



Heteroglossic Situations In Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye

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Abstract

This paper aims at investigating heteroglossic situations in Toni Morrison's novel using Mikhail Bakhtin's Polyphony as an approach. In *Discourse in the Novel*, Mikhail Bakhtin presented his views on extralinguistic features of a language, such as perspectives, evaluation, and ideological positioning as the basic qualities of the novel. The main argument is that the novel as a form of narrative art can be evaluated in terms of a series of heteroglossic situations by trying to focus the speech acts, implicatures, emotions, ideological differences, etc. which are the basic constituents of its narrative discourse. To this effect Bakhtin's theoretical assumptions on heteroglossia are applied to the selected situations from the novel with an aim to discover heteroglot features. The novel depicts a story of a black girl named Pecola Breedlove, who is brought up with negative images in very hostile circumstances because she does not possess blue eyes and fair skin. The novelist very tactfully uses gaps and holes at many places to involve readers and critics to come with their own appreciation. There are shifts of discourse and description of other upcoming events as well without providing final ending to the previous events. It is scrutinized that heteroglossic situations arise when an absolution of 'self' uniqueness 'A is A' flops to be effective as well as appropriate in an art of communiqué due to multiple other correspondingly powerful but entirely different perspectives.

Keywords: Heteroglossia, centripetal and centrifugal forces, polyphony, The Bluest Eye

Introduction

This paper examines the heteroglossic situations in Toni Morrison's novel, *The Bluest Eye* in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's claim that heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogism are

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distinguishing features of the literary genre. The purpose of this study is to explore heteroglossic situations not in a simple sense of diversity in discourse but in the ideological patterns working behind each type of the utterances made by each type of character as well as the discourse patterns of the narrator and the author as well. In this cross-sectional study, different perspectives, manifold interrelationships and multiple voices along with an overall voice of the author will be tried to hear.

The novelists create an idiosyncratic world for their readers with the help of their understanding of the real world outside them, which they had perceived through their own senses added to their own individual personality traits. Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) raised the notion of heteroglossia to make a linguistic analysis of literary texts, cultural upshots and discourse in different types of genre, especially in the modern novels to explore the different layers of meaning. Bakhtin took this term as a blending force on multidimensional world, seen from different angles: by the writer, by the readers and by the characters, when they come in contact with each other in the framework of fiction.

The common and uncommon discourses of daily life within any bounded area thereby marked by diversity and stratification, a wide variety of voices, a polyphonic plurality of perspectives, or what Mikhail Bakhtin has termed as heteroglossia (Pred, A., 1990, p. 4).

The readers of the novels, on the other hand, with the help of their own personal experiences are able to make a variety of unique interpretations of the literary texts. These interpretations will be totally dependent on the context, in which the text was produced, and without that context, it would tend to be meaningless.

Bakhtin denounces linguistic analyses that perceive language as a set of systems and rules, detached from communication and perspective. He perceives language as an essentially socially fabricated system, with different implications created between the speaker or author and the listener or reader, who themselves are immersed in extraordinary considerations and socio-political language arrangements. In this regard, it can be rightly assumed that we are all perpetually engrossed in this interpersonal interchange – our exclamations and expressions are hence already anticipated, and are equipped in view of, replies; and our expressions and reactions are themselves fabricated on the basis of the same responses to historic utterances made by ourselves and others (Bakhtin refers to this as ‘addressivity’). As Bakhtin emotively puts it, our statements are ‘always filled with others’ words, as we live in a historical context’ (1987, p. 89). Subsequently any expression is basically shown in a sequence of other expressions, whether constructing on or repelling discourses endured by that sequence. It is such acquainted entanglement in the subsequent discourse genres that permits us to

expect a speaker's 'discourse plan', or 'discourse will', before that speaker has completed communication. Henceforth expressions are not self-contained – reasonably, they 'are aware of and reciprocally reflect one another ... Each expression is occupied with resonances and echoes of other expressions with which it is interrelated by the social communality of the range of speech communication' (Bakhtin 1987, p. 91).

In the lines with similar notions, Derrida in *Signature Event Context* (1972), deconstructed Austin's theory of speech acts on two major grounds: role of context and authoritative intention of the speaker, especially when it is quoted in a text. He criticized not only Austin but also his critics, who did not pay any heed to the diversity of meaning associated with words. While highlighting limitations of Austin's theory, he indicated the possibilities of a speech having endless meanings and interpretations. His major concern was to show the complex nature, of words, signs and symbols. He could not see utterances as "pure" or "simple"; in fact, he regarded them as having the capacity to do much more than the intentions and expectations of the speaker. A single word, sign, image or utterance are capable of carrying multiple thoughts and possible meanings with them. In this regard, he highlighted mock nature of binaries presented under Austin's theory, which were mostly based on true and false conditions. He was able to envisage the un-accomplishment of speech acts in this sense.

