

The Concept of Signifyin(g) Monkey in "Beloved" by Toni Morrison

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Abstract: Language has been an ideological and political tool in the hand of imperialists and colonists. An outstanding feature of African American literature has been proved to be a distinctively variety of English language used prevalently among black communities in the United States of America and specifically in Black Narratives which is an answer to the monolithic feature of Standard English. Toni Morrison is an author for whom language goes beyond a mere tool of communication and the present article is a study of her novel 'Beloved' and deals with the concept of black vernacular English through Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s "Signifyin(g) Monkey" which reinforces the plurality and flexibility of Black vernacular English in contrast to Standard English.

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1. Introduction

In spite of its variations, Phenomenon of colonialism has expanded in different ways and has created the dominant discourse almost at any location all over the world. Nowadays one can rarely feel the existence of direct colonialism in any country due to the structure of modern life. However the cultural and social impact of imperialism and colonialism is more provoking and deeper than before. No doubt the West, the United States and many European countries, today, are acquiring more than what they would rob at gunpoint in poor nations years ago by means of the dominant discourse in terms of knowledge. Today, every nation that somehow suffered directly or indirectly from colonial domination requires reviewing and reconstructing the distorted history and identity that the West fabricated for them. Discussing African American community as a colonized nation is an ironic case mainly because firstly, it eradicates the notion of the West and the East as mere geographical concepts and secondly, colonizing can be occurred within one country. Perhaps those generations of black people who were forced to leave their homeland, that is African American slaves, suffered from the cruelty of colonization more than any other colonized nation since they had been robbed of their identity, language and history. Today African American people are forming their own discourse by challenging the long-term established Western discourse.

1.1. Black Discourse

Black social, cultural and literary movements such as black arts movement, black power movement, the Harlem Renaissance, and the civil rights movement were unknown until recent years while these movements constitute the main pillars of African American Criticism which includes a huge portion of the United States Literature. Although racial domination in America put cultural and literary

works of African Americans into long-term isolation and, roughly from the sixties and seventies of twentieth century they have achieved many national and international rewarding reputations and are allocated many academic positions (Baker, Houston A., Jr. (1991). The dominant ideology of America's society has excluded all its minorities from the history and it is the reason that critics like Lois Tyson emphasizes that it will probably more significant if the history of America is renamed the history of white American due to the exclusion of minorities through prevailing hegemony. (Tyson, 2006: 360).

One of the most effective and natural means to naturalize the concept of racism in America was fields of art and literature. Therefore the Western philosophy and literature is based on Euro-center definitions which reflect the experiences of Westerners and are surprisingly labeled as universal. According to the same principles literature of African - American as well as other minorities was ignored until the mid-twentieth century. In other words, the literature and culture of America have been a mirror of society and an executor of white patriarchal hegemony. Writers and artists of African - Americans have played considerable role in the hegemonic process including Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, John Edgar Waldman, Maya Angela, Gloria Naylor, Nikki Giovanni, Charles Johnson, Rita Dove among others have been able to challenge the white patriarchal monologue voice and they accounted for a significant portion of America's literature(Blake, Susan. 1984).

The naturalization of racism had a profound influence on America's communities so that even in the first half of the twentieth century black people were suffering from the concept of "internalized racism" that was much worse than racism. Victims of "Internalized racism "come to believe that white people are naturally master race and based on this,

white people are more capable, wiser, more attractive and generally are located a higher level (Denard, Carolyn. 1998). consequently during this period the most common community disease for African – Americans was psychological acceptance of inferiority of black and “superiority of white people. Whatever was white and related to the sovereign rule was considered superior and whatever was black was considered indecent and improper. The tragic thing was that this inferiority sense of the black population had been displaced as a natural phenomenon. Toni Morrison has illustrated this psychological complex in her novel "The Bluest Eye" successfully and skillfully. In this novel Pecola, the black girl who is unable to appreciate her beauty and this inability is rooted in internalized racism, considers “blue eyes” and white skin as the symbols of beauty and always thinks that if she had blue eyes she were charming and attractive.

Tyson believes that internalized racism may lead to "intra-racial racism"(362) that is a kind of discrimination among black people based on the degree of being darker or whiter.

Those who are lighter skinned, are considered to be better and closer to the dominant norms of society. In the novel "The Bluest Eye" Pecola is humiliated because she has darker skin comparing to other characters. On the other side Maureen Peal has the better position for her lighter skin (Holloway, Joseph E. (ed.) (1990).

