

Music, Memory and Morrison's Jazz

The aim of this paper is to study the tie between jazz music and Black identity and how memory works as a device to connect these entities in Toni Morrison's Jazz. The paper conducts the research under W. E. B. Du Bois' idea of "the slave music, the only gift of pure art in America." based on the book Black Reconstruction in America which unveils how the slave music flourished in America and how it holds the cultural identity of Negro. Therefore, it claims that jazz music is purely a product of Afro-American culture that carries the essence of Black identity. Besides, the paper unfolds the writer's intention of narrating the wretched African-American life from 1850s to 1920s the way jazz music is composed. Furthermore, the writer reckons that the bending back to the pathetic and horrible past is nothing more than trying to fix the smashed mirror that can never be fixed. Therefore, the thesis paper concerns why the music is always a great embodiment of human culture that represents the certain identity of human community as jazz music represents the identity of Negro community.

Keywords: Memory, Music, Afro-American Culture, and Identity

"Music fulfills the gap the language lacks." The idea crossed my mind as I leafed through Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. Indeed, the language is what we use as a tool to convey our ideas or thoughts. However, it cannot sufficiently explain the extreme pain or the sheer happiness inside our heart the way the music does. As I went through the novel, so I found the taste of music (jazz). Therefore, I made my mind to figure out why this novel is written in a way that jazz music is composed.

In the narrative, the characters and their whereabouts seem up in the air just like the improvisation in jazz music leaves the story unsettled. Besides, the language used by the author is merely portraying the black's outer wound. However, I believe the music transcends the

physical world and reaches the depth of the inner cosmos thereby the author has applied the notes of jazz music to make the readers feel the inner wound of the Blacks. Moreover, this paper endeavors to show how Toni Morrison's *Jazz* comingles the features of jazz music and the usage of memory that assist in forming the identity of the Black. Hence, the major objective of the paper is to examine jazz music (which is employed as a metaphor) and its function along with the writer's usage of memory in its most productive form.

This research paper examines the novel through the specific theoretical insights. It bases its study on the idea developed by Du Bois' in his *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the part Which Black Folk played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America*. Du Bois points out the significance of the Afro-American art and literature in the history of America that ventures back to the history of the black culture.

Moreover, he says the Negroes brought nothing with them when they were shipped in America as slaves except their religion and rhythmic song, and some traces of their art and tribal customs. Hence, the paper's prime focus is on how the Black music, specifically jazz, came into existence and how it mattered in the lives of the then Negro. It also shows how it changed by the course of time and still has an impact in American culture respectively.

Similarly, the paper also engages on scholarly discussions and debates initiated by the scholars regarding the issues of music, memory, and identity. Christine Ferrari, Nick Pici, Ward P. Welty, and Deborah McDowell, to name a few, are some of the scholars who have very different views about the fiction concerning the issue of music and Afro-American culture. This paper, in the end, brings the ideas generated by these above-mentioned savants regarding the diverse issues in the narrative and delivers its own genuine finding.

Jazz is the sixth novel by Nobel Prize-winning author Toni Morrison in which she

narrates the triangular story of Joe, Violet, and Dorcas. She tells the story in a way that resembles the spirit of jazz music. For instance, improvisation and swing are the very dominant features of jazz. Therefore, *Jazz's* narrative is extemporaneous and swings back and forth. Like these techniques, Morrison ventures back to the past and unfurls the pathetic and struggling days of these characters. The story is set mostly in Harlem that begins in the aftermath of the murder of 18-year-old girl Dorcas and moves back and forth.

Joe, a door-to-door cosmetics sales-man, falls passionately in love with Dorcas, an eighteen-year-old girl. He shoots her because the girl does not feel comfortable staying in relationship with him besides she finds a boy of her age. He murders her because he thinks this way he can keep the feeling for her alive in his heart. Later, his wife Violet also reaches her funeral and stabs the corpse just because the girl tried to steal her husband from her. However, while narrating the story of these characters the narration happens to take place at various times and in various places that give the sense of jazz music.

Du Bois elucidates in the book *Black Reconstruction in America* the contribution of the black in the history of America. In this book, Du Bois points out the significance of the Afro-American art, literature and the music in the history of America that have the direct connection with the formation of identity of the Black. Moreover, according to him, nothing else of art or religion did the slave south give to the world, except the Negro song and the story. This paper focuses on the particular music (jazz) which is flourished from the root of slave music and how it mattered in the lives of the then Negro and how it got changed by the course of time and still has an impact in American culture respectively.

He writes: “The subtle folk-lore of Africa, with whimsy and parable, veiled wish and wisdom; and above all fell the anointing chrism of the slave music, the only gift of pure art in

America” (56). This phrase explains that the black folks did not bring anything with them while they were transported to America except the story and the music and most importantly, the African culture along with them. That is why; if we believe in Du Bois he argues the music and the oral stories are the base of the African culture/identity.

On the other hand, Stuart Hall in his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” states: “Perhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices they represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation. (13)” Hall believes that the identity is a way of representation. Thus, our identity is determined by how we are represented which is based on the goods or things we use. Therefore, in *Jazz* Morrison presents the jazz music as a representative of Negro identity.

