



A Black-Feminist Analysis of Women Characters in Toni Morrison's Jazz

Naina Shehzin, Lecturer, Qurtuba University, Dera Ismail Khan, Pakistan

Nijatullah Khan, PhD Scholar, Department of English, Qurtuba University Peshawar, Pakistan

Dr Abdul Karim Khan, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Science and Technology, Bannu, Pakistan

Abstract- This paper aimed at exploring the way Toni Morrison has projected his women characters in *Jazz*, who are subjected to social and gender discriminations on the basis of their skin color, thereby exposing the white America who was repressing the black Americans in order to maintain its cultural hegemony or dominance. The analysis is carried out by using the vision of black feminism. Black feminism is a school of thought which argues that sexism, class oppression, gender identity and racism are inextricably bound together. The main objective of the study was to examine the role of Afro-American women who were abused, psychologically tortured and physically victimized as they were not only individually suppressed but also institutionally marginalized and psychologically abused on the basis of being Black. The technique of close reading examined dialogues, situation, actions and reaction of women characters in *Jazz*. The main issue of the present study was to investigate the female characters of *Jazz* and their reactions to particular situations. The study also investigated the situations as to how black women unconsciously resist against the patterns set for them. It was found that the women are living in restricted society where their individuality is suppressed on the basis of their gender. Moreover, the women show hypocrisy towards each other while neglecting their moral attributes. This study extends the boundaries of existing research and gives new insights for feminist researchers working in the field of black feminism.

Keywords: Black Feminism, psychological torture, moral ethics

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism vindicates the right of women for equality with man on the basis of gender, class, and independent identity as a human being. According to the Meridian-Webster Dictionary, Feminism refers to the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the sexes. Thus feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women (Bisong and Samuel, 33). Whereas Black Feminism has made the ideology and identity of a whole nation particularly black woman who belonged to that nation whose identity was besmeared with racist and racial subjugation. Even Ama Ata Aidoo, an Afro-American feminist commented: "the African women struggle for identity: I ought to go ahead to demand that each man and each women ought to be a women's activist – particularly in the event that they trusted that Africans ought to assume responsibility of African land, African riches, African lives and the weight of African advancement. It was unrealistic to support freedom of African without trusting African woman; they must have the best that nature could offer" (39). Toni Morrison was an Afro-American and lived in America. She portrayed all her female character vividly in order to depict the real life essence of Black community and their sufferings which they were facing in Harlem. While teaching at Princeton, a student asked a question, for whom do you write? Of which she rapidly responded: "I need to compose for individuals like me, who are known as Black individuals, questioning individuals, appealing individuals - individuals who can't be faked, individuals who should not be criticized, and individuals who have high criteria" (10).

The study evinces how black women characters have been victimized on the basis of their color, class, gender and identity in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Toni Morrison's "*Jazz*" is the object of my study to dig out Black Feminist ideology throughout the female characters and bring to the surface how they responded to the circumstances and the environment they are living in. Despite the fact that the *Jazz* is story of adoration of love-betrayal however it likewise uncover the human nature and their reaction to conditions, how they counter their shabby lives and handle the circumstances presented to them. Black feminism is also used as methodological tool to unearth the racial, social, economic and psychological segregation of the women belonging to black community. Black Afro-Americans were put to blind slavery to make them afraid of the Whites on the basis of their color. They had become a marginalized society as they came and smuggled in from Africa for a better life but in reality, their lives became the worst.

II. RESEARCH STATEMENT

This study has tried to examine the sufferings of the Afro-American women through Feministic perspective in which the black women characters in Jazz are analyzed. The aim of the paper is to highlight the injustices and oppressions to the black women in various walks of life in America. In this context, the paper investigates how the black women react when they are wronged on any occasion. The study is mainly focused on the women characters and their reaction. The study is viewed from the perspective of black feminism.

