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Passing Legacy of the Past through Literature: Study on Toni Morrison's Narrative Strategies

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to explore how Morrison used literary works as an alternative tool in passing on the legacy of the past in the black community to young people in particular and readers in general. The result shows that being a writer, Morrison argues that the legacy of the past could be transmitted through literature. Morrison asserts that contemporary black narratives should not merely tell stories; instead, it should invite readers to actively participate in experiencing the text, to feel, and to move them to take action. To accomplish the idea, Morrison emphasizes the significance of having specific narrative strategies, the importance of the reconstruction of memories of the past, and the selection of particular historical moments, real and metaphorical geography, and cultural characteristics of African Americans as the setting for her novels.

Keywords: narrative strategies, passing legacy, past through literature, Toni Morrison

1. Introduction

It is believed that the best way to understand literature is to look at its contribution to human life. Thus, literature should not only be seen as an art but needs to be understood as a work that has a function. The function of literature might vary, especially regarding the reader and the author. Literature cannot be separated from the reader and the author. From the perspective of the reader, the literature on one side might serve as the source of one's contentment. It functions not only as of the source of knowledge, which gives the chance to broaden one's horizons and perspectives, and inspiration for the betterment of one's own life, but also giving a kind of catharsis to be relieved from the pressure of emotions. On the other side, literature might lead one to do something for others. Studies show that literature might be utilized as one of the means for the betterment of character building, of legal affairs and religious life [1-4]. Those studies undoubtedly reflect the idea of connecting literature with other fields of study.

Similarly, literature might provide the same functions for the author. Besides thinking of their personal lives, lots of authors deliberately write their works for a particular purpose for the betterment of others. One such author as Toni Morrison, who once said that: I am writing for black people [5]. From the very beginning, black people were the audience described by Morrison. This is African-American history and not personal history:

If there is, I will do it by writing novels not only about the village, the community, and not about anything. I have the imagination to encourage fulfil my dreams [6].

Toni Morrison wants the young generation of black people in particular to understand the real and complete history of Black people in the past. She considers

the history of black people talented to be recaptured. In an interview, Toni Morrison asserts:

The debate can occur because the reclamation of the history of black people is essential even though someone blames the writer for writing history in his way. Much systematic distortion and elimination of black people in many ways at work [7].

Based on expressive and mimetic approaches, especially those related to history, there will be two highlighted problems: first, how is the legacy of past transmitted through literature and second, what strategies does Tony Morrison take to make literature able to transmit the legacy of the past.

2. Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, one of the orientations in literary theories is the idea of connecting the work and the author. In [8] states that: A work of art is a product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings expressed. However, the writer must consider aesthetics and be aware of the real conditions around him, including history, in writing his work. Some believed that literature could be the best device to understand history in the sense that it could reveal anything that cannot be done by the historian. Historians deal more with fact. The authors go deeply.

A literary source is believed to give a meaningful contribution to the historian because the novelist's imagination can create the way people once thought and acted, so ordering matters toward the ethical veracity that the historian could never achieve. Historians depend on written records, whereas drama is a routine delivered by movements, displays, or words that do not want to be written down [9].

Memory has a close connection with history. Indeed, memory is regarded to be different from history. French Historian Pierre Nora once writes, memory is living life and is borne by the people on its behalf.... memory remains in evolution and is open to dialectics. while history is a reconstruction of what has happened and does not exist. However, the need that is avoided by memory is a problem with the history of reconstruction [10].

Narration is a culture that stores memories and gives structure to law and human history [11]. The narrative follows humans wherever they travel and adapts readily to new forms of communication. Constantly evolving and always up-to-date, the narrative is a necessary strategy of human expression and a fundamental component of human identity.

Among the black community, the narration was the key to describing slavery as an extreme condition. The narrative has a primary focus on slavery from the lives of objectively known individuals. The same objective reality and addiction have the basis of the narrative [12]. There are organized groups who have the intention to reveal the truth of slavery so they can immediately abolish it. However, they create narratives that undermine the conventions of linearity between the past and the present.

3. Discussion

Morrison shows the specific characteristics of African-American art and the past heritage of the African-American community. She reminded the history to teach and reminded the future in improving their lives [13].

If my work functions for a particular group, it must witness a story of the past and present. Also, useful to identify important things and things that are not important from the past. The results of the work must be prepared for the present and provide for it. Literacy should not only solve social problems but must explain social problems. My novels must clarify roles that have become obscured. Novels need to identify useful pasts and for the future [14].