1.2. Double consciousness is a term coined by Du Bois that refers to his famous theory of African American "double consciousness". The term originally referred to the psychological challenge of reconciling an African heritage with a European upbringing and education. African Americans belong to two completely different and sometimes contradictory cultures: European cultures of America whites imposed on them and African culture which is their heritage brought to America by previous generations (362). Language is an outstanding aspect of "double consciousness". People of African - Americans need to use different languages in different social situations. They use language of Black African - American with together and with family and in situations which is more dominated by Western culture Such as academic places or at work, they have to speak Standard English. One of the challenges for African - American writers is whether to use African - Americans language or Standard English in their writings. Is their audience black or white or both? This matter has influence on the text .For example, the famous poet of the Harlem, Countee Cullen, preferred to use ‘pure’ English in his poems without any impact of black English although many of the themes of his poetry are about race and political issues (363). But

some other poets as Langston Hughes used Black English which is different from Standard English in many ways. Hughes's poetry is mixed with the rhythms and speech patterns of African - Americans and their blues music. In fact, language is for artists such as Hughes a means to introduce the culture and rich heritage of African – Americans.

In the early twentieth century and later African - American artists used unique artistic techniques to illustrate their identity in the form or content of their works to create equal opportunities and this attitude was developed and reinforced more in "Black Arts Movement". Amiri Baraka who was one of outstanding representatives of this movement believed that the main responsibility of African American author was to identify and provide some solutions to destroy the demon of racism. Criticizing the thought and philosophy which introduced the binary system of suppressing and suppressed, colonizing and colonized was the central topic for critics and writers in this period. This topic, criticisms of white supremacy, has remained to this day.

Another significant topic that was challenged by Black Arts Movement is the validity of Criteria of Western critical theories for interpretation of the black arts. They believed that According to the same Western criteria and Definitions the African - American literature has been marginalized thus those norms lose its validity and objectivity. White people create all contemporary literary theories based on what they considered to be true or false. Therefore, is it possible to criticize and evaluate the marginalized minority’s literature based on these criteria?

On the other hand there are many critics who reject this idea as absolutism and believe that there are many western theories that are effective to interpret African – American literary works. Gates who is one of them asserts that whatever contributes to a better understanding of African American works, should be used. This is also his strategy for producing his “Signifying Monkey ”; his literary theory was influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin and Saussure.

1.3. African – American Language

The second half of the twentieth century was the golden era of black literature in America. Within this new discourse the used-to-be ‘other’ expresses ‘self’ rather than being expressed through the lenses of others. No doubt one of the new elements to be used was the very unique language of African American people. The history of black literature has shown that different writers have different reactions to language and almost no one has ignored it. The emergence of this language is sometimes demonstrated stereotypically but frequently it is used meticulously with precise Linguistic techniques. These features, whether in narrative form or content, contain

considerable messages that are very important to understand and interpret the works. The first African American novel, according to Greene, that employed Black English in the history of African American literature was "Clotel: Or the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life" by William Wells Brown in 1853.

This novel represented African- American language which was common at that time and the black character were left free to employ their common language. Greene believes that this novel is an important work because the author depicted events related to slavery laws and its consequences while many of the parameters of African- American language can be found in the narrative. (Greene, 2002: 169). Many African - American theorists believe that linguistic confusion experienced by black communities has definitely interfered the integrity of psychological "self" of black subject and therefore the subject of African - Americans are constantly searching for suitable tool for the expression of "self" which is one of the frequent themes in their art and literature (Gates, 1983: 239). Houston Baker, Henry Louis Gates and Barbara Johnson have studied African American narratives from the perspective of black discourse analysis. They believe that particular linguistic techniques and patterns which are used by African – American authors have made a text particularly 'black' or 'African-American'.

Since the language(s) of African slaves disappeared generally and except for a collection of words and sounds which remained till now, it/they dissolved in Standard English. However any African American text is hunted by its/their ghost-like presence. Consequently the new adopted language, that is African American English, do not provide a coherent image. Thus, African – American authors naturally considered language as a phenomenon that goes beyond a mere means of communication or a tool for exchanging thoughts and feelings. In fact it became a national obsession and it was employed to uncover the unspoken aspects of black community.