Jazz is a well-celebrated novel in academia. It is known for its experimentation with the narration which resembles the musicality of jazz music. Jazz music is the spirit or base of the narrative. However, there is a subtle aim of the writer regarding the use of the musical notes in her book. This is why the paper investigates why Morrison chose ‘jazz’ as a title for her novel. Moreover, Morrison also discloses the black history and the constitution of their identity, and their country and urban life at the same time.

Many critics and writers have bestowed their thoughts regarding the issue of music and its functions in the novel. For instance, Nick Pici writes:

Almost all of her novels touch on music in some way or another, whether that music is slave work-songs, spirituals, gospel, or the blues and whether the vehicle Morrison uses to convey this musical experience is content, language, form, or a blending of all three. . . . Morrison's *Jazz* breathes the rhythms, sounds, and cadences of jazz radiating and

enunciating, reflecting and re-creating the music's central ideas, emotions, and aural idiosyncrasies perhaps as well as written prose can. (18)

In this review, Pici tries to showcase how Morrison's novels always bear the features of music. He says almost all of her novels are written in a way in which the theme of music is ever-present and the tool she applies to convey her musical experience is content, language, form and sometimes all of these. Therefore, *Jazz* is one of the novels, which for Pici, comprises all the aspects of jazz music just like any written prose can.

However, Morrison does not embed the idea of music in her fiction in vain but she does so in purpose. Pici agrees Morrison's works often carry the central idea of music, specifically *Jazz* is highly smeared by the notes of music. Nevertheless, we can argue why Morrison is doing so. As far as this paper is concerned, Morrison's only purpose behind raising the issue of music in her works is because she wants to tell the world how rich the colored people were in the field of art, literature and music that is deeply rooted in Afro-American culture and which are the initiatives of human civilization.

Likewise, Deborah A. McDowell in her "Harlem Nocturne" asserts: "Morrison's entire oeuvre has involved a studied effort to invoke Ezekiel-to make the dry and disconnected bones of the black historical past live. Though set in 1920s Harlem, *Jazz* traces the movements of its characters back to the near and distant past" (9). McDowell, in this text, talks about Morrison's entire works, in which he thinks, Morrison has deployed a certain tool that resembles biblical character Ezekiel who had chosen as a conveyor of the message of God because it holds all the ethos and pathos of the Negro's past and makes it more live. He also writes *Jazz* encircles the narrative in a different period of time of its characters.

However, Morrison applies the music as a tool in her novel, which is the resemblance of

Ezekiel that McDowell talks about. The way Ezekiel was appointed as a saviour of the people in Babylonian attack, for Black music indeed worked as a saviour in the time of segregation. That is why this paper claims that music is not only associated with the history of the colored people but also with their emotion. Moreover, as jazz music has a characteristic such as a swing back and forth, so the narrative of the book consists of the narration of past, present, and the future. Besides, the music helped them cope with all the hardships, movements, and disposition the black people went through which are put together as a manner of storytelling reflects the composition of jazz. Hence, the sole purpose of this project is to uncover Morrison's strategy of raising the incidents of the past in a musical form that ultimately goes back to the origin of Black history.

Likewise, Maurice Wallace writes a review titled "Print, Prosthesis, (Im)Personation: Morrison's *Jazz* and the Limits of Literary History" in which Wallace says: "Among other things, Jazz is very clearly a music book. . . "Somehow, the oral within the written, precisely when oral black culture was transforming itself into a written culture," *Jazz* would seem aimed at capturing the specifically musical aural ties of black song-making in the same prosthetic way" (5). Thus, the book, according to Wallace, is precisely a musical one that tries to foreground the unspoken or unwritten aspects of African culture that gradually began transcribing into written ones.

However, Morrison's practice of using the musical notes in her narrative is the beginning of her attempt of bringing all the oral aspects of slave-song in a written form. In doing so, she aims to expose the hidden turmoil of the characters in the novel because her protagonists are like the music itself. They are aggressive, fearless and loving at the same time.

Furthermore, Elaine Barry's article reads:

Jazz has its rural origins in the "field hollers" of slaves whose expressions of suffering

served to blur and alleviate pain. In Morrison's Harlem, music from clarinets, saxophones, pianos, guitars, and Victrolas seductively permeates the City's apartment houses, nightclubs, and streets giving some members of the black community the illusion that they are invincible. (12)

In the aforementioned extract, Barry talks about the history of jazz music that came into existence as healing medicine to the black slaves during the time of slavery. Nonetheless, she does not seem to acknowledge the music that is played in Morrison's Harlem, where Joe and his wife Violet reside, as a boon for the black, but an illusion that makes the Black think they are a Hercules-like figure.

Nonetheless, Barry's argument about the music does not sound agreeable because she knows how music had empowered the Negroes in the past. The Music indeed gave them the power of being undefeatable. The drums on the street made them stand against the inequity and atrocity and the sonorous sound of piano, saxophone, guitar and all encouraged them to move on and make the slavery eliminated from their life. On the top of that music was the only weapon that effectively worked to achieve the freedom they were fighting for.