In executing the obligation to pass the legacy of the past, Morrison asserts the significance of having unique narrative strategies, reconstructing the memory of the past, selecting the particular historical, geographical and cultural setting for her novels.

3.1. Narrative

Morrison is a contemporary novel writer who emphasizes the existence of narration in it. She argues that narrative is one of how knowledge is organized, and even she thought that it is the most critical way to transmit and receive knowledge. Morrison deliberately made narratives representing black people who were instructive. She writes

The narration is written in two ways, which is personal but also represents race, and to persuade others that we are human beings who deserve God's grace and immediately renounce slavery. By remembering these two missions, the narrative is shown [15].

Narration is not and is never enough because drawing is not just imitating. She asserts that the writers of the traditional narrative did not write their enslavement thoughtfully. Literary conventions always have incidents of each time, so the writer takes refuge in his work [15]. Morrison argues that the slave narrative points to them. Writers not only write their stories but also share stories about black slaves and their terrible experiences. She regards her obligation to reveal the depth.

For me - a writer in the last quarter of the twentieth century, the practice is very different. This exercise is also essential for anyone who is black or falls into the marginalized category, because, historically, we have rarely been invited to participate in discourse even when we are the topic. My job became a way to tear cloak that was pulled from the process too bad to be connected [15].

Traditional slaves have a narrative to tend to tell. Morrison's narratives show her speciality. She not only tells stories but invites readers to participate in nonliterary texts actively. She encourages readers not to accept any data found in the narration. She expects that the reader does not read her narratives based on their literary experience. She wants the reader to respond as an illiterate or preliterate reader would. He even wants the reader to make use of his solitary imagination.

I want the fiction that I make can encourage readers to participate in the experience of the text actively. Such as the literary value of a painting or limited musical composition, so too is the literary value of limited literature. How extraordinary it is not to have to rely on the reader's literary association, his literary experience that can impoverish the imagination of the reader as is the case with the writer. I do not just write literary works [16].

Morrison has her strategy in creating her narratives. The plot is arranged in such a way that impresses the technique of stream of consciousness in modern literature. Morrison explained the trial and error process used by the narrator to reveal an equally essential and exciting plot for her. It puts the exciting elements in front and invites the reader curious to know how it happened.

He wants the reader to be interested in the story of each page and provide excitement in reading. It also illustrates the importance of memory as a potent agency to organize, make sense of, and find meaning in the labyrinth of those very dislocations and disfigurements. The novel must have the same quality as the state of its time [17]. Morrison described “novel sounds, sometimes noisy, sometimes harmonious, sometimes words can be better than music [6].

Morrison never uses a character from her life. In the interview with Elissa Schappell, Morrison explains that she never uses anyone she knows in her life. She argues that she does not write autobiographies. Morrison’s characters are entirely invented. They are the product of her imagination based on *the bit* of information she got or *the bit* of memory she had. *The bit* does not serve as a historical fact, but it serves as a powerful and wealthy instrument to create characters and their narratives, which can move the feeling of the reader and move them to take action. He wants to explore to the reader what it feels like slavery in a narrative. Potential and development have reached character with the community boundary that has been created in Morrison’s novel [18].

The breaking from traditional narratives is also seen in Morrison’s uses of voice. The discovery of authentic sounds has been central to the interpretation of African-American literary history. The voice has been continuously researched by African-American literary scholars [19]. The narration has become a culture in building community identity. Morrison often uses multi-voice narrative strategies. He argues that it is essential not to have a total view, and to give credibility to the types of voices, each of which is very different. She wants to write a novel of his work that is compatible with African-American culture. A multi-voice revival in Morrison’s novel:

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The fact that the stories look as if they come from people who are not even writers. Readers are only told meandered as if they were going in several directions at the same time. I am just trying to create something from an old art form in my books. Something that defined what made a black book. Furthermore, it has nothing to do with the people in the book being black or not. The story is continuously told, imagined in a framework. The endless quality that is sometimes problematic in the form of a novel reminds me of the usefulness of stories placed in the black community [19].

Morrison’s consistency in having different voices is distinctly seen in *A Mercy*. She presents the lives of indentured servants, which are unpopular in traditional narratives. Contract servants did not have civil rights movement activists before 2000 [20].

American history has been forgotten and developed with different perspectives that Morrison used to attract attention [21]. Other perspectives used by Morrison can describe various types and aspects of slavery [20]. The contract servants also showed a different type of slavery. Contract servants are not seen as slaves, but in reality, servants are treated as slaves. Contracted servants are not seen as slaves, but in reality, we often see that [17].

