

Morrison's Discourse of Language

Dr. Vipin Pratap Singh

P.G.D.A.V. College (Evening)

University of Delhi

What is language? The answer to this question could be object where we use it as a means of communication which is essential to a community and a people. It could also be a marker of intelligence which could involve a network and higher order thinking skills which makes human beings different from animals. The use of language has been a part of the human world in the most inseparable way where is not only helps in maintaining and recording history and tradition over the years but also helps in communicating ones message. Language can be the medium of one's psychological experiences. It is a medium of expression of ones emotions and imagination. It is also a medium which empowers the individual to share, create and recreate their experience with others. It can be used to heal and provide comfort. It can be used like a weapon and tool. It can be used to retrieve ones experiences of the past, acting as a link between the past and present. For Toni Morrison, it is a medium that offers resistance and forms identity.

The winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, Toni Morrison is an African-American writer who has created a new language of resistance as a black subject in America. While highlighting the struggle of the black and African-American people in the contemporary as well as he past times, Morrison has designed language as a medium of expression.

English is a global language that acts as a link between various people and cultures in today's

world. This language, however, also carries with itself a colonial baggage and a legacy of one people. The use of this language in the world today is a direct result of the heavy baggage that it carries. It is the most brutal and popular example of the dominance of one culture over another. The language, originally from England, spread across continents as the language of the civilized man. This led to the alienation and identity crisis that becomes the crux of the Postcolonial literature today. Some of the postcolonial writers like Salman Rushdie, Chinua Achebe and Edward Said adapted the English language as a medium of their expression which enabled them to write back to the colonizers in a language they would understand. Other writers like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o chose to reject the 'foreign' language that was imposed upon them as being superior to their own. The ones who adopted the language did not just adopt it the standard form but hybridized it with their own cultural relevance and identity.

Another prevalent criticism that language receives is from the feminist theory where language is criticized for being masculine. Many feminists, like Luce Irigaray, believe that language, as it is, should be boycotted and a new version should be created which promotes equality for women who have been reduced to the status of "goods" by the society. Julia Kristeva, another prominent feminist theorist, believes that a subject gains their identity through language. She gives us

two independent aspects of language- the semiotic and the symbolic. The semiotics represents the matriarchal aspect of language that displays the innate drives and impulses of an individual. These drives are present unconsciously and are exhibited in the character's tone, the rhythm of their sentences and the images that are used to express their emotions. The semiotics is, however, repressed by the society and the patriarchal aspect of language which is the symbolic. Kristeva describes the symbolic as a rule-governed aspect that manifests itself in the grammatical and syntactic structures of language. The two, although the opposite, complement each other and are essential for the language system. Morrison's writing style is lyrical and poetic and thus, her language displays the semiotics aspect of language. The importance of "aurality" and "orality" has been one of the most important concerns of African American literature. Aural and oral deal with one's 'voice' which has to be heard and to be said. The importance of achieving this 'voice' becomes very important for the African American writers like Morrison. Her writings work towards achieving this voice for the people who haven't been heard and the people who have been denied have a say.

So far, we have discussed the role language plays in the formation of one's identity. One can form this identity only with the presence of 'voice' that would differentiate them from animals. Like the language and voice given to the native people of Congo in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, where they were reduced to mere sounds exhibiting their barbarity. This lack of voice would lead to the desire to acquire it and would thus demand adapting to the hegemonic language of

the superior people who claim to be civilized. This acquisition, however, can come with resistance too by "corrupting" the standard conventionally acceptable form of language. Morrison's use of the grammar-free semiotic language helps her achieve this goal.

Morrison's use of the rhythmical and musical language enables her to escape the shackles of grammar and syntax of language. The "music expresses the unspeakable and frightening abject, the thing that language leaves out" (Iannetta, 2002, p. 249). The best example of this can be seen in her most prestigious novels *Beloved*:

Little rice, little bean,
No meat in between.
Hard work ain't easy,
Dry bread ain't greasy....
Lay my bead on the railroad line,
Train come along, pacify my mind.
If I had my weight in lime,
I'd whip my captain till he went stone
blind.
five-cent nickel,
Ten-cent dime,
Busting rocks is busting time.

