blowing a phrase on his saxophone, till he runs out of breath.’ (Russell, p26).

Toni Morrison has her own way of incorporating jazz into her writings. First, jazz in Morrison's *Jazz* shapes the whole novel in terms of structure and themes. At the level of narration, the eight untitled chapters of the novel are fragmented. *Jazz* is not a straightforward narrative. Just like free jazz, the novel is rhizomatic. Sometimes it goes high and other times low. It has no rhythm. Gilles Deleuze invented the term "rhizome" to evoke those bad herbs, which grow in the roots of trees. These herbs go in both horizontal and vertical directions. Therefore, the Deleuzian rhizome makes a clear cut with the traditional modes of thinking as well as writing. Like the rest of postmodern writers, Toni Morrison relies on fragmentation, experimentation as well as improvisation, which is a jazzy feature. The triangle of Joe, Dorcas and Violet resembles the trio of Keith Jarrett, Gary Peacock and Jack DeJohnette. Most of jazz bands are made up of three members. Therefore, the triangle of love in the novel produce a syncopated jazz song reminiscent of blues themes mainly loss and despair.

Jazz aesthetics denote the techniques deriving from the music of jazz used by a particular writer. The enigmatic narrator in *Jazz* is like a maestro and a solo musician at the same time because at the end it has lost control over the characters of the novel. Moreover, the first three letters of "Sth" (*Jazz*, p. 1) which begin the novel are like a musical note initiated by the leader of an orchestra (narrator) to start a song (novel). Therefore, the narrator relies on improvisation which makes some critics compares him/it/her to Duke Ellington who is known for his jungle style. Another feature of jazz novels is scat or what the Russian formalists call skaz, which is to "imitate the sound or the beat produced by the instruments" (Bligny, p. 220). Violet epitomizes the notion of rhythm in jazz music for instance when she rips off the dead body of Dorcas. It is an act based on improvisation. Jazz originates from blues music as Willie Dixon states "The Blues is the roots, everything else is the fruits" (Dixon quoted by Bligny, p 215). The high and low notes of Jazz and the lyrics of blues music manifest in the bipolar theme of love and violence between the two characters of Joe and Dorcas. Although, Joe loves Dorcas ultimately he kills her with a gun which is quite remisncent of Oscar Wilde's verse "everyone kills the thing he loves" from his *The Reading Goal*. Some of the "other jazz-like elements of Morrison's style include call and response" (Sanders, p190). One of the main instances in which the narrator talks to her audiences is at the end of the novel where she states, "I envy them, their public love" (p. 229). Meaning the love of Joe and Felice. Dorcas is a scratched vinyl. After she is dead, her friend, Felice, replaces her.

Metafiction and the Unreliable Narrator

In her essay *The Morrison Trilogy*, Justine Tally claims that each of the three novels of Morrison trilogy has an enigma starting with *Beloved* "Who is beloved? Who is the narrator? Who is 'the white girl'?" (Tally, p. 76). The narrator in *Jazz* remains unknown. By doing so, Morrison decenters and destabilizes subjectivity. Since we do not know the race and gender of the narrator. Morrison adopts the postmodern concept of difference. She does the same as Deleuze and Derrida. They celebrate individuality with no point of departure meaning difference in itself regardless of race, gender and class. The writing style of Toni Morrison is

highly indebted to the two modern writers of William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. On the one hand, both Faulkner and Morrison use the technique of narrative experimentation including the multiplicity of narrators, non-linear storytelling and fragmented time sequences. (Magill, p. 120). As in Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, multiple narrators tell the same story of *Jazz* but in different ways. For instance, in the first chapter, the enigmatic narrator gives us the whole plot of the novel. Morrison does the same thing in *The Bluest Eye*. In one of her interviews Morrison, claims that by providing the reader with the plot at the very beginning, she makes the readers figure out how events will take place or enjoy the language instead. The first chapter opens with Violet releasing her caged birds. This scene bring to the reader's mind Maya Angelou's poem, *Caged Bird*, "... for the caged bird sings of freedom" (Angelou, p. 195). The music of jazz is about freedom and the quest for identity and reconstruction of the self. Most of the characters in *Jazz* act in hysterical manners for instance the murder of Dorcas and the ripping out of her corpse. On the other hand, Virginia Woolf is well known for her stream of consciousness especially in novels such as *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. Morrison uses stream of consciousness more implicitly in *Beloved*. Yet some instances in *Jazz* may include the interior monologue of Joe "nothing complex; you'd have to fight your own self to miss, but he isn't going to miss because he isn't going to aim. Not at that insulted skin. Never. Never hurt the young: nest eggs, roe, fledglings, fry ..." (p. 181). While Joe is planning to end up the life of Dorcas, a train of thoughts flows in his mind urging him to kill her. Thus, the technique of stream of consciousness makes us to sink deep in the inner psyche of a particular character.