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

Morrison completed *Jazz* in 1992. Like her novels, *Jazz* has also received significant recognition in the recent years. It has attracted the critics and scholars to critically analyze it in terms of black music cultures. It is deemed as a textual manifestation of music and chronicled the era, however the novel is still viewed from the lens of Black Feminism representing women's resistance against their odd situations and patriarchal fetters. Roberta in his writing, *Singing the Blues / Reclaiming Jazz* by Toni Morrison and *Cultural Mourning* (1998), in which the cultural mourning connotes the response of African Americans not only to the lost lives and the lost possibilities produced by slavery but also to the loss of cultural productions by appropriating the white culture. In her 1992 novel, *Jazz*, Morrison re-claims black music both by re-conceptualizing the jazz age, and by employing the literary equivalents of its musical forms (147). In Grandt's analysis, *Kinds of Blue*, by Toni Morrison and Hans Janowitz, and *The Jazz Aesthetic* (2004), who say that the narrator of *Jazz* "seeks to transpose the rhythm and sounds of Jazz onto the written page (13-14). Another scholar Tone Derre (2008) in her thesis; *Variation in theme: The role of music in Toni Morrison's Jazz*, discussed the culture of Afro-Americans through their musical instrument Jazz; which they used to play in the streets of America just to show their blue culture of Africans and it was also a part of their identity as society (1-5). Farshid opines in her article, *The Composing Mode of Jazz Music in Morrison's Jazz* (2011) that the melody of Jazz is gradually unraveled by performers who play against each other, each of Morrison's characters plays their own pieces to recount the story. The interplay of varied sounds and narrative modes in different chapters resembles the plan of the jazz music for call and response among instruments and vocalists (1). *Jazz* is tragic love story but it covers all the themes of marginalized society as Patty De Graaf (2012) in her master thesis, *African American Identity*, discusses the idea of identity crises of Afro-Americans who have suffered throughout the novel for their identity and claims that the narrative technique used by writer made the novel a little complex (1-10). This study has focused on black women as Afro-Americans and their sufferings on the basis of their color. Morrison utilizes the power and glory of her creative ability to address them and nearly everybody is keen on her stories that have made an eternal niche for her among America's most noteworthy essayists. In view of the literature review, there appears a gap that the novel has still much to discover in terms of black feminism.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The current study is qualitative in nature. Close reading technique used for data collection. The primary data are taken from the novel, *Jazz*, however, other sources are also used to strengthen the argument. It seeks to explore the main women characters Violet, Dorcas, Rose Dear, and True Belle of *Jazz* who are analyzed through the perspective of Black Feminism. The paper investigates the inequalities, discriminations and oppression done to the black women which are usually indicated through their reaction to different situations.

V. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Jazz uncovers the smothered sections of Afro-American black women of the 20th century. It is mainly concerned with the struggle of Afro-black women characters-Violet, Dorcas, Rose Dear, and True Belle and their struggle with both the race and gender throughout their lives. Various scenes and situations have been observed where women are oppressed on the basis of their color. They have confronted for their race, as well as for their sex too. In this discussion these female characters are investigated through the lens of black feminism. These female characters share their stories of suffering thorough dialogues, and actions to the situations in the novel.

Character of Violet

The first character under investigation is of Violet—a fifty-six years old lady, unpredictable of nature, whose whole life was miserable and full of hardships. Violet was brought up by her mother, Rose Dear, in Vienna, Virginia. His father had left them when their family possessions were taken back. Violet's mother decided to choose death over pain by tossing herself into the well. At the time when Violet was a young woman,

married to Joe, they decided to move on to city in order to have a better life and left all those painful bites from which she had suffered in her teens. At that point both of them did not bother much about having kids due to economic crises through which both were suffering. However, when she developed into a more mature woman, with each passing year her desire for kids intensified. She wanted desperately something to love and care for. But the more she became passionate, the more Joe avoided having kids as he considered city life not to be easy to have children. A stage came when Violet started sleeping with a doll but at that time it was too late to have children. Her life was going smooth with Joe but once more the evil destiny knocked at her door when she discovered that Joe had an affair with another girl, Dorcas, who was shot dead by Joe. Violet tried to give vent to every last bit of her outrage, pity and disappointment by cutting Dorcas' face at her funeral when she was lying in her open coffin but she could not fulfilled her desire.

