

Cultural Awakening and Literary Assertion: Exploring Musical Dimensions in the Narratives of Toni Morrison's Novels

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Abstract

The African American literature has been constant in responding to the hegemonic Western literary traditions which had historically marginalized and excluded the voices of the Black. Imitated by social, cultural and institutional imposition, early African American writers devised a more subtle dual or double-voiced approach to expression. This approach helped them to take part in the hegemonic white discourse and at the same time, they managed to incorporate subtextual change of expression of the realities along with the cultural memory and resistance of the African American communities. The Harlem Renaissance was an important turning point as it led to a confident and self-conscious Black identity in literature. It stimulated a new contact with African inheritance, folklores, music and vernacular traditions and widened the range of representation and provoked the reductivity and totalizing constructions of Blackness.

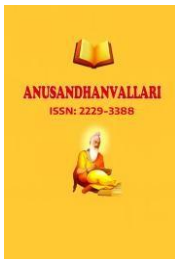
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Introduction

The late 20th century saw the shift in African American literature from external to internal explorations of African American life. A new generation of writers, including Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison, shifted the focus to issues of gender, identity, family, and community, and offered nuanced presentations of African American life. Their narratives explore not only the impact of racism but interpersonal and cultural relations. There is also a focus on form, which highlights the importance of the past and of definition. These texts are enriched by the use of African American oral culture, folk culture and narrative techniques. These offer a different literary space for marginal voices to be heard and valued. The narrative forms and themes used redefine African American literature as a vibrant literary field that resists oppression, negotiates identity and encourages cultural and historical recollection.

Some of the main issues that bother both the critics and the African American literature writers include how to apply a Black ideology towards the literary tradition which largely is determined by the Western ethnocentric values. Early black writers were to a great extent heavily censored and were unable to speak out. Because of this, they took a two-fold form of expression where they speak the hegemonic white discourse yet there are undertones of Black in it. This was a tactic that enabled them to express their experiences indirectly since they had to live oppressive lives (Gates 52).

African American writers started to critically re-read structures of racial oppressions and re-excavate the Black identity at the beginning of the twentieth century as a reaction to the Euro-American culture and economy hegemony. An example of such a turning point was the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s-30s. This movement reversed the traditional image of docile Old Negro into the new self-assured, educated and confident New Negro (Locke 5). It turned out to become a cultural renaissance wherein writers glorified the African culture, folklore and local culture. The art of the period also portrayed various voices and themes and dismantled the notion that the Black experiences were all the same and emphasized diversity and complexity of the Black life (Huggins 89).



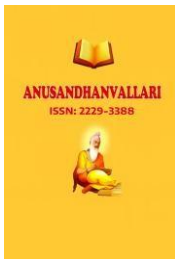
This change came at the end of the twentieth century and more specifically, in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s as the focus started drifting towards outside battles with race and rather, internal battles within the community. Previously, the problem of racism and oppression by the white society had been tackled by authors to a large extent. But later authors like Zora Neale Hurston, Alice Walker and Toni Morrison shifted the center inward, and explored the depth of the Black communities themselves. Their writings reflect how the Black people began being marginalised and settling thus destabilising and destabilising the hegemony of the white opinion in literature (Morrison 34).

In the *Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers*, critic Calvin Hernton (1987) characterizes the shape of the narrative as having played a vital role in revealing the oppression of race, and the struggle to achieve freedom in the African American literature (Hernton 112). Alice Walker did not escape this custom since she wrote specifically about Black women, which was published as *The Color Purple* (1982). She highlighted the problems that were forgotten or hidden such as gender inequality, domestic violence and female identity. Authors such as Walker and Morrison have invented new methods of narration to transform the face of Black writing. They employed the time-honoured Black narrative technique as the tool of female Black empowerment and of the once-taboo subject matter. In their works, they write about gender, sexism, Black womanhood, identity, motherhood, sisterhood, family, and community. Another element that these writers had been reliant on substantially and which added an additional level of profundity and genuineness to their narratives was African American folk traditions and oral storytelling (Dubey 67).