Moreover, a review written by Ward P. Welty makes a comment: "*Jazz* is a novel of the redemption of Joe and Violet Trace through remembering their pasts, dealing with the after effects of violence and racism, and finding coping mechanisms that allow them to grow on with their lives" (227). Welty sounds logical when he says the novel is all about the redemption of Joe and Violet. These characters struggle all their lives but they do not realize what they are struggling for. However, in the end they find their salvation in the love that welts for the time being and blooms again in their heart. Besides, the music also works as a tool to revive the love for them

For Welty, *Jazz* does not only carry the issue of romance, pain or the vengeance among the characters. Nevertheless, it actually goes beyond that and endeavours to fetch the effective solution

to the problems that obviously are created by the violence and racism. Hence, after the great turmoil among colored and the non-colored people, people like Joe and Violet had no any option to cope with such situation except take the help of music and escape the remnants of such brutality. The following excerpt toward the end of the novel clearly explains Welty's notion: "Somebody in the house across the alley put the record on and the music floated in to us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing" (214).

However, these characters are run by an abstract power. I think Welty is talking about that abstract power which she calls redemption. Certainly, the love and music are the mechanisms that did not let them give up while the life was crushing them like a cigarette butt. Besides, there was a dim hope in them. The hope for the better life that was not extinguished even in the time of storm of slavery that almost shattered their lives down. Thus, Joe and Violet lived their life hoping the life they were driving would be better and comfortable one day. In the end, their hope led them into the realm of love and salvation.

On the other hand, Edna O'Brien's article published in *The New York Times* states:

. . .Harlem permeated with the thrum of music, Harlem to which those black people who had run from want and violence came to find their stronger, riskier selves. In Ms. Morrison's robust language we see the sidewalks, the curbstones, Egyptian beads, Kansas fried chicken, doors ajar to speakeasies, an invitation to the low-down hellfire induction of music and sex. (4)

O'Brien's statement precisely shows the image of that contemporary time when the jazz music was achieving its popularity. Because, in the book, we can find the people enjoying the club, drinking alcohol, being involved in adultery, and most importantly, the blacks' engagement in

the novel tension after escaping the pathetic past that was leading them to a new horizon where they would have to form an identity for themselves in the industrial America.

Besides, after the emancipation Morrison's characters seem battling with themselves because they are not being able to erase their past from their head. They are haunted by their gruesome past that is why they are involved in different activities to subside it. They are making and enjoying the music, they seem to be celebrating their freedom by having intercourse with the people irrespective of the color of the skin and enjoying the alcohol. This is how they have forgotten the solemn side of their selves and focused on the brutal side that engaged them in a new tension.

Additionally, Veronique Lesoinne's article that is entitled as "Answer Jazz's Call: Experiencing Toni Morrison's Jazz" mainly focuses on the vague voice of the narrative. Lesoinne states the indefinite personality of the narrator invokes author's two of the central concerns in the creation of African American literature. On the one hand, through both of the indeterminacy and the self-questioning of the narrative "I," she compels her readers, irrespective of their ethnicity, to engage in a thorough self-exploration or to examine centers of the self and to compare those centers with the 'raceless' ones with which we are most familiar. On the other hand, the narrating voice's indeterminacy enacts in a most forceful way the novelist's notion of African American modernity. Morrison once observed that a modernity which overturns pre-war definitions ushers in the Jazz Age (an age defined by Afro American art and culture), and requires new kinds of intelligences to define oneself.

In the same way, Christine Ferrari's article announces jazz has its rural origins in the field hollers of slaves whose expressions of suffering served to blur and alleviate the pain. Specifically, Ferrari's prime concern is circled around the lives of pivotal characters; Joe, Violet,

and Dorcas. Furthermore, she does not rely only on the present whereabouts of these characters; however, she further steps on the historical period that still has a tremendous impact on them. In the time of slavery Negroes were so dominated that they even could not express their suffering, thereby, they started eliminating their woes through the oral song and music that ultimately happened to flourish into jazz. Therefore, this paper concentrates on the issue of jazz music and how it is related with the identity of blacks and how all these things are portrayed in the novel.

This paper explores Toni Morrison's *Jazz* by applying Du Bois' theoretical insights from the book *Black Reconstruction in America* in which he talks about the contribution of the colored people in America. To be more precise, it unfolds how Blacks' identity is reconstructed and what is the contribution of the Black in the history of America and how music plays a pivotal part in combining the black identity and their contribution in the history of America. Moreover, *this paper also borrows the ideas from journals and articles written by the scholars, O' Brien, Nick Pici, Maurice Wallace, Warp Welty, to name a few, who have contrasting views on Jazz. After analyzing all these materials, this paper shows the relation between the novel and jazz music and how these two phenomena help meet the paper's ultimate goal.*

Jazz music is originated in the Afro-American culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is developed from the root of blues and ragtime. If we delve into the history of America, we can find how and for what purpose the African people were brought to America. They of course, as the history shows, were shipped in America (Virginia) in 1619 as an indentured labourer to work for white Americans. However, what they brought with them was nothing except mindful of memories of their country, folklore, and the song in short, an African culture. Gradually, the song started to develop into diverse genres, jazz is one of them.

Initially, Black sang spirituals, work song, and field holler or field call during the time of

work in the field. They expressed their hellish life through the song. Later on these rituals gradually developed into blues, ragtime, and jazz and so on. Not only these music or songs lessened the agony of the colored people, however, the music by itself was a great achievement for America or the great contribution of the colored people.