In the opening lines of Violet character, It had clearly shown how psychologically depressed she was. It also exhibited what was her reaction after acknowledgment of her husband's relation with another woman who was half of her age. It is in her subconscious; the feeling of rage, what she had done in the church just to take revenge from the dead body of a girl. Later on, when she reached her home, those birds whom she loved the most, who accompanied her in her empty life, she set free all the birds just to make her thoughts free of everything (Morrison, 16). Her senseless behavior was describing her agony of suffering when she was thrown out of the church. She was unable to get what was going in the surrounding and to manage her parts not to fall in the public. Further on narrator explains;

Crowd was showing her hatred for what Violet had done on the funeral. But narrator considered it as their double-face mentality. They had nothing to do with her or Dorcas or even it didn't matter to them, who had done what to other. The people who suffered were Violet, Dorcas and Joe. Being a wife Violet suffered, her whole life revolved around Joe. What Joe had done to her? Joe had fallen for a girl by cheating on his wife (Morrison, 28). What could be the reaction of the wife whose husband had cheated on her, for her it was a torture; her wounds were bleeding which was reflected by her lost conscience that how much psychologically she had suffered.

Further on the narrator described how Violet used to look like at the age of fifty, she was extremely bony, but she had maintained herself very beautifully when she came to the funeral. For someone like her it would be a disgrace when as a person he or she was thrown out of church in the front of crowd. But for Violet, it didn't matter. Her hypocrisy was sufficiently thoughtful of being gorgeous to believe that even in this age, she could snub Joe by getting herself a boyfriend and allowed him to visit her in her own apartment with her new boyfriend. She thought, it would give her some fulfillment and would dry the tears of Joe. But narrator approached her as "the children of suicides are difficult to pleasure and trust on nobody since they are not mentally present here" (Morrison, 17). For him nothing matters at all and she failed in this attempt too. This came as insane attribute, what else she could do to her husband, to dry off his tears by looking like her new love or her new girlfriend whom he murdered. Violet tried to know about the girl for whom her husband had fallen up so she started investigating about her.

Violet didn't know much about the young girl at first sight except her name, her age and she was well considered of having legitimately authorized parlor. So, she initiated to accumulate whatever was left of the information (Morrison, 17). At that time having a licensed parlor, being a black was something extraordinary. Blacks were not having opportunities to live their lives in a healthy way. So, whatever came in their pocket, they picked it.

She questioned everyone, beginning with Malvonne an up-stair neighbor-the person who made her aware of Joe's relation with a young girl. Her apartment was used as a love nest by Joe and Dorcas. From there, she got address of the young girl and tried to figure out everything about her. On this behalf, she visited her friends, her school to collect every bit of information about Dorcas. Even Violet attempted to learn to do the dance steps which the girl used to do and had done in the party before dying. On such psychological behavior she was considered as a pigeon who was feeding on those useless bites which were left behind by the cats (18). It could be taken as nothing comes out of nothing, it hurts.

Further on, this information was not sufficiently enough for Violet. So, she visited Dorcas' home where she met her aunt. At first her aunt didn't allow her but later on both shared a strange bond of companionship as both ladies had the same suffering of betrayal from their husbands. Dorcas aunt showed all the things of Dorcas to Violet especially her picture. Violet borrowed the picture of the dead girl and put it on the chimney of her parlor. The picture became a sign of agony for Joe and Violet. It was the only living creature in their apartment. Joe and Violet's existence didn't matter for each other. Their apartment resembled the vacant bird cages which were wrapped in fabric. What's more, a dead young girl's face had turned into a vital thing for their evenings. The only thing, they were doing to visit the remarkable piece of their apartment, the photograph of dead girl. Joe and Violet both went to the parlor one by one to see the picture of the dead girl's face. This had become everyday story, where Joe shed tears on murdering his lover while Violet wanted to know the hidden misery in that picture (Morrison 18-23).

Violet, as a wife, needed a gut to put the photograph of her husband love in her parlor. This could be a suffering for both husband and wife, their communication was filled by a photograph. Even, Dorcas was left but still her absence made both of them to suffer more than her presence. Violet was discriminated by her own companion who cheated on her with a girl who might be his daughter. This made her suffer but in that discrimination where first her husband had fallen for a girl, then murdered her after that by shedding tears on her death. What would be the suffering of that woman whose husband used to shed tears on his love whom he murdered? This might be a psychological torture for that woman. When, she tried to resist her agony of un-faithful husband, for her identity, by cutting the face of dead girl in her open coffin or by making an extra-marital affair with another man. It was her psychological response when she wanted to know about Dorcas, every minute detail of her, from her aunt, from school even by borrowing the photo of Dorcas and then by putting that photo in to her mental piece was all about her psychological response to overcome her agony.