Madhu Dubey (1994) notes that these novelists had forgotten about traditional realism and developed a very Black feminist voice. They utilized new methods including a combination of linear and cyclical ideas of time, collective narration and parallelism of narrative forms and musical forms. These practices were contributing to the formation of distinct identity, history and collective memory (72). Another turning point in the Black feminist thought was another essay *In Search of Our Mothers Gardens* by Alice Walker (1974). In this piece, Walker also links the creativity of black women with the daily life cultural activities like music, quilting, cooking and gardening. She establishes this type of identity expression as a crucial artistic activity illustrating the strength and ingenuity of the historical Black women who have been oppressed (Walker 238).

In general, the history of African American literature can be termed as the history of literature of resistance to the outer oppression that is translated into the literature which is not merely focused on the inner identities, the cultural memory and gendered experiences. This move has increased literary discourse and has added a sense of comprehension of the life and expression of the Blacks. Toni Morrison has made an essential contribution to the African American literature. Her novels are reputed to be many-voiced and multi-layered, and attractive to general readers and the serious literary audience. Her writing has also been criticized to combine various narrative traditions. According to Gurleen Grewal (1998), the work of Morrison can be seen as a meeting of two rivers of narrative tradition, namely oral storytelling traditions of Black people and the written version of the Western novel (12). It is through this blending that Morrison is able to generate a distinctive narrative voice that is firmly embedded in cultural memory, yet closely interacts with the traditional literary genres.

Language is one of the main issues Morrison is concerned with in her writing. Her goal is to recover and affirm the wealth of Black oral traditions. To her, language is not only a means of communication but an expression of culture that breathes. She emphasizes rhythm, sound, and breaks in narration, and much of her work leaves open spaces in her narratives to allow readers to be involved in the process of making meaning. Morrison articulates her intention to shake off the myths and to sweep up the cliches to restore their original meaning and strength (Davis 59). This style emphasizes her attempt to re-tell cultural stories that have been misrepresented or diluted over the years.



Language also has ethical and political implications to Morrison. She considers language to be an act with consequences, indicating that narrative can define identity and alter social realities, depending on the manner in which the story is narrated. She makes this very clear in her Nobel Prize lecture when she says, “Narrative has never been to me but entertainment (Morrison 7). This quote shows her dedication to employing literature as a tool of cultural preservation and social intervention. The sense of responsibility and urgency is present throughout Morrison. She understands that most of the Black communities are feeling increasingly out of place culturally. To many and more black people, as she observes, the loss has increased. the more imperative it has become to find some means of clinging to the useful past without obstructing the prospective possibilities (LeClair 26). This concept demonstrates her struggle to find a balance between memory and progress- to be able to preserve all the precious traditions in the culture but still to give room to change and development.

Morrison is influenced by the sense of cultural oppression in addressing the past. She realizes that most of the cultural forms created by the black people were as a response to oppression. Hence, her writing aims to salvage and reappraise these forms in a literary context. The elements that she regularly employs include folklore, memory and community storytelling as a means of challenging dominant narratives and providing space to other histories. Notably, Morrison equates the role of her fiction with that of music in the Black culture. She shares how she wants her novels to do to blacks what the music did to them. The music kept us alive (LeClair 28). This analogy is important in that music and particularly music genres such as spirituals, blues and jazz have been a source of empowerment, identity and survival of African Americans. In the same way, the purpose of Morrison fiction is to ensure cultural memory, to affirm identity as well as to offer emotional and intellectual support to her readers.

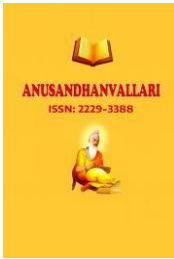
Furthermore, her thematic issues are also supported by the narrative techniques used by Morrison, including non-linear narration, multiple voices, and the mixing of both the past and the present. These strategies represent the multidimensionality of the Black experiences and do not allow the history to be interpreted in the straightforward and linear way. Her writings, however, do not merely narrate stories but also reconfigure the way the stories could be narrated, which is why she became a key figure in the African American literary tradition, as well as the worldwide literary one.