(page 48)

These lines have a grammar of their own but the rhythm and the melody bring out the semiotics in them.

Another aspect of her use of language can be seen in her first novel *The Bluest Eyes* where she begins with the description of a house:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. (page 1)

This opening paragraph is followed by the one with no grammar and ends with no space:

Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house...Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green and white house (page 2)

In her foreword to the novel, Morrison gives her take on the choice of language in the text:

My choices of language (speakerly, aural, colloquial), my reliance for full comprehension on codes embedded in black culture, my effort to effect immediate coconspiracy and intimacy (without any 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. (page XIII)

In one of her later novels *A Mercy*, Morrison parodies the language of the masters as a means of expression and a counter to these master:

There is no more room in this room. These words cover the floor. From now you will stand to hear me. The walls make trouble because lamplight is too small to see by. I am holding light in one hand and carving letters with the other...Dreaming will not come again. Sudden I am remembering. 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...See? You are correct. A minha mãe too. I am become wilderness but I am also Florens. In full. Unforgiven. Unforgiving. No ruth, my love.

None. Hear me? Slave. Free. I last. (page 160-161)

The language of the master, when subverted, leaves a strong impact in her words. Morrison's characters are usually the people who do not get representation. They are the ones who have been rendered voiceless and helpless yet are able to use words and language in a way that enables them to create a large impact on the language of the master as many of these characters are suffering and recovering from slavery.

Morrison aims at not just engaging the audience with her plot and characters but also at the participation of her readers. Her readers who, upon reading her novels should be, as she mentions, "moved" by her work and not just "touched" by it. She does so to evoke empathy for her character.

Morrison's treatment of her women characters drives the reader to see and acknowledge the bitter reality of black women who have gone through a double marginalization. From Pecola's desire to have beautiful blue eyes to Sethe's struggle with her guilt to Florens and Lina who long for a mother's love in the face of the ground zero reality of slavery in America. These women, with a very strong characterization, struggle with their lives in relation to the marginalization they have faced due to slavery and it is done through the use of words. Morrison equips these women with the most powerful weapon and tool of language that, with all its subversions and corruptions, gives these women the voice they were never given.

In her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize Morrison shapes her take on language. She implores to reject this oppressive language *drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as*

it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind." She goes on to say that this kind of language, sexist, racist and theistic, are all types of the political language of the mastery that restricts new knowledge and exchange of ideas.

References :

1. Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*. , 2008. Print.
2. Morrison, Toni. *Beloved: A Novel*. New York: Knopf, 1987. Print.
3. Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. New York: Plume Book, 1994.
4. Beavers, Herman "A Brief Survey of Aurality in African American Literature" <http://www2.ku.edu/~langmtrs/lml/discussions/jazz.html>
5. Sadehi, Camelia Talebian "*Beloved* and Julia Kristeva's The Semiotic and The Symbolic" *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 7, pp. 1491-1497, July 2012 <http://www.academypublication.com/issues/past/tpls/vol02/07/22.pdf>
6. Shilaja, C.L. Writing Resistance: an Understanding of the Narratives of Empowerment in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, Sathyabama University. [www.rupkatha.com](http://rupkatha.com) Volume VIII, Number 1, 2016 General Issue http://rupkatha.com/V8/n1/16_A_Toni_Morrison_Mercy.pdf
7. "An Artist Who Bent Language to Her Will" Aug. 7, 2019, Section A, Page 23 of the New York edition <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/06/books/toni-morrison-death.html>
8. Dorian de Wind, Associate Editor on Aug 6, 2019 in Arts & Entertainment, Bigotry, Inspiration and Living, Society, Writing <https://themoderatevoice.com/toni-morrison-the-power-of-language/>
9. Iannetta, M. E. (2002). "Literary melancholia, or the refusal to mourn: Amnesia and anamnesis. Memories of love, loss, and abjection in feminine writing." Diss. University of California, Santa Cruz. Dissertations & Theses: Full Text, ProQuest. Web. 6 Aug. 2011.