Characters of Rose Dear and True Belle

Rose Dear was the mother of Violet while True Belle was the grandmother of Violet. Their sufferings were shared as a digression in the novel but equally important for being black women. Violet's father abandoned his family by wasting their cash and wandered off. While her mother, Rose Dear, lost confidence and committed suicide by devoting herself completely to a well. At that time, her grandmother True Belle was serving her special white lady in Baltimore for raising the lady's half-dark child and was paid handsome money. But, when True Belle discovered that her little girl, Rose Dear, was stuck in an unfortunate situation back in Virginia, and have committed a suicide, True Belle came back home to assemble the family and to raise her grandchildren (Morrison, 97). What would be the pain of subjugation for a woman who committed a suicide on the behalf of her husband who had left her with his children? What would be the pain of that mother who was far-away from her and came back as the result of her daughter death?

True Belle, being a Negro woman, could understand the situation of her daughter Rose Dear who committed a suicide. For her daughter it would be nearer to happiness to surrender her life then to live and struggle for it whose husband had left her empty handed with five children. For this, she murmured on her daughter's death: "Thanks God for life," True Belle said, "and thank life for death" (Morrison, 98). The murmuring of True Belle on her daughter death was the response of her agony that what she thought about life. Both the women had lost their individuality, Rose Dear by surrendering her life and True Belle by accepting slavery for the betterment of her family.

Character of Dorcas

Dorcas existence was projected more complex and thoughtful by Morrison. Being a young girl, Dorcas was enthusiastic and more secretive. She had lost her both originators around same time, when her father was killed and her mom was burnt alive in her own home. In both cases no one even knew by whom they were killed. This thing made Dorcas empty handed. But her aunt took her as a guardian. These things made her nature complex. Her suffering, her rejection from the society made her a foxy creature. The other thing in her character was her relation to a man, Joe, who was wedded approximately thirty years ago. They shared a strange bond of miseries, love and most important escapism from their respective lives.

After her funeral, she was introduced with his boyfriend Joe, with whom she was sharing painful death of her parents. Dorcas didn't remember much about her parents but while describing her haunted memories to Joe, she described: she didn't remember much detail about her last conversation with her mother but she had remembered the slap of her mother on her face, nothing was more awful than that. However, she did recall, and let him know in the way, about the slap over her face, but she had remembered every minor detail of her death, how her house was blazed in fire, How it smoldered, she let him know. She leaned out the window from her best girlfriend's house because the shouts were not part of what she was dreaming. They were outside, across the street. "Like running for water? Buckets?" Everyone was asking about the fire motor, than someone told that it was not possible to reach because that was busy in another part of town. Nothing remained so important in that house but for Dorcas something was left, that was her doll house which she placed on dresser, in cigar box. However, she attempted to get it. By calling her mother, "Are we able to get that doll house? Mama?" (Morrison, 45).

This was the greatest suffering of Dorcas who lost her parents in the span of one week. What would be the psychological torture for a girl who had seen her mother burning alive? To whom she was calling for her doll house. Although her aunt had taken each responsibility but no one could be like parents. Dorcas wanted to be appreciated. So when Joe stopped over in her auntie's home, she effectively caught the look of seasoned man's. Joe was more mature than Dorcas, could be consider as her father. Like a young lady, Dorcas was energetic and was blessing to him. For whom Joe bought gifts and sometimes when Dorcas didn't get her course, she went to be bad-tempered. There was another scene through which we could clearly understand the situation of Dorcas, when she was rejected by white society for being black woman.

There was a night in her sixteenth year when Dorcas offered her body to both of the white siblings for a move... The right record was on the disc spinner; she could hear its preliminary murmur as the needle slide

toward its furrow. The siblings smiled splendidly; one inclined a small amount of a steal toward the other in addition to never losing eye contact with Dorcas, and whispered something. With every alternating gaze, Dorcas moved towards them. At that point, their smile was pretty much as the music, moderate and smoky, stacked up the air, and splendid as ever then he wrinkled his nose and dismissed her (66-70).

Dorcas had been recognized; assessed and rejected in the time; it took a needle to locate its opening depression. That rejection made her to think that the body she possessed was unworthy. May be for white boys it was a normal thing to reject a black girl but for Dorcas, this rejection was the rejection of her existence, her respect. Even, her aunt gave her each possible way to privatize her that she had no match with city. Yet, her niece challenged and said "Come and do wrong". After revealing such a rejection of society, Joe and Dorcas used to enjoy each other misery and celebrate their un-happiness by accompanying each other. Then she consoled herself to him, "Nobody does me like you do me" (Morrison, 70). During recollection of all these incidents, she was always appreciated by the love of Joe.