J. L. Dillard (1924-2009) studied linguistically the works published before the twentieth century such as works by Charles Waddell Chesnutt, Joel Chandler Harris and William Wells Brown who employed African American English. However later generation were more obsessed by black language. Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes are most famous authors or poets of the Harlem Renaissance whose main themes were the black language. Greene believes that Hurston presented emphatically in her stories various aspects of African American language including phonetic differences, structural variety, different concepts and vocabularies. He admits that this generation especially Hurston paid more attention

to the form of the language such as differences in phonics and articulation comparing to black writers of the previous generations. (Greene, 2002: 178) Hurston's characters have stronger ties with African culture with the use of colloquial and popular language. Greene also says that Ralph Ellison in his "Invisible Man" (1914-1994) reflected the language of African - Americans professionally by Using cultural elements of folklore and linguistic tools and labeled it as one of the most important literary works of African - Americans in the early second half of the twentieth century. He used the linguistic parameters, literary techniques with particular emphasis on language and syntax rules attempting to express the culture and history of African – Americans. The main character in "Invisible Man", Peter, is a trickster plays with rhetoric, rhyme, irony and ambiguity and tries to express more hidden meanings and to convey the concepts that cannot be transferred otherwise. Not surprisingly for most of other writers of the time such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed language is a considerable theme. In this part the writer tries to explore Morrison's "Beloved" through Henry Louis Gates' 'Signifying Monkey'

1.4. The Signifying (g) Monkey

Henry Louis Gates is one of the most prominent literary critics of African – Americans. In a review article called "The Blackness of Blackness: A Critique of the Sign and the Signifying Monkey" he in order to clarify his theory describes a manner of speaking within African - American community. Gates borrows the term 'signifying' from Saussure, but with a distinctly different meaning.

He uses Bakhtin's ideas about language to define 'signifying'. Mary Klages says the term 'signifying' in academic context has the same meaning of Saussure's term in his theory. But in African - American context 'signifying' is the name of a type of language that Gates connects it to jabbering, shouting, and signifying (Klages, 2008, 150). Gates pronounced and writes signifying as recorded in the African - Americans English language; signifying (g). According to Gates the origin of signifying roots in the myths and beliefs of African – American people. "Signifying" is defined by Gates as a verbal game which is based on insulting and is used as a defense mechanism. It is used in situations where other forms of power are not available. Gates relates this action to symbolic reactions of monkeys to their facing stronger animals of the forest. Monkeys are in a less powerful situation but they use their verbal playful skills. Gates indicates that African American people empties the sign from the normal signified and fill it with new ideas and concepts and in this manner, the relationship between signifying and signified of the standard

language is destroyed. At the same time new concepts and meaning are created.

All differences of African – American language with Standard English language arises from this action which all African Americans practice it consciously and sometimes unconsciously. And these playful uses of language create a discourse that stands side by side to Standard English. According to the linguistic theories of Derrida and Bakhtin, the speakers who are closer to the center of Language (standard language) experience more linguistic power. However ironically those speakers who are in the margin of language (speakers of dialects for instance) have a superior status because in the margin, Language is more flexible and plural. As a result of this instability of meaning the speakers are more able to use the language. (Klages, 2008, 151)

African – American vernacular has been marginalized as a non-standard language; it is plural, ambiguous and instable. Whereas standard English as an accepted ‘proper’ form is fixed, stable and monolithic. According to poststructuralist and postcolonial theories stability and inflexibility of language associate with monolithic systems of governments and dictatorship while multiplicity and plurality of language can be linked to multinational organization and democratic systems. With such mentality authors of African - American use language as a tool to counter the dominant discourse in literature. Morrison's narratives are often challenging Standard English through African-American vernacular employed in her novels.

1.5. ‘Signifying (g) Monkey’ in ‘*Beloved*’

In her work, Morrison indicates the condition of African Americans generally and black female specifically in a racist country full of injustice. She uses Components such as myth and imagination in addition to factors such as Racism, sexism and class differences in his novels. In one of her interviews Toni Morrison admits that the worst experience for any human being might be the loss of one’s language. When asked what most prominent characteristic of her work is, she said in answer "her language". She says the most important thing for black people is language. African Americans love to play with words and enjoy it. “There are certain things that I cannot say without recourse to my language.

It is terrible to think that a child with five different present tenses comes to school to be faced with those books that are less than his language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging.” (Tylor-Guthrie, 1994, 124)

She added that In African - American literature, there are some layers of meaning which only for black readers or listeners are understandable.

