

Toni Morrison's 'Jazz':

Lyric of Individual Voices and the Black Community

Toni Morrison stands perhaps as the most widely acclaimed African American woman writer today. In her novels, she unfolds the tales of African-American women with a remarkable lyrical force. The first African-American to win the Nobel Prize for literature, Toni Morrison shapes tragedies of her marginalized lot in fiction which reads almost like lyric of the Black community. The pains of being ignored, oppressed and marginalized create aesthetics of pain in her fiction. She has remarkably contributed to the development of Black Aesthetics.

Dante's 'Divine Comedy' is divided into three canticas—Inferno (Hell), Purgatorio (Purgatory) and Paradiso (Paradise). It is interesting to note that Toni Morrison's 'Jazz' forms the second part on Afro-American cultural history in the fashion of Dantesque Trilogy. In fact, Morrison's Trilogy begins with 'Beloved' and ends with 'Paradise'.

The title 'Jazz' plays an important role in the novel. Jazz, a 20th century music, originated in African-American communities in the Southern United States, is a musical style that reflects the mood and the spirit of the Black community. Travis Jackson defines Jazz music as musical style that includes qualities such as "swinging", improvising, group interaction, developing an "individual voice", and being "open" to different musical possibilities".¹ And indeed music remarkably contributes to the thematic aspect of Toni Morrison's 'Jazz'. The jazz music gives a new cultural dimension to the novel. Morrison's art of story-telling includes upbeat and fast rhythm as well as slow and sad tones. As the title of the novel suggests, 'Jazz' is a novel that reflects the mood and mode of living of the Black community, particularly, the Black women. In their woes and distress, the Black women help and support one-another and endeavor to alleviate one-another's pains. The female characters in 'Jazz' create a sort of social motherhood and sisterhood. Charlotte Perkins Gilman writes: "To be woman means to be mother. To be mother means to give love, defense, nourishment, care, instructions".²

True Belle in 'Jazz' is one of the Black women who substantiate the idea of social motherhood. Cut off from her own children Rose and May, True Belle transfers whole heartedly her motherly affection to Golden Gray. She, by nourishing Golden Gray along with his real mother Miss Vera Louise who is deserted by Henry, consolidates maternal stability in a distressed woman and provides her a feminine

support the lack of which is to force True Belle's own daughter Rose Dear to commit suicide. When Violet's parents die, True Belle takes up the responsibility on her already senescent shoulders to nourish Violet and the rest of the infants. She, thus, enlarges her maternal capacities and saves Golden Gray. The Miller Sisters who keep and entertain the children whose parents have gone for work, evince socialized motherhood. These sisters mother the children providing them sand-witches as well as psalms, food-stuff both of the body and the soul, and thus they contribute fully to the psycho-physical development of kids.

Alice Manfred is perhaps the most central female character who substantiates even a sublime form of social motherhood and reinforces the Black female consciousness in 'Jazz'. "I'm having trouble with my head"³, complains Violet during her meeting with Alice whose niece's corpse Violet has tried to maim with a knife. Alice, who has no children of her own, mothers Violet symbolically; she heals the frustrated part of Violet's heart and cures the latter of her distress. After her primary refusal to see Violet, Alice develops with her an immense intimacy wherein formalities vanish and courtesies disappear. "With Violet she was impolite. Sudden. Frugal"(83). And it is needless to say that these are the special privileges of a mother who is so fond of her child. Alice exorcises the ghost of Violet's earlier hatred to Dorcas and awakens her potentials of motherhood. Violet who has miscarriages wonders then whether Dorcas was "the woman who took the man or the daughter who fled the womb?" (109). By Alice's help, Violet discovers a new and permanent motherhood with Dorcas who is no more dead, but alive to be fondled on the lap of her heart. Unconsciously, Violet thus carries out the idea of social motherhood by Gilman that a mother who would crave for a child would "deliberately engage in the most active work, physical and mental; and even more important, would solace her longing by the direct care and service of the babies we already had"⁴. Violet takes care of Dorcas and styles her hair in dreams. Alice teaches Violet the central principle of life which is love. "You got anything left to you to love, anything at all, do it" (112). Alice makes Violet realize that she herself is the maker of her life. She helps Violet to discover the real "me" inside her and mothers the inside "me" in Violet. And Violet perceives a grand mother image in Alice and identifies her with her dead grand mother True Belle. "You iron like my grand mother" (112), says Violet to Alice "whose stitchings were invisible to the eye" (111). By providing the motherly protection which Violet missed in her later life, Alice serves as True Belle's counterpart in the novel.

The idea of sisterhood is connected with that of motherhood. Malvonne reinforces the Black sisterhood in 'Jazz'. When Joe complains about Violet's indifference to him, she scolds Joe and puts him in his place: "Okay there's no love lost between Violet and me, but I take her part and not yours, you old dog" (46). Violet and Felice develop a remarkable sisterhood. Felice discovers that Violet is Violet and not violent. She unloads her responsibilities by conveying the last message of Dorcas to Joe: "There is only one apple...just one, tell Joe" (213).

Whereas the projection of African-American feminist consciousness preponderates, the patriarchal order appears to be deteriorated in 'Jazz'. A number of male characters, Hunters Hunter, Joe, Acton and other nameless ones, with their hypocrisy and failures, conform to the stereotyped male viewpoint. Hunters Hunter who assumes the role of a symbolic father and who has killed Vera Louise by ignoring her, preaches Joe, "never kill the tender and nothing female if you can help it" (75). Joe also kills his beloved Dorcas symbolically by reducing her to an object even before he actually shoots her. "She was Joe's personal sweet like candy" (120), we are told, and "candy's something you lick, suck on, and then swallow and it's gone" (122). Joe claims his ownership of Dorcas: "I chose you---No body gave you to me. I picked you out" (133). For Joe, Dorcas is "the reason Adam ate the apple and its core" (133). And we are immediately reminded of patriarchal interpretation of Eve, the first woman on the earth, created for pleasurable companionship for Adam. "Violet takes better care of her parrot than she does me" (49) is an excuse with which he turns from his wife to a teen-aged Dorcas. This shows how women are looked down as mere objective substitutes in an exploitative social order. Other minor male characters have the similar strain of superciliousness to women. Alice's husband, for instance, runs away with a mistress, Neola's would-be husband leaves her and Violet's greedy father proves to be an absentee when Rose Dear is in distress.

While the Black male characters appear to be selfish and isolated, the Black female characters collectively develop female consciousness by providing one-another social motherhood and sisterhood. Gilman observes in 'Women and Economics': "To leave in the world a creature better than its parents, this is the purpose of motherhood.⁵ At the end of the novel, the female characters live with a better knowledge of life and with a higher development of themselves. Golden Gray is brought up nicely by True Belle. Dorcas, we are sure, must have learnt a lot about life from Alice and the Miller Sisters. Violet, who is protected in her childhood by True Belle, discovers with the help of Alice, the inside "me" and her maternal inclinations to Dorcas. Consequently, Violet lives peacefully with Joe and establishes a sisterhood with Felice. And Felice, trained in the school of relations, learns to be "Like Mrs. Trace, Mrs. Manfred...(204).

Toni Morrison's 'Jazz', then, projects African-American female consciousness which substantiates an altruistic, triumphant and inspirational social motherhood and sisterhood. By the power of new motherhood and sisterhood, the female characters stream out with life and distinguish themselves from most of the male characters who sink in isolation and obscurity.