Du Bois in his book *Black Reconstruction in America* writes: “They brought with them their religion and rhythmic song, and some traces of their art and tribal customs” (21). Here, Du Bois is referring to the contribution of Negroes in the making of America. Moreover, jazz music is one of the timeless gifts to America by Negroes. Hence, the paper argues that jazz music is a developed form of slave music that is deeply connected with the Afro-American culture. Furthermore, it also relates with the identity because the culture determines who we are. Therefore, Morrison’s sole concern behind making her novel sound/seem like music is to unfold the truth that how jazz music resembles or bears the Afro-American culture and identity.

Undoubtedly, Morrison’s *Jazz* breathes music and the music helps to express the agony, wrath, lust, passion, desire, melancholy and the psychic of the people. So is the case with *Jazz* because Morrison, through the musical notes, tries to render the inner turmoil of the characters in the novel that is related with the African-American lives. However, although there is no use of word ‘jazz’ in any page of the book but Morrison uses all the materials that jazz music potentially consists of just to portray the Afro-American life from slavery to twentieth century.

Therefore, the narrative orbits around the three major characters; Joe Trace (a man in his fifties who sells cosmetic products to make his living. He happens to fall passionately in love with an eighteen-year-old girl named Dorcas), Violet (Mrs. Trace, an unlicensed hair dresser who is betrayed by her husband. She tries to kill to already dead Dorcas because she stole her husband), and Dorcas (an eighteen year old girl who falls for an old man and enjoys the short

term romance and eventually gets killed by her beau, Joe) and ultimately reaches back to the slavery.

On the other side, Morrison finely applies the use of memory in the fiction through which she brilliantly manifests the sufferings the characters had to bear throughout their lives. The affliction created by the racial inequity in the South was at peak. Therefore, people like Joe and Violet had to move to the North to escape the racial injustice and poverty carrying the stuff full of valise and the bitter memory in their head. Thus, the memory in *Jazz* plays a vital role because characters in the book belong to different generations. However, Morrison sews the thread of relationship among the character brilliantly which is not possible without the use of memory.

While talking about the narrative, the most frequently asked question is who is narrating the story. The readers relate themselves with the speaker so they would be able to feel the pain or happiness as the characters in the plot feel. However, Morrison employs omniscient narrator who knows each and everything about the characters and the happenings that take place in the novel but never reveals himself/herself. At the opening of the story, the omnipresent speaker begins the story this way: “Sth, I know that woman. She used to live with a flock of birds on Lenox Avenue. Know her husband, too. He fell for an eighteen-year-old girl with one of those deepdown, spooky loves that made him so sad and happy he shot her just to keep the feeling going” (P 1). Nobody knows who the speaker is; however, he/she seems to know the past and present of the characters and sometimes agonizes for the painful incidents the characters go through. Still, the narrator is anonymous.

Nonetheless, the anonymity of the storyteller is what the author intentionally maintains because for the very long time the identity of the black was in threshold. They struggled for their identity for the long time. Besides, the whites knew who they were and where they came from,

and what contribution they made to the nation. Yet, they pretended as if the Negroes were off-stage characters in the play who never got a chance to appear on the stage to expose themselves. Therefore, the writer is trying to relate the anonymity of the speaker with the unclaimed identity of the black, which they expressed through the music.

Morrison, in the foreword avers “I was interested in rendering a period in African American life through a specific lens—one that would reflect the content and characteristics of its music (romance, freedom of choice, doom, seduction, anger) and the manner of expression” (viii). As a result, she composed *Jazz* in which she depicts the interconnectedness of music and the narrative that expresses the woe of Afro-American people. In the book, Morrison presents the romance between Joe and Violet, Joe and Violets’ decision of moving towards the north from south, illicit romance between Joe and Dorcas and Violet’s act of stabbing the corps that encompass the whole spirit of jazz music.

Indubitably, the dominant features of jazz are improvisation and swing back and forth and *Jazz* explicitly seems to follow these patterns. Generally, improvisation is defined as a spontaneous invention of melodic solo lines or accompaniment parts. It is one of the defining elements of jazz. It is composed on the spot, when a singer or instrumentalist invents melodies and lines over a chord progression played by rhythm section instruments (piano, guitar, and double bass) and accompanied by drums.

In the narrative, stream of consciousness technique is highly employed that exactly resembles the improvisation in jazz. For instance, the narrator begins the story in early twenties but gradually it comprises the different era and the lives of the people. Furthermore, the story also includes flash back technique that is equivalent to swing and forth in jazz. The narrator talks about the lives of the characters and circumstances in a way that is very extemporaneous

and it does not have chronological order. The story begins with the turbulent relationship between husband and wife caused by an eighteen years old girl and ends with the romantic integration between them. However, in between these happenings, Morrison represents the chaos and confusion of the characters and the era they lived.

She further writes, “I wanted the work to be a manifestation of the music’s intellect, sensuality, anarchy; its history, its range, and its modernity” (xiii). Although, the music is the foundation of the narrative Morrison raises the diverse issues regarding the Afro-American life. She talks how the characters in the novel are very sensual like the music itself, how their lives are so wayward and uncontrollable regarding the desires they have, and how the narrative gleans the story from generation-to-generation, and how it manages to unfold the tale of different movements which took place in the past and hugely impacted in black lives, and how all the black folk were enticed by the life in the city. For instance, Joe’s passion for Dorcas was so intense that leads him to murder her in the end. He does so because he does not want to let his feelings for her go wilted like a flower in the waterless vase.