Another narrative strategy proposed by Morrison is adopting an uncomplicated and straightforward style in their writing. She recommends that Black writes to use ordinary words and simple sentences. The process of selecting and arranging words into sentences does not have to be articulated and should not be seen. The ordinary or daily words are chosen to create the intimacy between the readers and the pages but, at the same time, to give them time to pause before driving them to the following shocking knowledge. The strategy to do that is by paying attention to the

first sentence in their writing. Some of her fictions have a shocking but straightforward first line.

To remind the reader of the past, Morrison deliberately associates the first sentence of his fiction with the chosen time and place setting. In his book *Unspeakable Thing*, Morrison said that presenting phrases known to be calm and deliberately arouse the reader's memory. Black women talk to each other, gossip about people or events in a circle, family, environment. That is the strategy done by Morrison in protecting readers from confrontation too early with painful details, while simultaneously triggering a desire to get to know. The article is a disclosure of secrets shared and kept secret by the world outside the community [17].

The same strategy is done in her other fictions. Morrison begins *Sula* with a sentence "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighbourhood." This story reveals a historic place once inhabited by the black community and its prediction of destruction. Written as the memory of the Veteran of Korea War who embarks on a reluctant journey home, *Home* is opened with "Whose house is this?" "Tar Baby's opening sentence," He believes he is safe. "The word" believe "was chosen because it shows belief. Salvation is the desire of everyone" [6] the novel. The view of inconvenience is important to make the reader feel lost. *Song of Solomon* begins with, "The North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance agent promised to fly from Mercy to the other side of Lake Superior at 12 o'clock." The sentence shows a geographical location that suggests travelling from the South to the north, but the protagonist must go south to become an adult.

3.2. Memory

Memory plays an essential role in Morrison's work. Morrison refused to read modems or Westernized versions of the story. This action aims to fill the void in the history of black people and invite young people to improve their lives in the future. Morrison adopted the reconstruction of memories to reveal the lives of black people [22]. Having an idea of who has been and who is better or worse, the life story that is remembered is a pretty good guide to what will be done tomorrow.

Morrison is fully aware of the power of memory and its close connection with history. Indeed, memory is regarded to be different from history. French Historian Pierre Nora once writes; memory is the life borne by the people who live on its behalf. On the contrary, history is a reconstruction of what has happened. History is the need for reconstruction, the need for memories [10].

Memory has two types, namely semantics and biographical [22]. Semantic memory refers to facts and implicit types of memory. Memory is distinctive to distortion and often is not nearly as reliable as we would like. Morrison has based on the biographical memo [10] that this form of intentional creation is not an attempt to find out but is dwelling on the way it arose and why it arose in a certain way.

However, Morrison does not intend to take the full content of what so-called autobiography or another kind of historical documents. She does not intend to write autobiography and history either. Morrison just takes bits of memories and reconstructs them through the help of her imagination. She recognizes she may have matched pieces, but it is usually something vague. Margaret Garner's story is inspiring, but Morrison insists that he does not understand the actual story. *The Bluest Eyes* is inspired by her memory of hearing a girl who prayed for blue eyes.

Morrison takes slices of memory based on faith and does not trust the literature of others [23]. In digging into the truth, he searched for information based on the site to see what was left behind and reconstruct it. What makes it different for her fiction is her reliance on the images – the remains on the site. Images that refer to feelings and beliefs can recognize truth as a route to the reconstruction of an unwritten world [15].

However, even though she uses her fiction to fulfil the distorted history, she does not intend to regard her fiction as historical facts. The bits of memories, which are the base of her narratives, are not regarded as historical facts either. She prefers her fiction as a kind of truth. Morrison argues that her responsibility to the reader is “not to lie.” he is not debating fact and fiction but debating fact and truth:

Facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot so if I try to find and uncover the truth about the inner lives of people who did not write it (which does not mean they do not have it). If I try to fill in the gaps left by the narratives of slaves to open the veils that are so often drawn, to implement the stories I hear. The most productive and most appropriate way is the memory that moves from image to text, not from text to image [15].

Pieces of memories are deliberately reconstructed, and products or memories function as phenomena that have their own lives life outside events, places, and people as expressed.

One day you will walk on the road, and hear something or see something happen. You think that is what you think, a picture, but it is not. When you meet a memory that belongs to someone else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It will never disappear. Even if the whole farm - every tree and grass dies, the picture is still there and what else, if you go there you are never there if you go there and stand where it is, it will happen again; it will be there for you [24].