The fact that Toni Morrison employs Black music is extremely important since it is a form of cultural awareness that has not been assimilated or dominated by the mainstream white culture. African American identity and resistance has continued to manifest through music, particularly blues and jazz. Amiri Baraka (1963) writes that

Even though the mainstream of the society was continuously making the calls to oblivion, music remained to be the sole means out of an African culture that could not be destroyed, and it was a clear indication that there was something called an African American cultural identity (Baraka 28).

But this musical consciousness was frequently sidelined as African Americans strove to enter the mainstream White society. Assimilation into the middle classes occasionally resulted in loss of touch with blues. According to Baraka (1963), the fact that the Black middle class had gotten rid of everything about the blues tradition entailed the loss of a vital sense of connection with a history of resistance and cultural memory (Baraka 31). Here, the work by Morrison can be regarded as an attempt to reestablish that lost connection. As critic Anthony J. Berret notes (1998),

Morrison uses music as a paradigm to her writing, especially based on the traditions of blues and jazz (14).



These music genres not only affect her themes but also her narrative style, structure, and rhythm in all her novels including *The Bluest Eye* to *Jazz*. In her works, music becomes a thematic as well as structural underpinning. The blues, especially, have a profound historical and cultural meaning. The very word blues as Paul Oliver (1960) describes it is packed within itself with the entire tragedy of black servitude, full of the history of early African American life, including the coming of enslaved Africans to Jamestown in 1619 (45). Blues music is based on difficult situations, so it conveys the message of misery, poverty, displacement, violence, and survival. It is a representation of what African Americans go through and a kind of emotional release and cultural expression.

Even Morrison admits music has impacted her writing. She says that her story is struggling to be like something, which has perhaps, only been uttered in music in any comprehensive way (McKay 152). In *The Bluest Eye*, she tries to do what the music did to Blacks, recreating the close cultural interactions, which were practiced within Black communities under the White culture (LeClair 29). In this way, her fiction is like music, a source of healing, expression and preservation of culture.

Folk Tradition in *The Bluest Eye*

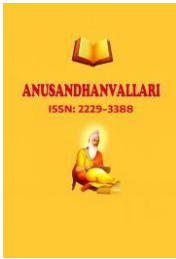
The format and subject of *The Bluest Eye* is similar to that of blues music. The critic Cat Moses (1994) notes that the novel has a structure that resembles the standard blues lyrics: it starts with loss and suffering and then progresses to some sort of emotional resolution (Moses 98). In between these highlights, there is a wealth of cultural knowledge in the narrative, which provides an understanding of the values and knowledge that is woven in Black folk traditions. Blues verses which are used in significant events of the novel are vehicles of cultural knowledge. They are a set of values to live by, particularly to young Black women who were growing up in the 1930s and 1940s. This information assists Claudia, the narrator in her growth and perception of the world. Conversely, Pecola, deprived of this cultural heritage, fails to deal with her situation.

Claudia represents the so-called blues subject in the novel, the voice of collective pain and strength. Claudia does not just sing the blues of one person, Pecola; she sings the whole community. She reveals the internalised racism and lack of self-love within the community through the oral tradition of testimony and projects it onto Pecola. Once the community imposes its pain and insecurities on Pecola, she turns into a passive character, a 'tabula rasa', onto whom the community projects its suffering and feelings of low self-esteem. Notably, Claudia does not passively imbibe cultural knowledge and rather, she actively makes cultural knowledge a source of strength. The blues define her voice, her outlook and her style of narration. In doing this, she rediscovers a Black aesthetic that is based on cultural memory and resistance. Her story turns into a survival exercise and identity, and it shows how cultural practices can form identity.

The initial referral of the blues in *The Bluest Eye* is through the childhood memories of Claudia particularly when she remembered the times of the Saturdays when her mother was in singing mood (Morrison 23). The importance of these scenes is that they introduce cultural and emotional relatability of blues music in the Black family. Claudia remembers bits of hard times songs that her mother would sing like the line, hate to see that evening sun go down, which is the well-known blues song, *St. Louis Blues*, (1914) by W. C. Handy.

Claudia is so emotional and even paradoxical in the way she reacts to the singing of her mother. She not only fails to get sad but even lacks the experiences discussed in the songs. She remembers,

Misery, tinged with green and blues, in the voice of my mother, all the pain out of the words, and the conviction it left me with that pain is not only endurable, but good (Morrison 25-26).