On the other hand, Violet’s aggressiveness explodes when she tries to harm the dead girl with a knife because the girl tried to snatch her husband from her and succeeded too for the time being. It is vivid in this conversation between Alice and Violet: “She wasn’t the enemy.”/ “Oh, yes she is. She’s my enemy. Then, when I didn’t know, and now too.”/ “Why? Because she was young and pretty and took your husband away from you” (85)? Similarly, Morrison also uncovers Joe and Violet’s yearn for the city life. The couple leave country and migrate in the city where, they believe; they will find the way to sustain their lives better than the village.

After they shift in the city, they simultaneously try to erase the memories of the country from their mind because the city would help fill the void the village had dented in their lives. The

following statements from the novel read: “Joe believed it would be perfect. When they arrived, carrying all of their belongings in one valise, they both knew right away that perfect was not the right word. It was better than that” (107). Definitely, the city had a great influence on them; they wouldn’t have to work hard, like in the village, to earn good amount of money, in the city they were more freer than the country, besides they did not have to look after anyone. Their lives were going smoothly until Joe finds himself as a murderer of an eighteen-year-old girl.

Initially, jazz music was not given much attention thus it had a bad impression. It was not considered as a disciplined genre of the music because it was usually played in the brothels and taverns where the bad things took place. The people who played this music belonged to a very lower class. Specifically, they were Negroes. Steadily, jazz began to earn its popularity. Subsequently, even whites involved themselves in the music making. However, primarily jazz music was a threat to the domination of the whites upon the blacks. Blacks revolted through music against the hostile treatment of the Whites upon them.

The whites thought the music was a curse because it led the people, who listened to it, towards the path of immorality and unwise activity. In the text, the omniscient narrator substantiates this idea through the help of Alice’s thought:

Alice thought, No. It wasn’t the war and the disgruntled the veterans; it wasn’t the droves and droves of colored people flocking to paychecks and street full of themselves. It was the music. The dirty, get-on-down music the women and the men played and both danced to, close and shameless or part and wild. . . it made you do unwise disorderly things. Just hearing it was like violating the law. (58)

In the aforementioned excerpt, Morrison is talking about the attribution and the impact of the music (jazz). Alice herself is a black woman and she is expressing what the music can do or how

the music can enter into the nerve of a person and make him act accordingly. However, Alice's idea about the music sounds very aggressive. For Alice, music was a fuel to go against the oppression and the tyranny of the whites. Indeed, the music has that power. If one listens to it (jazz) very attentively then it produces a different wave/vibe in the body that has the power to make the listeners act spontaneously. Simultaneously, it creates hatred, rage, melancholy, and all in the mind because of which the audience jump in the action.

The era Morrison is describing in the book was very chaotic and disordered. There were tremendous racial discriminations and the segregation was worst of all. The Black were treated worst than the animals. As a result, Negroes revolted against it because they could not find the answer for the question who/what they were. Nevertheless, Alice says the act of revolting was unwise and disorderly because people like her lost lives, family members, and many became homeless.

Nobody wants to lose anything or anyone in the name of the revolution. However, they did it because they had to claim their right and freedom of choice. Hence, the music was the first means to initiate the rebellion. What Morrison is trying to convey is the music gave the confident enough to take a step against the White and their domination. The strongest of all the weapons for Black was the music they played. It never failed to make them feel as good as the whites themselves. Thus, the music worked as a great weapon for the blacks because it helped to express the inexpressible turmoil of the blacks.

In the text, Morrison describes the movement organized by NAACP, an abbreviation of the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People founded by Du Bois, along with other fellow intellectuals. The organisation was working to fight segregation, racial violence and social marginalisation in order to achieve equality of conditions for black Americans. In

1917, they organised the first major protest march in the history of the United States. However, everything is based on Newton's third law i.e. every action has an equal and opposite reaction. So was the matter with this movement. The riot did not only bring the freedom and prosperity to the Black but it also brought the death and homelessness to many people.

In the fiction, Morrison creates the characters to imply the other side of the riot which is so atrocious in nature. The other side that is very gruesome and merciless. She writes:

Alice thought the lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the riots. So many whites killed the papers would not print in numbers. (57)

Again, Morrison brings the reference of the music. In Afro-American lives, the music played a significant role thereby Morrison is embedding the issue of music in every possible part of the book. Actually, the colored people and the music have an innate relationship. The music is a place where they can be who they really are or find the meaning of life holistically.

Similarly, it works as an escape. When the world turns out to be a hostile then the only thing that can make them cope with the hostility is the music. However, in the mentioned extract, music stands as a loss of life and the wrath of the Negroes. Alice as a herald of the author conveys the historical incident in which many people seem to lose their lives. She is one of the bereavements who lost her own sister and brother-in-law in the riot. Essentially, her people were the innocent victims who had nothing to do with the ongoing rebellion. However, they were killed mercilessly. Through the narrative, Morrison exposes the monstrous act of the white people.

Morrison is calling the music 'lowdown' because the wrath it kindles in blacks was nonsensical and tremendous. It was nonsensical in a sense that it pushed the Negroes on the fire regardless of the outcome it would bring. However, the outcome it brought was unpredictable and pathetic. For instance, Rose Dear, Alice's sister, and her husband were brutally murdered and their only child Dorcas was left orphan. This is just an example but the numbers of such people are still in the womb of enigma and no one can find the exact data.

