

JOURNEY OF THE BLACKS IN JAZZ

*Kavitha H.S., Research Scholar, Assistant Professor of English,
Government College for Boys, Chintamani, Chikkaballapur, Karnataka*

Abstract:

The journey of the Afro - Americans from the first day of slavery to the time when were declared free, the black writers have recorded in all the literary forms. It is clear by now that history of black servitude has received a great impact on the present state of affairs as far as the African - Americans are concerned. The journey of slavery of the black ancestors has made the fates of the present Afro-Americans suffer the consequences. All the characters in Jazz have got these imprints in one form or the other.

Key Words: *Slavery, Jazz Music, Harlem Renaissance.*

Introduction

The title and the content of the paper is a metaphor which represents the course of events as a journey from the beginning to the end with various and varied events that affect the characters. The theme of the paper is to strengthen the identity of the African-Americans and to heal the past wounds of their ancestors and forefathers. Morrison aimed at eradicating the racial and colour disparity. The role of jazz in the life of the black people was that of a remedy for the lack of identification of the black talent and calibre. In the post-war American society, jazz music had an influential effect in the evolvement of the rights of the blacks in America. Its development brought revolution which confirmed the firm stance of the Afro-Americans. The black Americans did not abide by the decorum which is a prerequisite of the American society.

Although rebellion against the segregation of black people existed as early as the 1930's, it was not until after WW2 that black equality movements began to surface all around America. Ultimately, WW2 proved two things. The first one being black and white men had to work together to achieve greater success. The second one being black soldiers were as efficient as their white comrades. Afro-Americans abroad or at home began to use the "Double V" sign throughout the war. The first "V" indicating victory against the enemy abroad and the second one meaning victory against the enemy at home: racism.

The most common theme that unites most of Morrison's novels is the effects of slavery on African-Americans' with the focus on African American point of view. In an interview in 2003 on National Public Radio, Morrison said she wants to write from a "strong historical and cultural base in describing what impacts people, especially, maybe exclusively, African Americans."

Jazz is a composition that expresses chromatic experiences of the musician. The same is the case with the characters of *Jazz*. Take for instance Alice Manfred, aunt of Dorcas, who looks at the world as being risky and the reason is that what know what they do; they are vicious creatures. Even then, her protégé does not reveal of her love affair with Joe. Every character has to say something in the journey of life. The events which he comes across in his life teach him lessons and making him feel repented. For instance, Joe Trace's experiences are that bring him out safe from the state of depression. He patches up the broken relationship with Violet. One of the morals *Jazz* teaches us is that good people may be bad at times. One cannot believe one's inner drive that sends one astray. Morrison seems to convey that repentance is the only way out to rectify our misdeeds. Morrison semantically links the past slavery of the black to the frustration and dejection of the present. The common element that Morrison takes to weave the strands of his novels is that of slavery of the black people and its journey until their emancipation.

Jazz music and Journey of the Black People

Morrison's *Jazz* breaks the stereotype depiction of the black men and women. Her male characters are more or less, weak and fickle minded while the female roles are portrayed as better than their male counterpart. They are self-conscious and are able to comprehend the need of the hour but they are doubly exploited by their own men and also by the white masters. At this juncture, it is fit to mention that her women are either hyper-sexual or soft-natured rational beings. In the story of *Jazz*, the two roles of Violet and Dorcas are opposite poles.

Jazz gives the idea of the fact that life is an unceasing improvisation on the unexpected, uncalled-for and uninvited events and anecdotes. The composition is complex but with a systematic format and form. *Jazz* is a journey from the beginning of slavery to its abolition. The term Jazz may refer to America which is an amalgamation of various and varied things and people with different races, colours and classes. It is an intricate and eccentric blend of the same and the contrast features and traits. America is life Jazz Music which has multifarious colours and sentiments in its composition. Journey of the Africans from the arrival of the first group of slaves in America to the time when they got freedom has witnessed innumerable ups and downs, in their struggle for survival in America. In the words of Carmen Gillespie:

The United States is many things, but is often conceptualized as a coming together of opposites, of the synthesis of urban and rural, black and white, rich and poor, male and female and young and old. All of these polarities combine in a unique formulation that creates the sound, the look, and the character of the country known as the United States in other words, *Jazz*. In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison examines this definition in America by creating characters that can provide access to the experience of what it means to live in a space that is defined by the idea of opposition.

In the light of the above definition of America, the journey of the blacks has its own significance and contribution to the history of America. Morrison delineates the above characteristics in her novel *Jazz*. The novel proceeds in a slow and gradual manner as if its acceleration is recorded like a musical composition. The reader of the novel *Jazz* becomes like the needle on a record player, gently caressing the surface of the words in order to discern the meaning of the text as it moves slowly towards the center, all the while revealing more and more pieces, notes of the entire score of the novel.

During the stay of the black people with the whites, they faced unbearable and humiliating happenings and events. These painful and pugnacious elements in the course of the life of the African-Americans have taught them unforgettable and inexplicable lessons. The past of their parents and grandparents has left indelible imprints on the black minds. After all, they could resolve the crises and were able to overcome the threats. Joe and Violet are the best characters that proved the black potential in *Jazz*.

In *Jazz*, Violet Trace failed to adjust herself to the environment in Harlem and they moved to the South. She shifted to another place which is urbanized. Her journey can be conveniently classified into three stages:

1. Journey to Harlem in search of Individual Identity. This extent until the death of Dorcas who was the beloved of her husband, Joe Trace.
2. From the time when the aunt of Dorcas named Alice met Violet until Violet was relieved of the pangs of her fate because of the illicit entry of Dorcas.
3. When a friend of Dorcas called Felice came on the scene to set everything right until Violet was empowered.