This scene is an echo of one of the most vital functions to the blues, the transformation of pain into a sort of emotional wisdom and even power. It is not that the pain is forgotten but rather it is re-modelled into something meaningful and lasting through the voice of her mother. It is also significant that Morrison chose to refer to the song *St. Louis Blues* because the song has been reflected to reflect much of the main themes of the novel. The song and the story are arranged in a same emotional scheme that is a transformation of loss to some sort of acceptance or resolution. The lyrics of the traditional blues tend to begin with the sense of absence or loss, e.g. the person whom the speaker loves, is moving away and he is left without feelings (Baker 5). In *St. Louis Blues*, the speaker is heart-broken by the fact that her lover has gone, and she employs the night alone to symbolize that. But the blues never sink in despair. Instead, they are moving toward some sort of emotional release or movement-physical, psychological or symbolic coping. It is an attribute of the form motion of blues. The song then transits gradually to sadness to the sense of perseverance to show that people can survive, despite loss.

Similarly, *The Bluest Eye* is a journey of pain and disintegration towards a deeper understanding of pain within the community.

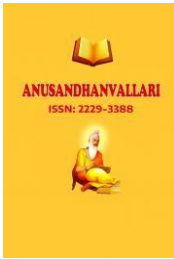
The blues provide Claudia with a map, through which she can learn to understand suffering, in the case of Claudia. The music passed down to her through her mother contains cultural knowledge and emotional wisdom. They educate her about pain being a normal and unending process, and this is what will prepare her to undertake struggles in the future. This is a sharp contrast to Pecola who has not been accorded this cultural background and therefore, has no emotional resources to cope with her predicament. Thus, referring to the blues music in the novel is not merely ornamental but formal and thematic. It influences the personality growth of Claudia, the voice of the narrator, and helps to realize the general intention of Morrison to regard music as an example of storytelling. The issues of memory, identity, and resilience are brought to the surface as the personal experience is linked to the collective cultural history with the help of the blues.

“Feelin’ tomorrow lak I feel today.

I’ll pack mah trunk an’ make mah getaway.” (Hurstun 31)

Similar to numerous blues pieces, *St. Louis Blues* implies both literal and symbolic solution to the problem by means of movement. The speaker in the song chooses to take a train in order to find her lover who has gone to St. Louis. This is a culturally wise move; challenging circumstances can be managed by moving around and by using the support of the community. The fact that one of the friends is working on the railroad hints that survival can be a matter of networks and mutual assistance. The train symbolically symbolizes hope, change and escape. The sound rhythm is reflected in the very blues music, which strengthens the impression of movement and a change of mood.

Toni Morrison employs this theme in *The Bluest Eye* whereby Claudia notes that her mother is forever singing about the trains and Arkansas (Morrison 98). With her sense of justice, Claudia sees these songs as a way of freedom and possibility. Her mother sings, and she learns to form the linkage between suffering and perseverance and change. The tradition of the blues is to shift a statement of loss to a statement of a wish to be resolved, and this trend is evident in the first lines of *St. Louis Blues*. Later verses, which Claudia listens to many times, help to support cultural values which impact on her emotional and moral growth. The third verse contains one of the most significant themes that criticize unnatural beauty ideals. The song gives the impression that no other woman has stolen the lover of the speaker, but rather, material symbols, including rings of diamond (store-bought hair) (Handy, qtd. in Morrison 62). These pictures reveal how the consumer culture builds false standards of beauty.



This is echoed by Morrison in her characterization of Maureen Peal, a woman whose main defining characteristics are more of physical symbols than of substance. She is defined by such things as patent-leather shoes, a brown velvet coat lined with white rabbit fur and a matching muff (Morrison 62). This information demonstrates how identity can be created using consumerist markers that are in line with white ideals of beauty, and not by being true to personal identity.