Toni Morrison, being an advanced postmodern novelist, confronted many established Western philosophies and customs through her creative as well as critical career of more than forty years. There are multiple layers of different perspectives in the literary texts, which are full of gaps and holes to attract postmodern literary as well as linguistics approaches to discover polyphonic voices in a subverted world. She gave very strange dimensions to her fictional characters in their relationships with each other in an atmosphere of turmoil in post-colonial America. She amalgamated the overall vision of the author, of the narrator and of the characters in such a manner that all of them can be seen as a unified whole as well as individuals. Bakhtin wrote:

All languages of heteroglossia, whatever the principle underlying them and making each unique, are specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized by its own objects, meanings and values. As such they all may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and co-exist in the consciousness of the real people --- first and foremost, in the creative consciousness of people who write novels (Bakhtin, 1981: 291-292).

Research Statement

Like a true heteroglot novel, *The Bluest Eye* is a manifestation of heteroglossic situations.

Methodology

The study is based upon analysis of few selected heteroglossic situations in the selected novel in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia. In those situations, utterances, made by the novelist, the narrator, and the characters will be seen as a display of a variety of ideological conflicts within the framework of the novel.

Analysis and Discussion

Like a true heteroglot novel, the novel provides a network of interrelated centrifugal as well as centripetal forces working together to provide basis to a variety of cognitive conflicts. There is an evidence of polyphonic voices of the novelist, the narrator, and different characters who remain indulged in a process of dialogue with each other in many situations of the novel: "ultimately, dialogue means communication between simultaneous difference" (Clark, K., & Holquist, M. 1984, p. 9). In the novel, we find a nine-year old Black African girl, Pecola Breedlove, being abused by different violent forces around her in the dark environment in which she is born to be tortured because she is not blessed with white skin and blue eyes, a celebrated norm of beauty in an Afro American culture of that time. She yearns for possession of blue eyes, since she believes that with blue eyes, she will be able to receive love. Blackness is the major sin of the girls like Pecola, who grows in this sheer loathing sense, received from other such women; their mothers.

According to Bakhtin, the centripetal forces "seek to impose order on an essentially heterogeneous world", which seem to be in a continuous effort to "disrupt that order" (Morson, G. S., & Emerson, C., 1990, p. 30). In the novels based on Aristotelian framework, the readers find an authoritative voice of the novelist, which has only one centre, because those early novelists would focus their attention mainly on the external form of the novel. On the other hand, in a heteroglot novel, there are multiple voices which can be heard around their own unique centres. "The novel reproduces within itself the heteroglossia on which it draws and in which it lives" (Dentith, S., 2003, p. 196). The main narrative is fragmented into other narratives to make the readers aware of the polyphonic attributes of the novel.

It is found that the Breedlove family members are abused with pronouncements of being "ugly". Toni Morrison wrote this novel in 1970 in order to promote the movement, "black is beautiful", which was the most powerful slogan in the USA at that time. This movement stimulated in the Afro-American writers of that time to highlight the oppression of their people. Toni Morrison, through her literary works exposes how different people perceive realities and people in a different manner producing heteroglossic situations. By

representing distorted reflections of oppressed individuals in her novels, she tries to justify different inequalities in societies. In her novel, *God Help the Child*, (2016) Toni Morrison represents a black female child, who is abused by her mother, because the very looks of the baby scared its mother. Such mothers put their babies on church steps, since they cannot own them. In such cases their motherly instincts are dominated by powerful discourse, which condemns blackness. In her interview with *New York Times*, Morrison is questioned about her motivation for writing. She declares that she is profoundly apprehensive about the feeling of being ugly. She laments that as a reader she has been unable to find such a story in literature, which projects a black figure in a presentable manner: "every little homely black girl was a joke". She laments over the plight of black children, who have no space in literary books and art except for jokes. If the black women appear in stories and pictures, they are seen in the roles of maids and housekeepers. The representations of black females as passive characters are determined by the socio-political positions of the policy makers and by the historical accounts of the conventions they tend to employ.

There are multiple voices transecting each other in a single situation that defines the most heinous act in the novel: rape of Peccola by her father. The narrator, Claudia, perpetuates different realities from two perspectives, as a child and as a mature girl. The description of the situations given by Claudia is clearly different from the feelings of Cholly, Peccola's father: 'He wanted to break her neck - but tenderly' (p.161). Cholly is a true representation of the African Blacks, who were jobless, drunkard and had no sense of responsibility towards their family members. Nothing good can be expected from him, since he himself considers himself a devil. His sexual guilt with his daughter can be expected from such a senseless person. 'He never felt anything about God, but just the idea of the devil excited him' (p.146). In this regard, Cholly's voice epitomizes the voice of a jobless black man who is a drunkard and is at the bottom of morality, which is a quality of a monoglot novel: "In a monoglot world, truth is impersonal. It is placed in a character's mouth by the author. Characters are not creators of ideas but merely carriers" (Pethinking, p.152).