3.3. Setting

The arrangement consists of three elements, namely a place, time, and social environment. Time is more complex and compositional that contains historical elements, and time has interrelated layers [25]. Morrison adopts historical, geographical, and cultural settings for her novels. Her novels set in the years that would remind the reader of the critical moments in American history, especially those that are dealing with African Americans. The novel has a realistic background about the period but also historical roots that add depth to the story. It provides a cultural setting for the character’s thoughts and actions.

Geography and identity are strictly related to endangering humanity, both physically and morally. The relationship between empathy and sustainability is critically mediated by places and identities that shape and limit the role of empathy in pro-environment sustainability behaviours [26]. The metaphorical geography of African-American expressions takes a different turn, changing the conventional image of a place that connects black environments with low social status and spiritual despair [27]. Morrison makes use of particular places which are inseparable from the history of Black people. Once she said that milieu in which the ancestor lived is of importance, without it, interior life will be absent. Morrison has the power to create settings to evoke memories.

Morrison’s first novel, *This Story*, occurred in the 1940s, there was an imbalance between whites and non-whites. Segregation separates one race or group from another. The effect provides a cultural setting for action in the novel.

The second and third novel is set in years that reminds the reader of two important movements in African-American history. *Song of Solomon* began in 1931 and ended around 1963. Its physical arrangements moved from anonymous cities in Michigan to various cities and cities in the U.S. Macon, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama, Danville, Pennsylvania, Shalimar, Virginia, Jacksonville, and Florida mark the move from North to South. Historically periods of black migration emerged with cities with low populations. The period when blacks as social groups first joined the modern capitalist system as soldiers, and the years when cultural identity seemed to fade away. As the years of contradiction between beginnings and endings, love and hate, and despair and hope [28]. Again, it provides convincing reasons for Sula's and Milkman's thoughts to quest their identity and their movement back to the South to their original community. It also helps to interpret the strange actions of black veterans. At this point, there was a division in slavery.

Besides, he invited readers to manifest themselves in the racial discrimination they were facing. Similarly, *Paradise* is set in Oklahoma in the 1970s, but it goes back to 1889, to the Reconstruction times, in which Morrison presents the ghost of the past that always haunts Malvis. It also depicts the beginning and the end of the community of Ruby, a fictitious all-black town and its 60-year history.

Cultural setting plays an essential role in Morrison's novel. Intending to remind the reader of the past, Morrison intentionally put some aspects of Black culture, such as the worship of the ancestor and music, as the fundamental elements of African American literature. Culturally Black people are inseparable from their ancestors. Ancestral heritage representing the source of information, figures of speech, and cultural values is a black community. Morrison had asserted how the character with ancestral connections determines success in life. Morrison presents the connection between her characters and black communities [29]. Morrison mentions that the legacy of the ancestors exceeds the return of family members who have died. In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison presents Milkman's journey to the depths of his ancestors, so he begins to understand his place in the world. Morrison wants to convey that irregular existence is an inseparable part of a fragmented ancestral relationship. At the same time, Morrison reminds the reader that the survival and collapse of a community may be caused by internal and external causes, as seen in *Sula* and *Heaven*.

4. Conclusion

Toni Morrison has significant concern with the hidden and distorted history of Black people. She deems it her duty in particular and Black people, in general, to reclaim it by revealing the hidden truth not to retreat to the past but to prepare how to handle the present and what they might be able to do for the future. It is an essential legacy of the past. As a writer, Morrison is assured that the legacy of the past could be transmitted through literature. However, she asserts that her fiction is not intended to be historical facts; instead, it is a vehicle to reveal the historical truth. In order to accomplish the legacy of the past, Morrison asserts the significance of having unique narrative strategies, reconstructing the memory of the past, selecting the particular historical, geographical and cultural setting for her novels and might be followed by other black writers.

Black literature needs to keep the black narrative as its specialty, but it should develop specific strategies. The modern black narrative should not merely tell stories, but it should invite the reader to experience the text actively, to feel, and to move them into action. The strategies adopted are: (1) arranging plots that reveal the

alignment of past, present, and future; (2) create characters based on information or memory; (3) exposing different sounds in each work; and (4) using simple and uncomplicated styles in writing.

Black narrative's strategy needs to be completed by the different uses of memory, which represents the black experience in America and the chosen historical, geographical, and cultural setting. Black writers need memories to be reconstructed to reveal the inner life of black people and to be able to understand the real history of their ancestors. Black writers need to adopt historical, geographical, and cultural setting, especially that are dealing the African American history and culture for their works.

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