Although the unreliable narrator and metafiction are two different literary devices, they have one common point. Both of them blur the distinctions between reality and fiction. Sometimes we feel that the narrator is addressing us, the readers. Morrison's unreliable narrator transcends the conventional types of focalization. At one point, the narrator itself states, "I have been careless and stupid and it infuriates me to discover (again) how unreliable I am". (p. 160). Many postmodern writers such as Kazuo Ishiguro and Vladimir Nabokov use this self-reflexive and contradictory narrator as a mean of experimentation which is quite the same as the call and response technique in the music of Jazz. David Lodge defines metafiction as "fiction about fiction: novels and stories that call attention to their fictional status and their own compositional procedures" (Lodge, p. 207). Therefore, metafictional novels look like stories within stories. Although metafiction is highly used by postmodern writers, it dates back the times of Cervantes. In the ultimate lines of *Jazz*, Morrison's unreliable narrator states "I can't say that aloud; I can't tell anyone that I have been waiting for this all my life and being chosen to wait is the reason I can. 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" (p.229). The narrator here is addressing the reader. The statement of "look where your hands are now" means that the reader is holding a book, the novel itself. It is for this reason why Morrison's *Jazz* is considered one of the greatest examples of metafiction.

Intertextuality

Julia Kristeva coined the term Intertextuality in the sixties in order to indicate that a text is not self-contained and autonomous but rather it is a product of other texts. She claims that there is a network relationship between texts. In this way, the meaning of a particular text depends on other previous texts. The Bulgarian literary theorist and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva came into appearance in Paris as the interpreter of the Russian Formalist, Mikhail Bakhtin. In his collected essays *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin refers to the novel as dialogic because it contains a multiplicity of voices, Heteroglossia. In this way, a novel is not fixed as other forms of literature but rather it is subjected to change because it possesses parodies, travesties, and reaccentuates. (Edgar and Sedgwick. pp,14-123) Roland Barthes develops the term of Intertextuality in his famous essay *The Death of the Author* in 1968. Influenced by Kristeva's work on Bakhtin, Barthes develops the idea of the text as a non-unified authorial consciousness and a form of plurality of quotations of other words, other utterances and other previous texts. As Roland Barthes puts it himself, a text is a "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture." (Barthes, p. 146) In this way, the novel of *Jazz* becomes what Baudrillard calls a "simulacrum". That is, a copy of a copy. This point of view triggers off the idea of the creativity of Morrison where "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of death of the author". (Barthes, p148). Furthermore, in one of his essays, T.S Eliot makes it clear that, "no poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone, his significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists." (Eliot, p9).

Morrison begins her novel with an epigraph taken from the religious texts of the Nag Hammadi particularly *Thunder, Perfect Mind* "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" (*Jazz*). This paratext is very significant in understanding of the whole novel. It is related to the identity of the unreliable narrator who represents itself as something mysterious or rather unachievable. It also triggers off Derrida's notion of traces. Besides, the paratext combines jazz music and the written narrative since it includes words like "sound" and "letter". Thus, the language of the novel undergoes the musicality of jazz with its different instruments of the saxophone, piano and the double bass. The novel also alludes to various songs by famous jazz musicians including Nina Simone and Louis Armstrong. For instance when Joe hears people singing with their guitars "Blues man. Blues and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. Everybody knows your name. Where-did-she-go-and-why man. So-lonesome-I-could-die man." (p. 119). This extract alludes to Armstrong's *What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue*. It also refers to James Baldwin's *Nobody Knows my Name*. (Bligny, p. 221).