The above three situations mean that transformation of a personality is possible if it is desired and intended. Morrison states the reality. Hell's twins, slavery and silence, came later. Still you were like no other. Not because you suffered more or longer, but because of what you knew and did before, during, and following that suffering. No one knew your weight until you left them to carry their own. But you knew. You said,

“Excuse me, am I in the way?” knowing all the while that you were the way. You had this canny ability to shape an untenable reality, mold it, sing it, and reduce it to its manageable, transforming essence, which is a knowing so deep it's like a secret. In your silence, enforced or chosen, lay not only eloquence but discourse so devastating that “civilization” could not risk engaging in it lest it lose the ground it stomped.

Harlem Renaissance(1917-35) and Jazz

At this juncture, it is apt to know the salient and succinct features of Harlem Renaissance to comprehend all the aspects that affected the lives of the people and literature, in the context and background of Toni Morrison's novel *Jazz* because the shadow of Harlem Renaissance has been found in *Jazz*. *Jazz* shadows the historical elements of Harlem Renaissance. It represents the Negro Movement. Migration of the Afro-Americans is the chief cause of the Movement. It so happened that African-Americans went in search of jobs so that they could shun slavery and live in a peaceful and independent atmosphere. They moved from the rural to the urban areas. Soon after the First World War, they had shifted their stay to the cities like New York and Paris.

Another nomenclature of this movement is '*Negro Renaissance*'. In fact, it was a timely gesture that intended to propagate and showcase the black potential in the cultural, social and artistic areas. Harlem is the district that belonged to the city of New York, which was previously a residential town of the white people. It was also called the Black city because it fascinated the African-American intellectuals and talented people. During those days, Afro-American literary stalwarts had formed literary associations and clubs in Baltimore, Philadelphia, Washington and Los Angeles. Thus Harlem was the centre of attraction for the black community. It became the residence of unique and exceptionally talented Negroes. No kind of hegemony was found among them. Consequently, there was profusion in the production of literary pieces in all genres. Their efforts towards obtaining black cultural and individual identity were fruitful.

Morrison has borrowed the above historical realities to weave her plot. The setting of the story of *Jazz* and the illustrations she has produced through the events and incidents of the novel. Even the term *Jazz* has been metaphorically utilized. It becomes easier to analyze the topic after studying the salient and encapsulated features of the story. Joe Trace and Violet Trace, a fifty-year old black woman, lanky with unstable emotions, made a happy couple. They were in Harlem. She was a hairdresser who even went to the homes of her customers for service. Joe Trace, a fifty-year aged waiter and salesman of cosmetics a part-time stint, Violet's husband, falls in love with a seventeen-year old girl, Dorcas. Joe and Violet belonged to a middle class family.

The love affair was secretly carried on when he visits Alice Manfred, Dorcas' aunt, with the intention of disposing of the cosmetics. Malvonne Edwards, a neighbour of Alice Manfred, who lived upstairs, accommodated the two lovers by providing them with a spare room. However, Violet and Alice Manfred were not aware of the illicit relation. Malvonne used to clean the office of the white people. Every time Joe met Dorcas brought elegant gifts and presents for her to please her. As the time passed by Dorcas grew tired and one fine day, she expressed her sickness against him. The so-called love of Dorcas was only a matter of fascination and the intoxication of which abated soon. She diverted her mind towards youngsters to hook them with her charismatic and alluring acts. After all, she won the praises of a handsome young boy named Action.

The party arranged on the occasion of the New Year's Day, while she was dancing with Acton, Joe's arrival at the party spoiled the entertainment. He shot Dorcas in the shoulder and the bleeding was fatal. Her death on the spot revealed the affair and it spread like wildfire. At the funeral of Dorcas, Violet slits the face of Dorcas using a knife.

Conclusion

Moving to Harlem with Joe Trace, the trauma Violet experienced shows the side effects of the journey. They represent the other black migrants who journeyed in order to find better life. Another reality is that post-bellum effects as far as the Afro-Americans are concerned; the economic instability compelled

them to take up crimes like suicide. In *Jazz*, Rose Dear who is Violet's mother and True Belle's daughter was unable to withstand the bitter realities of life and the wretched economic condition, committed suicide. Her husband had abandoned her, abusing the money earmarked for the family made them incur debts. Thus his wife and children, having been ruined, were driven out as the result of destitution. With the view to get redemption, she threw herself into the well.

This is also a kind of journey suggested by Morrison in *Jazz*- A journey from well-being to the state of destruction. However, this downward journey is a lesson for the black men to make them aware of the aftermath. The consequences of these wrong-doings send the family down like a house of cards. In the case of Joe and Violet, their migration was a need of the hour. *Jazz* is a lighthouse for the Afro-Americans which directs on to the right path. In fact, migration may seem to be flawless but it may be destructive in reality and vice versa. To some Afro-Americans, the migration might be an incorrect step but to those black migrants who go in search of a job, it is like a trial. The after-effects of the journey to Harlem, Violet became calm and less talkative. She was influenced by the ambience found around her. This was the trait of the urban life. The transformation in the life of Violet and Joe is a symbol of constructive development in their personality. Thus she could transform her identity in the urban area.

Morrison upholds the truth that men are born feeble. In the case of his love affair, he was the initiator whereas the female character like Violet has been sketched in a manner that exaggerated her personality. Every character in the novel is traumatically affected. They are intrinsically feel frightened of their forthcoming life in the midst of the white authorities. The journey of their life has taught them to reconstruct, redesign and to refashion their lifestyle afresh. Morrison herself says at one juncture: Entering the mechanized, disciplined world of the northern city, Violet must refashion her private self as a means of entering the public domain of urban life.

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