However, it was needed and nobody can disagree with it because the blacks' position in the then society was beyond pathetic. In fact, the only thing that could shore the black's problem out was the rebellion which ultimately carries the essence of the music. Furthermore, Morrison argues that the music has something to do with the revolting blacks on a street whose anger is spread all over the atmosphere with the beat of the music. Hence, the music the blacks played was a very encouraging factor that led them onto the street releasing their wrath through the instruments they played.

The city where the characters are dwelling has a great tool that manipulates the thought and action of the people. The tool that is so abstract but it still has the power to wield the people's activities and it is none other than the music itself. The music is everywhere enticing the people do dangerous acts. For instance, Joe is overwhelmed by the music. He shoots the girl in such an environment where a loud music is playing.

In addition, the party is going on and the people are dancing and singing. Everyone in the party seems to be saturated by the intoxication of the music. In a true sense, the people in the party are just trying to escape from the woe created by that particular period. Moreover, Morrison further relates the agony of the music with the men walking on the street. She writes: "Blind men thrum and hum in the soft air as they inch steadily down the walk . . . Blues man.

Black and bluesman. Blacktherefore blue man. . . So-lonesome-I-could-die man” (119). The term “Blues” is a base of the jazz music, which expresses the melancholy or the gloominess of the people who play it. Therefore, Morrison tries to exhibit all the agony of the men that is created by the racial environment in America.

Likewise, the fragrance of the music is all over the story. Furthermore, the whole texture of *Jazz* sounds like a person’s long shriek that has been caused by an intense grief. Therefore, the cited extract from the book lets us know about the narrator’s intention to show the pain of the black men. The pain which is so intense that nothing can lessen or heal. Actually, these men are called blues men because their lives are very gloomy and the only friend they have is loneliness. They are aloof from the crowd where their presence is not enjoyed. This is why they are called blue men who only have a darker and bleak side in the life and this is the reason why they had to make the music their soul companion through which they could be able to express all the grief and sorrows they could never utter in the White domain society.

If we venture back to the life of the author herself, we can find a great impact of music in her life. She grew in such a family where music was the first source of learning or education. Her mother and father played and enjoyed the music. Thus, she had a music running in her vein that pumped with each breath she took. After her birth, the very first thing she was familiar/intimate with was the music. Therefore, she spilt the attachment of music in the fiction with the help of language. Moreover, the book also sounds autobiographical. In the Foreword, she states:

My mother was twenty years old in 1926; my father nineteen. They had both left the South as children, chock full of scary stories coupled with a curious nostalgia. They played the records, sang the songs, read the press, wore the clothes, spoke the language of the twenties; debating endlessly the status of The Negro. (xi)

Like Joe and Violet, her parents too had left the South in their early age. Hence, Joe and Violet's lives resemble the lives of the parents of Morrison. The reasons they escaped the South must be the racial inequality and poverty otherwise, they would not come to the North in vain. Besides, they were, like Joe's family, very fascinated with the city life and its phantasmagoria-like scenarios.

They did everything to be the twentieth century American. In short, they appropriated the White elite's culture to adjust their identity in the society as such. They read the newspapers and books, wore the fine attires, spoke the language of twenties, talked about the condition of the colored people, and played and listened to the music.

Furthermore, she grew up listening to the music her parents played. She was raised in a very musical environment that helped her nourish the love for the music. The major source of inspiration for the music was her mother. From a very early age, she began to hear her mother sing. She says her mother was a very good singer that made other people mused. She further states: "Like the music that came to be known as jazz, she took from everywhere, knew everything- gospel, classic, blues, hymns-and made it her own" (xiii).

Unarguably, her mother was an ideal personality for her who deliberately poured an impression of music in her life. That is why the novel could not be untouched by the theme of the music. Moreover, as the jazz music flourished out of multiple elements, the book itself contains the different subject matters. Morrison's intention of collaborating the various discourses in the narrative such as love, sex, racism, politics, economy and so forth is just to claim that jazz music is a sole creation of afro-American culture, which binds all the cultural aspects of the colored people and carries the burden or boon of being the Negro.

Morrison's subtle intention behind making *Jazz* sound exactly like jazz is to claim that

the music is a pure gift of the Blacks which is so novel to the world in which they found the depth of their true being. Besides, the music became a way to communicate with each other in the black community that the Whites could not comprehend them. To substantiate Morrison's argument I have brought the reference from Du Bois' *Black Reconstruction in America*, in which he writes:

It was a new song and its deep and plaintive beauty, its great cadences and wild appeal wailed, throbbed and thundered on the world's ears with a message seldom voiced by man. It swelled and blossomed like incense, improvised and born anew out of an age long past, and weaving into its texture the old and new melodies in word and in thought. They sneered at it—those white Southerners who heard it and never understood. They raped and defiled it—those white Northerners who listened without ears. Yet it lived and grew; always it grew and swelled and lived, and it sits today at the right hand of God, as America's one real gift to beauty; as slavery's one redemption, distilled from the dross of its dung. (92)

Du Bois, in the mentioned extract talks about the music which is recognized as Jazz now. It is a genuine creation of the Black that the nation has ever received as a beautiful present from the Afro-American culture.