Critic Cat Moses (1994) notes that the last stanzas of St. Louis Blues express cultural values that are essential to sustain Claudia but are missing in the life of Pecola (Moses 101). Intra-racism or prejudice based on colour among the Black community is also discussed in these verses. The speaker refers to her lover as blacker than midnight, which is a positive characteristic of dark skin as something attractive and strong (Handy, qtd. in Moses 102). This photo turns the hierarchies of beauty upside down as Blackness is appreciated instead of being undermined.

Whereas Claudia is introduced to affirmations of Black identity by way of her mother singing to her, the white beauty ideals are internalised by Pauline Breedlove. She envies the corn-yellow hair of the white child she is taking care of, and denies her own daughter. In a very dramatic scene, Pecola spills blueberry cobbler, which Pauline slaps her, throws her outside and consoles the white Fisher child (Morrison 108-09). This scene shows the extent to which racism is internalised in her behaviours. Pecola, who belongs to the dark berries, is something to be discarded, whereas whiteness is safeguarded and appreciated. The difference between Pecola and Claudia is also depicted in the episode of Maureen Peal. Claudia denies Maureen her privilege, denying her high yellow dream complexion, two-lynch-rope-long brown hair (Morrison 62). Claudia opposes the internalised racism that favours light skins by calling her out of her name. However, it is these same attributes, blue eyes, light skin, and straight hair, that Pecola wants since they are symbols of social status and acceptance.

The opposition to Claudia is determined by her upbringing, and by her mother, in particular, and the cultural background of blues music. However, Pecola, conversely, internalises the mainstream aesthetic, which has imbued the Breedlove family. According to Inger-Anne Softing, it is only the character of Claudia who makes a deliberate attempt to deconstruct an ideology of the dominant society, especially in her dismembering of white dolls (Softing 12). Considering this act, Claudia retrospectively explains about her conversion:

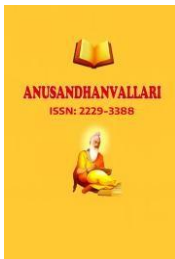
The innocent sadism, the artificial hate, the hypocritical love, I learned later to worship [Shirley Temple]... I know... that the change was a process of adapting without bettering (Morrison 23).

This understanding shows the influence social conditioning has on making a person conform to prevailing ideals despite them being aware of their inability to do so.

Claudia is virtually singular among those who are opposed to the prevailing master-aesthetic. These values have been internalised by many of her community members such as adults, characters such as Geraldine and even children who tease Pecola. These ideas are so ingrained that when the insult is hurled at her, it is repeated by others, Black and ugly black e- mos (Morrison 73). So, the tradition of blues offers a structural and thematic basis to the novel by Morrison. Morrison introduces something of a cultural resistance through the voice of the oral tradition in Claudia, and the tragedy of Pecola shows the consequences of internalised racism and forced beauty ideals, which are devastating.

Racism

Toni Morrison also laments the idea of racial self-hate, which results in the admiration of Maureen Peal and the hierarchy of colour that she has brought to the Black community. Characters, like Maureen Peal and



Shirley Temple, are used to demonstrate the idealisation of whiteness and light skin. On the other hand, the singing voice used in *St. Louis Blues* recognises emptiness of the artificial beauty, powder, jewellery and shop bought hair- and exposes the insignificance of these ideals.

The other main feature of the narration style of Claudia is the oral tradition of testifying with its roots in the African American church culture. The critics suggest that the testifying itself can be referred to as a ritualised form of black communication in which the speaker personally testifies to the efficacy, truth and strength of some experience that every black has been through (Smitherman 45). It is not only narration but dramatic and emotive retelling of lived experience. Expounding further on this, Smitherman explains that to testify is to speak the truth in the mode of story; a group re-enactment of an individual feelings and experience (46). So, the individual experience transforms into the common memory and comprehension in such a manner.

In the final pages of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia is turned into an exemplar of this tradition. When she notices Pecola picking up rubbish, she looks outward at the reader and in a way, testifies. She reveals that Pecola is now the place where the shame and internalised racism of the community is scripted (Morrison 204). This scene turns the narrative into an extremely strident act of seeing and ethical reflection in the collective. Morrison constructs Claudia as blues subject- a voice that is seductive, honest, poetic and capable of providing irony and emotional depths. The frankness, immediacy, shared conversation and expressiveness of the narration are characteristic of the blues tradition and Claudia is no exception. She also uses call-and-response, signalling, and testifying, which are the most important aspects of the African American oral culture.