One of the main themes of Morrison’s narrative is the role of African - American language which is either in the form of linguistic elements or as thematic concepts. However these two elements are more frequently fused. Sethe the main character in "*Beloved*" sometimes tries hard to remember unsuccessfully anything of the language in which her parents and grandparents had spoken. But the only thing that she remembers is that when she was a little child she used to speak in another language; the language which has entirely disappeared. Nor can she find anything about her parents when she explores her past.

The vanished language is a part of her identity and like any other slaves she feels the gaps and emptiness which is one of consequences of losing one’s language. (Morey, Ann-Janine (1997) After Mr. Garner’ death, Schoolteacher has assumed responsibility for the farm. He conducted a pseudo-scientific study of the slaves, treating them in his study the way a biologist treats lab animals; writing and studying on “these creatures”. When Cixous, another Character in “*Beloved*”, was arrested on charges of stealing food, he tells Schoolteacher that if slaves eat enough with further working, master will benefit. But Schoolteacher says that in response “definitions are by definer not by defined” (Morrison, 1987: 190).

Sethe even once heard that Schoolteacher asked his nephew to look at Sethe and contrast her with an animal to classify her animal and human characteristics. Schoolteacher with his symbolic pseudo-scientific methods stands for the long-term established colonial discourse in which blacks are considered as uncivilized community and need to be civilized. Morrison criticizes the western historiography by which non-western nations are defined and formed. It is the reason that Seth prefers to kill her daughter to let people like Schoolteacher write her destiny. *Beloved*, another character in the novel, which is nineteen years old and appears suddenly in 124, is one of the most unconventional characters in Morrison’s all narratives. She represents past and present history of African American community. She does not remember almost anything of her past.

She is sick, cannot breathe easily, her head is loose, her movements are like an immature child’s, her speaking is less than a mature human’s. Her real name is never known and her identity is complex. She is the embodiment not only of the baby’s ghost but also the legacy of slavery. Among many other things she represents the history, language and culture of black community.

William L. Andrew associates the character of *Beloved* to Gates’ signifying monkey (trickster). He

believes Beloved is the image of the non-rationality who cannot be defied easily. She simultaneously has several roles; Sister, daughter, lover and perhaps mother. Her relationship with other characters is both metaphorical and real. Her thought and words, are confusing. Even her physical figure is shifting and unstable. She belongs to the future and the past. She cannot be defined in words and in short she is pregnant with all possibilities (Andrews, 1999: 117). Paul D. is another character who joins a chain band and only his group members understand his unique language and words. He selects his words and expressions in such a way that almost every syllable has many different meanings. Sethe is another signifyin(g) monkey. On her way to escape Sethe is accompanied by Ella. Ella very soon recognizes that in Sethe's speech concepts and meanings go far beyond meaning of words. Therefore she attempts to understand the 'gaps', 'hole', 'silence' and unspoken words convey by her. However it is not an easy job to understand such language. Even for those who are from the same community filling the 'gaps' with meanings will be difficult. For example, Sethe and daughters' dialogue is not understandable for Paul D. This discourse that relies more on verbal techniques such as storytelling, rhetoric, diversity and ambiguity stands against monolithic and racist discourse which is based on writing and is represented by Schoolteacher.

The recent discourse created by African American narratives, which has all characteristics of Gates' "signifying (g)", evokes Bakhtin's world of dialogue. Mikhail Bakhtin, one of the well-known literary and language theorists, believes that the language has an ideological nature in terms of structure and content. He argues that any language is under a permanent changing process it should always examine how people use languages. Bakhtin's theory focuses primarily on the concept of dialogue.

His theory is rooted in uncertainty. Language is always "dialogic" both in speech and writing. Dialogue synthesizes multiple voices. When someone speaks or writes, she/he is not the only source of her/his speech. Rather her/his discourse like her/his identity is a mixture of multiple voices from Past and present. Speech and writing arose from pluralistic dialogue. Dialogue from Bakhtin's view is in contrast with monologue. Monologues include the utterance of one person that does not have the plurality of dialog. Klages says Bakhtin believes that there are two forces at work in the use of language "centripetal " and "

centrifugal." centripetal power leads the language to the integration and monologues and tries to eliminate the differences.

It makes the standard language and standard norms. However, centrifugal force propels the meanings to the margin of language which leads to plurality, diversity and democracy (Bakhtin, 189:1981).

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