However, at the initial phase the music could not get the praise instead the White people loathed it as hell. The whites did not respect it because they could not understand the music. Besides, the music became the code language among the black people that the Whites barely understood. Despite the unconcerned nature of the Whites regarding the music, it did not extinct. Rather it bloomed like a rose in the stormy weather so everyone would love it. And Morrison's one of the intentions is to taking us back to the history of the music along with the history of the

black slaves and show us the relationship between the music and the Black culture respectively.

Another significant component of *Jazz* is Memory. The book is deeply soaked by the flavour of stream of consciousness and flash back technique as the paper has already mentioned above. The memory is a very crucial factor without which the narrative could not be weaved. Moreover, Morrison brings the issue of memory in a way that resembles the practice of swing back and forth and improvisation in jazz. What the paper tries to explain is, no matter what Morrison says or shows to the readers, the music is always embedded there. The music is never far from the issues Morrison deliberately talks about in her novel.

The past of the characters in the novel is related with the memory they bear in their head therefore, it is highly influenced by the style of jazz music. Hence, the memory and the music are complement of each other. These two factors are interrelated in a way that produces the whole essence of the book. To be more precise, Morrison develops the narrative parallelly in which both music and memory are vital that sounds like jazz music bringing all the historical aspects of black people/culture at the same time. Therefore, the paper links the whereabouts of the colored people with the origin of jazz music that ultimately seeks to find the origin/identity of the Negroes themselves in which the presence of memory is very significant.

The characters in the novel are trying to escape from their past. Each bears a very turbulent past that keeps on hunting her/him and each of them shares a common ground that is what makes them feel the empathy for one other. For instance, Joe and Dorcas loss their parents in the riot and Violet too finds herself as an orphan when her mother commits suicide after the debt collectors evict her from her own property.

Morrison creates a kind of orphanhood that completely carries the wound of the Black community of that era. Because of the orphanhood, they hold the common pain created by that

particular wretched period and because of which they are able to understand each other's inner suffering. However, none of them is succeeded to erase the past from their psyche. The more they run from the past the more it chases them. They have no other way to get rid of it save accept it and move on. And this is what they seem to be doing. For all these characters, the past is very dark and gloomy. In spite of the troubled past they are still trying to make their lives worth living.

As a matter of fact, Morrison does not only talk about the woes of the characters in the text but she also brings the historical aspects of America's major political upheavals in which Blacks were highly involved in making of the nation as well as fighting for their basic rights. Therefore, Morrison had no any other option save the memory to portray the inner turmoil of the characters along with the disorder of that era. Besides, she also had to express her idea like the music, specifically jazz, playing on that would justify the situation of that contemporary time. Thus, in this novel Morrison, through the help of memory drags the issue of black history that is expressed/played like the music. This is the major concern of the writer thereby without the memory the intention of the author would not be accomplished.

The description of Joe and Violet's escape from the rural South to the urban North, the murder of Dorcas' parents and the suicide of Rose Dear, Violet's mother, and the traceless disappearance of Joe's mother (Wild) is merely a memory in which the narrative is encircled. Along with the past lives of these characters, Morrison also raises the gruesome history of the black migration and different movements that took place in the course of the American history.

In addition, Morrison brings the context of the 1850s through the 1920s juxtaposing the extended cultural responses to the slavery's end. The narrative begins in Harlem in 1920s with the aged married couple's (Joe and Violet) unhealthy relationship and gradually it starts to unfold

the confusion of each character in the novel. However, the question can be asked regarding the intention of the author behind bringing the historical context with the idea of music attached with it in her work.

Undoubtedly, Morrison's sole purpose behind poking the Black history in the twentieth century applying the musical theme is just to show the importance of the Afro-American culture to the world, particularly in America where the Blacks were taken as a working machine from the very time when they were shipped there. However, their existence was ignored just because they had a black skin colour which was the reason why they were dominated. In other words, they were not considered as the authentic citizen in America albeit the great contribution they made through their toil in the nation was accepted unhesitatingly. Being ignored despite the one's selfless contribution toward the nation is not actually what one's dignity demands. That is why Morrison shows her dissatisfaction through the narrative, specifically through the implication of memory in the fiction.

Nonetheless, Morrison's prime focus is to expose the inner turmoil of the characters in the novel. She does not directly talk about the suffering of the biasness of the white people towards the colored ones although we can find it in the narrative. However, Morrison lets the characters delve into the past that is obviously not pleasant and battle against it. For instance, Violet's evicted mother's suicide, Dorcas' parents' assassination in the riot and Joe's Wild mother's traceless vanishing are the incidents that tremendously haunt the lives of these characters.

Joe's memory of his mother is very intense that haunts him like a ghost, for example. As an orphan he grows up in the family where his foster parents Rhoda and Frank Williams love him equally as they do to their biological children. When he learns that the Williams are not his

actual parents then he asks them about the authentic ones. In return, they answer, “Oh honey, they disappeared without a trace” (124). This remark touches his heart immensely. This is what makes him think that he is a parentless boy and ultimately he baptizes his last name as Trace.

The traceless disappearance of his parents, specifically of his mother is very mysterious. Joe tries to find his mother in the wild but there is no sign of her anywhere. Therefore, he bears the pain of being an orphan within himself as Dorcas and Violet do with themselves because these three people have the same experience that Morrison drags along the story that is defined only by the trace of memory.