Rewriting History

The concept of history is very crucial in post-colonialism as well as postmodernism for the reason that it deals with the problematic of power. Therefore, we should ask the question of who write history first. In *their Post-colonial Reader*, Tiffin, Ashcroft and Griffiths states,

The significance of history for post-colonial discourse lies in the modern origins of historical study itself, and the circumstances by which 'History' took upon itself the mantle of a discipline. For the emergence of history in European thought is coterminous with the rise of modern colonialism, which in its radical othering and violent annexation of the non-European world, found in history a prominent, if not the prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples. At base, the myth of a value free, 'scientific' view of the past, the myth of the beauty of order, the myth of the story of history as a simple representation of the continuity of events, authorised nothing less than the construction of world reality. (p. 355)

From this quote, we can deduce that history is reductionist in the sense that it neglects and marginalizes the history of other nations and minorities. In the umbrella of post-colonial studies. History is regarded as Eurocentric and thus it is essentialist. History is made to be seen from a white lens, which is a metaphor of white supremacy and racial discrimination.

Because of this historical hegemony over the voiceless minorities and ethnic groups, rewriting history became a key concept in both post-colonialism and postmodernism as a whole. The two isms are used interchangeably for the reason that there are affinities between the two for instance many post-colonial thinkers draw from post-structuralists as is the case of Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri spivak basing their work on Deridida, Lacan, Foucault and Deleuze. Therefore, the role of post-modern critics and even writers is crucial here for the reason that,

Postmodern thought, by analyzing everything as text and rhetoric, tended to push hitherto autonomous intellectual disciplines in the direction of literature – history was just another narrative, whose paradigm structures were no better than fictional, and was a slave of its own (often unconsciously used) unrealized myths, metaphors and stereotypes. (Butler, p. 32)

Postmodernism came to deconstruct and destabilize the binary oppositions on which western epistemology is based. Before the coming of postmodern mode of thinking, the world took the form of anti-humanist structures and polarities. For instance, white/black, male/woman and so on. Yet the problematic lies in the fact that the first element of each binary is meant to be seen as superior to the second subordinate element, which results in a social inequality in terms of race, class and gender. Thus, postmodernism enlarges the negotiation of meaning since it views any particular phenomena as a text, which has the ability to be deciphered. In this way, history and historiography become another form of fiction. In other words, they become a kind of myth for the reason that they feed on power, stereotypes, representation and imaginary truth, which do not exist in reality.

Linda Hutcheon states that both Post-colonialism and postmodernism form a “dialogue with history” (Hutcheon quoted by Nicol. p, 123). Hutcheon then coined the term ‘Historiographic Metafiction’ to denote the works of fiction that are involved in the reconstruction of history such as Morrison trilogy including *Jazz*. For Morrison, the Harlem renaissance is not the bloom of art and literature but rather it is an epoch of loss and grief. There is no reference to any black literary figure at that time in the novel. It is in this period where the death of Dorcas took place and gloom descends on Joe and Violet gazing at her picture above the stove. For Morrison even Jazz music is not the same as F. Scott Fitzgerald perceives it in the Jazz Age. Thus, Morrison uses and abuses Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* by the use of pastiche. In his *Postmodernism, or the cultural Logic of Capitalism*, Jameson defines pastiche as “a blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs” (Jameson, p 17). Through these postmodern intertextual elements, Morrison juxtaposes the two novels for the sake of comparison. Yet, Jazz and Blues bring with them all kinds of suffering of discrimination that took place in the twenties. Morrison also highlights the race riots that took place in 1917 where thousands of black were killed. It was here where Dorcas has lost her parents. The second chapter better illustrates those racist riots. In this way, Morrison fluctuates between realism and fiction. She incorporates remarkable and real historical event, which left a wound in the memory of African Americans into her fictional works. It is for this reason why critics call her work by the term of Historiographic Metafiction.

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