Dorcas understood that Joe was totally flexible. She annoyed him and loved to do it with Joe; she knew how to control him. Joe would be always there for her, but also for Dorcas, Joe was a seasoned man but for him she was his private candy. She was exploiting him for her exploitation as no one cared about her as much he do. Somehow, being a young girl, she was attracted towards a young man known as Acton. She wanted to be with someone with whom she could make jealous of her fellows, people must gossips about her, and how lucky she was to have such a boyfriend? And now that opportunity was there, she had Acton. The person with whom every girl wanted to be then why shouldn't she take the chance and leave it for an old man. Joe, an old man on whom her own best friend, Felice used to laugh for having such a creepy relation they had. It was a sort of embarrassment in the society when they got to know about them (169-170). She knew she would pay for it. Even when she met Joe, she said: "You bring me another jug of fragrance I'll drink it and die you don't allow me to sit unbothered" (169). That's why when Joe shot her she was less astonished. She kicked the bucket, to be kept under observation of others by making herself a saint. By bleeding her to demise and opposed to heading off to the doctor's facility. Later on, this was revealed by her best friend, Felice.

Morrison's storyteller sorted out the strings of her story to show how woman characters suffered throughout their lives for being black. They were psychologically and socially tortured. Moreover, their individual identity made them to be insane. Black feminism has clearly observed through each women character of Jazz, where the whole story spins around the subjugation of Afro-Americans women who are the victims of society. All the characters had responded on their own individuality, for their existence. For that they had paid like Felice grandmother said once to her, "Live the life; pay the price" (181).

VI. CONCLUSION

The study found out the set rituals, statements, for the people who are living free but still in cage. Their individuality, their existence everything lies in set rituals of restricted society. In Jazz a lack of ethics, moral law was also found out. In the opening scene, it can be described when Violet tried to disfigure the face of Dorcas in her open coffin in rage. As Dorcas-Joe relation was hidden from their own families and after Dorcas death when society acknowledged about it, this became the hottest topic of contemporary society. This study also found out how women showed hypocrisy to other women of the same class and how each woman character had shown arrogance bigotry towards other women. The study found out how victim becomes victimizer: Violet was insane but through which psyche-chaotic condition she was suffering being a victim and when she acknowledged about this affair. She tried to cut the face of Dorcas in her coffin. Whereas Dorcas knew Joe was married but still chooses to be his private candy. The study found out the motherless part of women. One of the most important relations through which every character of the novel was suffered, was the absence of mother and motherhood. Mother is a mentor to every child but somehow every character managed the situations Violet, Rose Dear and Dorcas all suffered in mother less part. Jazz also found out the lack of chances given to Afro-Americans for their betterment of lives. Joe and Violet moved to America for their betterment of lives but still after passing thirty years in America they are unable to get it.

Feminism is meant to give equal rights especially those women who are not only suffered in the society but also domestically. "Black feminism" points to inspect specific race, Afro- American, who have heartwarming issues especially of black woman. Basically, it deals with the rights of Afro- Americans females for their identity and as an individual of society. Black people were migrated in order to get better life but they were chained in the slavery. Their life had become marginalized for them. Where the Black man knew the social-logical, economical hurdle in society, their women had suffered through the patriarchal society of whites, and also in their own home, they were considered as nothing, black man forgot that black woman personality and individualism is also important.

Toni Morrison, *Jazz* clearly shows the suffering of black women. Each woman character had shared their sufferings of being black. In which some of them tried to resist against it such as Violet and Dorcas while others subjugated in the front of the set rituals for Afro-American woman. Each woman character suffered psychologically and reacted on their suffering whether they accepted the subjugation or resisted against it which made them insane. Through all these characters of *Jazz*, Black feminism could be seen clearly. As Mori argues that Morrison who is “acutely aware of the place historically assigned to black women and suspicious of white middle-class feminism, refuses to be influenced by stereotypes but rather attempts to depict her female characters as subjects that emerge from an oppressed situation and who seek survival” (29). Lastly, it would be better if other researchers study the male characters only or do stylistics analysis of the novel.

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