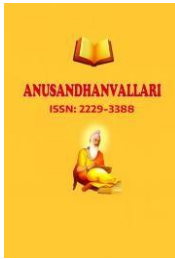
Just like in blues music, there is no easy or conclusion to the story of Claudia. Instead, *The Bluest Eye* leaves a reader with an open ending and the reader is left to confront the consequences of post-trauma, memory and social injustice. By this, Morrison has succeeded in making her novel resemble the shape of the blues, itself, wandering through the pain and expression without any resolution, and leaving one to go on speculating.

In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison attempts to address the problem of such a complicated connection between music and narrative by combining the aspect of the blues with jazz in her narration. The tone of the narration in the novel is the emotional richness of a blues lament, and the form is representative of the improvisational quality of jazz. Such a mixture enables Morrison to develop a lyrical and dynamic text. Critic Eusebio Rodrigues (1993) says,

Morrison imitates the characteristics of jazz music through the use of punctuation and repetition, rhythm, and other linguistic devices. He says that the novel is like a musical score and that the reader must involve him/herself in musicalizing the text to be able to grasp the meaning of the text (88).

In this regard, the process of reading *Jazz* is not a passive act; it involves involvement like listening and understanding music. The call-and-response pattern, which is one of the most significant methods that Morrison uses, is a key element of African American music. Since Robert Rubenstein, the critic, suggests, every part of the novel is a response to the previous one in a manner of musical improvisations. With every reply, a new idea or emotional twist is introduced, which gives the story the opportunity to develop in several ways (Rubenstein 140). To illustrate, in the first part of the novel, the words I love you (Morrison, *Jazz* 24) are uttered by one of the parrots of Violet Trace. The second part starts with the answer of 'Or used to' (27) and immediately changes the mood and the companion is the loneliness of Violet. This transition is akin to a shift in musical key or chord as is the case with jazz musicians improvising on a theme.

The same trend is noted at the end of the novel. Felice, the friend of Dorcas, tells her that she did it because she consumed water in order to make it easier to swallow the food she did not like as it helped her to feel less pain (Morrison, *Jazz* 216). The last part is then opened by the answer: Pain. I appear to have an affections, a



sweet tooth towards pain (219). This repetition and change of the word pain depicts how jazz also remakes a theme with more meaning by reinterpreting the theme.

The theme of pain is prominent in *Jazz* just like in the blues tradition. The novel portrays a very emotional loss and desire through such characters as Joe Trace who says he misses the heart you cannot live without (Morrison, *Jazz* 130). Rubenstein claims that this is a story of suffering as a kind of cultural mourning and that the work of Morrison is connected to the wider African American musical tradition of the blues (Rubenstein 142). This connection is further enlightened by Ralph Ellison (1995) who explicates the blues as an attempt to keep alive the painful details and events of a brutal experience,

... and to rise out of it... by wringing out of it a near-tragic and near-comic lyricism (78-79).

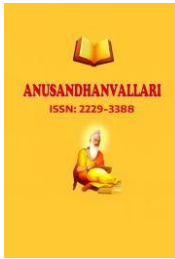
According to this perception, the blues are not merely laments of sadness but also therapy where individual pain is transformed into music.

This process is reflected in *Jazz* by Morrison. Blending blues feeling and jazz form, she develops a fluid, participatory and strongly based in African American culture narrative. The novel is not linear or structured as such; it is more like jazz music which develops through variation, repetition and improvisation. By doing it, Morrison turns the story telling process into a musical one that would invite the readers to interact with pain, memory, and identity in a more active and meaningful manner.

Thus, Toni Morrison takes the novel to the rural and urban African American tradition from which she came, back to the blues with its longstanding tradition of voicing pain, registering complaint and comfort. The unrelenting lyrical pressure of her prose aims to unsettle as well as to heal. Her characters though seldom in powerful social position, command their desires in an outlawed agency that puts into crisis the law of the land and the judgement of the jury of readers.

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