Similarly, Joe and Dorcas’ romantic affair, which does not last very long, is the only memory Joe wants to cage in his head forever. Although, he shoots the girl because he found out that she cheated him, Joe enjoys the beautiful moments they spent together which has become the memory only. In the following statement, the narrator precisely narrates the state of Joe: “He remembers his memories of her; how thinking about her as he lay in bed next to Violet was the way he entered sleep. He minds her death, is so sorry for it, but minded more the possibility of his memory failing to conjure up the dearness” (119).

No matter how one treats another but in this ephemeral world the only thing we own is the memory we share with others. This is what Joe is going through. He kills the girl and laments for her departure from his life, however, he seems more worried of being failed to conjure the spent time with Dorcas in his mind because the moments create the memories and those were the beautiful moments of his life that he wants to treasure until the end of his life. On the other side, Violet is in war with her own insanity. She appears in the funeral of Dorcas and tries to slay the corps until she is thrown out of the funeral ceremony. She does so because she wants to erase the existence of the girl from the Trace’s lives that created a lot of trouble, however, she fails in a

great scale. Both of the husband and wife suffer from the nasty memory of the dead girl in a different manner.

In the given extract, the narrator clearly uncovers the psychic of Mrs. Trace: “For Violet, who never knew the girl, only her picture and the personality she invented for her based on careful investigations, the girl's memory is a sickness in the house—everywhere and nowhere” (28). For Violet the memory of the girl is a curse that does not seem to let them live in peace. It haunts them like an evil apparition wherever they are. Is it possible to be haunted by an unknown figure who you have never met with? However, Morrison deploys this abstract thing control over the mental sphere of the married couple whose relationship is gradually bending towards the dust.

Furthermore, Morrison also brings another aspect of their lives. The city seems to entice them tremendously. Joe and Violet, a country people who spent ample time of their adolescent in the small village of Virginia, met under a tree in during cotton-picking season. They fell in love, lived together for a long time, and eventually made their way up to New York City in 1906. Here Morrison adds the historical upheaval that had greatly affected the economy and other sectors of America.

It was the Great Migration or the Great Northward migration in which the massive numbers of Afro-Americans from the South moved to urban North. In the mentioned passage, Morrison clearly depicts how her characters participate in such act and why they do so. She writes:

The wave of black people running from want and violence crested in the 1870s; the ‘80s; the ‘90s but was a steady stream in 1906 when Joe and Violet joined it. Like the others, they were country people, but how soon country people forget when they fall in love with

a city, it is for forever, and it is like forever. As though there never was a time when they didn't love it. (33)

A great number of people migrated from the rural part of the country to the urban cities where they believed they would be able to sustain their lives with material success. The Trace couple were part of it. Nonetheless, as soon as they approached to the city they acted as if they were the true city dweller from an eternity. They forget the place where they came from.

Actually, what Morrison trying to do is, she simply lets her characters act like that because it is the only way they could wipe out the pathetic past from their lives.

New York City provides them a refuge but snatches their youth in return. However, they do not seem to be worried about it because they are intoxicated by the city life, where they do not have to follow the Jim Crow law and where they can easily make money by doing a very trivial jobs, holding a door for the costumers in the hotel, polishing the shoes of passers-by and doing the hair of others, for instance. Most of all, they are in love with the city because it carries the inexplicable pain on its bosom as they do in their heart which is alike. The pain that no one can feel, understand, or heal. Therefore, Joe and Violet force themselves to leave the every inch of nasty memory behind and assimilate whatever the city throws on their path.

There are many things that these characters are attached to from their past. Nevertheless, they cannot travel back and fix it. Therefore, the memory is the only tool from the help of which they can venture the things or moments they had or loved the most. For instance, this sentence from the book explains more about the memory the characters hold in their heart and mind:

“They are remembering while they whisper the carnival dolls they won and the Baltimore boats they never sailed on” (159).

Indeed, we, by nature, have a habit of willing the things that we do not have or have been

lost. As Percy Bysshe Shelley says in his 1820 poem *To A Skylark*: “We look before and after/
And pine for what is not:” (86/87). The lines are very applicable to the status of Joe and his wife Violet. They live in the metropolitan city trying to accomplish a materialistic life. However, they feel/realize that they lack something or there is a void inside them that the city, the money, or the materialistic life cannot fulfil. The only option left for them is to remember things and enjoy the moment they lived. And this is what they seem to be doing.

Nonetheless, the deployment of memory in the novel resembles one of the prominent features of jazz music which is known as swing back and forth. As the swing back and forth is crucial in jazz, so is memory in the novel because without it the narration would be lame. Hence, memory is used as a means to journey the past of the characters in novel and put forward their pathetic whereabouts in the text so the world would not forget who are they and where did they come from.

Music has always been a very significant part of human life and it has always succeeded to make a human life comfortable. Besides, it is a creation of a human culture that obviously holds the certain human identity. Therefore, in *Jazz* Toni Morrison collaborates the musical notes and narrative techniques to show the importance of music in creating the identity of Afro-American people. Morrison also raises the issue of memory to help her intention of combining features of jazz and narrative technique work more effectively in achieving her goal. She wonderfully portrays the restlessness and agony of the characters that can only be grasped if we carefully listen to the music their lives play. To understand their lives or the aura of that era Morrison suggests us to read the book as we listen to jazz music. Thus, this paper halts at the conclusion that jazz music is genuinely a part Afro-American life that not only held their cultural identity but also helped them escape the atrocity of the world.

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