Irrespective of this aspect, Soaphead, the Church man, considers all such mischives as natural, "He believed that since decay, vice, filth, and disorder were persuasive, they must be in the Nature of Things. Evil existed because God had created it" (p. 172). Another possible interpretation is that although Cholly stands on the verge of morality, yet he approaches this daughter with the feelings of sympathy and care. He blames himself for not providing his family members with enough comfort in their life. He feels himself sad at the sight of her dish-washing in the kitchen. However, in the feelings of despair, mixed with anger and sheer helplessness, he tends to destroy his own world. Who else could he punish or kill for all that sense of loss? He has no control over the others, he is helpless in changing

his providence. Accordingly, he desires to hurl his psychological burden, which has caused him much pain, agony, misery and torture, all of which are visited upon his own daughter.

Peccola Breedlove: as victim, perceives this sexual assault by her father as a repercussion of the fact that she is ugly. There is over-emphasis on the idea of being beautiful by possessing blue eyes. If it is believed for a while that her rape was a hate crime, then there seems to be no justification for the repetition of the same act for the second time. The victim still yearns for blue eyes after this great loss of her trust, virginity and innocence. Her wish cannot be justified by assuming that she suffers only due to the fact that she is not blessed with blue eyes. Morrison's Peccola desires for the possession of blue eyes. It is actually a voice of the novelist's school friend, who was not sure about existence of God because her desperate wish for possession of blue eyes was not fulfilled (Erdrich et al.). "Pretty blue eyes. Big blue pretty eyes. Run Jip run. Jip runs, Alice runs. Alice has blue eyes" (Morrison, 1970, p. 61). Claudia's ideological world becomes obvious when she discerns the outcome of this tragic event in such a manner that she associates it with the inability of marigolds to grow in 1941 (p. 206), because "This soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers" (p. 206).

There are gaps, shifts of discourse and description of other upcoming events, which show that Morrison deliberately leaves a margin of freedom for her readers to make their own way through the text. After Peccola has been raped by her father, she reports to her mother Pauline, who is least concerned with this shameful sexual assault, instead of consoling her victimized daughter, she colds her. Her speech, especially with her daughter, Peccola depicts her cynicism, a product of her disgusting feelings and pent up emotions: 'Crazy fool..... my floor, messlook what you away in dread' (p. 121). She is so deeply moved at the sight of hot pie juice falling on the kitchen floor but remains silent at the demise of her real daughter's virginity by her father. Instead, she shouts at her bitterly and holds her responsible for that sinful act because she did not resist his assault. It is possible to say that the girl who was not been given any worth throughout her life has easily failed to resist. She had lived a passive life, she had been a victim of abuse, hatred, physical and mental atrocities could be easily subjectified by anybody under any circumstances. Since her mother shows no sympathy for her daughter after the act of rape, Peccola does not tell her of the same the second time (Morrison, 1970 p. 215). In contrast, Cholly and Peccola live under one roof, but there is no description of their change in feelings, emotions or ideas after the rape event.

Heteroglossia emerges when an inclusive indulgence of 'self' identity 'A is A' fails to be valid as well as pertinent in an act of communication. There are inter and intra interpretations of 'self'. Such heteroglossic situations are evident in the display of social

jargon. The same character, Pauline is observed in many ways thus allowing for a diversity of discourse. She is seen differently at different places in different situations and with different people. Her attitude towards her own family members is quite different from her attitude towards those where she works as a housekeeper. Her own daughter is seen as the best target of her worst type of cynicism, a product of her disgusting feelings and pent up emotions. On the contrary, her gentle treatment towards the pretty daughter of Fishers, where she is a housekeeper, strikes a bitter contrast with the humiliating discourse when she shouts at Pecola. This is clearly evident in the episode where Pecola accidentally drops a pan of blueberry pie on the kitchen floor and is burnt there. Pauline does not comfort her own daughter because she does not possess white skin, golden hair and above all blue eyes like the Fishers' daughter. She tends to betray the expectations of her girl in many situations. It is strange that this mentally enslaved mother has only perceived the white aesthetics from the movies but she fails to perceive the archetypal image of a mother. Pauline is a mother whose self is mortified by hate speech due to her physical ugliness. The humiliating discourse patterns have successfully made her a subject, although on psychological grounds. Her character is the representation of psychic enslavement, which will never show resistance, but will escape the bitter realities into the world of her own choice.

According to Bakhtin, we are unable to form "authoritative images of ourselves within", because we tend to change ourselves under the influence of our mood, situations and feelings (Pethniking, p. 155). Pauline's own daughter looks at her mother as a stranger, when she addresses her as Mrs. Breedlove. In contrast, the Fishers' girl gives her a soft name, 'Polly'

Conclusion

It is found, after the analysis that Bakhtin's ideas and Morrison's novel offer enlightening visions into each other. His notion of polyphony deals with the novel's characteristic for the illustration of a variety of expressions in different situations in domain of the novel. The characters and the novelist are seen enjoying freedom of expression, not dominated by the voice of the novelist. In representation of characters' polyphonic voices there is technique of double-voicedness applied by the author to engage the readers to make their own interpretations. The novel is an imitation of the real world, since Morrison has tried to project socio-political environment of 1940s in postcolonial America by reconstructing history with her own perspective. Hence the novel presents linguistic cultural diversity of social classes as well as diversity of individual discourse as a product of a specific belief system and peculiar likes and dislikes.

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