



Rural versus City Life: A Case study of Toni Morrison's Jazz

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3002

Abstract

Toni Morrison's Jazz is a historical novel which got published in the year 1992. The novel juxtaposes the rural and city life as perceived by the blacks. Owing to their fractured identity which got created in the lap of nature due to the horrors of slavery, Afro-Americans had started considering city not as something to be dreaded. Rather it became a promised land for the slaves. The questions which arose were very challenging – Would blacks be ever able to forge their earlier bonding with nature which they have lost? Could nature be still used to heal the lives of blacks? Could city and nature inhabit together in the lives of blacks? Did blacks still yearn to go back to the wilderness they escaped from? Was city completely incapable of healing the lives of blacks? These and many more such questions remain unanswered so far in the critical works of Toni Morrison. The present study thus is an attempt to answer all these aforesaid ecocritical questions which still remain unanswered when one reads the novel.

Key words: Morrison, City life, Nature, Culture, Urbanity.

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The relationship between nature and culture is a complex one which is covered with many layers. In the America of post-slavery period, nature and culture were often considered as mutually exclusive places. The existence of culture came only after the destruction of nature. They couldn't cohabit together as culture and nature eventually formed irreconcilable spaces. Carlin Gersdorf, in his work, "Nature in the Grid : American Culture Urbanism and Ecocriticism" puts forward a view of a space of colonial Savannah and illustrates how, "view of Savannah...see nature and the urban grid as diametrically opposed phenomena"(1).What is true of Savannah is true of the modern environmental status as well. The distinction between wilderness and civilization is clearly visible in this modern epoch. City has surfaced as something which sabotages nature.

The movement of new urbanism was a transition from the earlier concept of urbanity. The earlier concept of urbanity talked about the separation of city and countryside while the new movement of urbanity talked about the interaction between these twin concepts of nature and culture rather than their separation. Slowly and steadily, this new concept of urbanism started affecting other spheres as well. Literary discourses too changed their approach

towards the depiction of city. The city got a reconstruction from environmental perspective. This new concept of urbanity and city became an important facet of ecocriticism which somehow evolved during the same time when the new concept of city was taking its shape. *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*, a book by Michael Bennet and David W. Teague was an important book which acted as a pioneer in changing the attitude of people towards this new concept of urbanity. In order to protect environment, the general tendency in America was to promote nature writing because such kinds of writing would change the attitude of people towards nature. But such kind of writing didn't help in instilling a feeling of love towards Nature. Rather these writings portrayed the city as a devil. As Andrew Rose points out, "the literature of conservation – almost wholly devoted to nature worship...is persistent in its demonization of the city" (43). The city became a devil's workshop which annihilated and gulped down everything that existed in nature for its own survival. The myth was broken and a need was felt to redefine the association between nature and culture. This need for a revived relationship between the two also penetrated into various literary discourses and philosophical thoughts.



Jazz emerged as an important text which provided a new outlook towards the spatial relationship between nature and culture. According to many critics, the role of the grid system which forms the basis for a city was a positive one. It was formed to offer protection against the harmful effects of nature and to improve the health conditions of the people living in that space. Scattered arrangement in a forest made it difficult to manage but grid system played a pivotal role in their management. The prejudices towards city as a space were still intact with the masses. The concept of city was rejected by many for several years on the basis of its demonizing effects upon nature.

However, as the societies progressed, the writers challenged these anti-urban sentiments harbored by the earlier writers and environmentalists. What was even more interesting is that white Americans were full of anti-urban sentiments and explored the horrible pictures of city. On the other hand, Afro-Americans who worked as slaves in the plantations and endured innumerable tortures in the lap of nature considered city as a promised land which gave them more money and freedom from horrors of plantation slavery which happened in wilderness. On the one hand, white writers celebrated wilderness and tried to curb down the malefic presence of city and called for the retreat to the pastoral life, on the other hand emerged black writers like Morrison and Paul Auster who felt that in order to regain their self-identity and resurrect themselves out of their past lives, characters had to love the city and over-emphasis and domination of their past lives which linked them to nature was only going to obstruct them.

Postmodern novelists thus changed their attitude towards the city. Though these novelists still believed in the harmful effects of city on individual, they didn't consider resort to nature as a solution to this crippling problem. Writers like William dean Howells and Frank Norris gave a new dimension to the fight between nature and city. This distinction of nature versus city was replaced by a new distinction of urban exteriority versus interiority and between protected and unprotected spaces of city. Moreover, this new concept of city was not devoid of nature. Nature and city intersected in

this new attitude of writers and environmentalists towards city. This interaction between the spaces of nature and city on the same platform acted as a catalyst and had an enzymatic effect on literary discourse which started depicting this altered relationship between nature and city. Morrison's *Jazz* was also one of these novels which projected this newly constructed relationship between city and nature. The novel *Jazz* focused on New York City of 1990s. New York City was the chief attraction for all the Afro-American slaves who worked in horrible conditions down South. For these slaves, North, especially, New York City was a space of freedom and solution to all the tortures and exploitation of slavery. These slaves in search of happiness migrated to the dreamland of North during the era of the Great Migration. Cecil S. Giscombe points out about *Jazz*, that the novel was an improvisation on the theme of "the melodious southern wild coming into the city" (63).

As the narrative unfolds, one meets the characters Joe Trace and Violet Trace. They had become the part of the Great Migration of 1920s when they came to New York from their original home in Virginia. Joe and Violet joined thousands of black slaves who shifted to urban places between 1830 and 1930. Joe and Violet Trace moved to the city with lots of expectations. City life for them was a dream world which would put an end to all their miseries. The migration was not just an attempt to come out of the curse of slavery but to improve their economic conditions as well so that they could improve their lives. The city for them was a wonderland. Even before they stepped into this wonderland, their minds were full of imaginations and dreams relating to the promised land of city.

For the characters of *Jazz*, the city was not a place of hatred or alienation. For these Afro-Americans who came from South, the city brought a lot of positivity and warmth along with it. The past of these blacks was full of torments and exploitation down South. The city offered them a huge sigh of relief from that miserable life. And that's why city for them could not evoke the feelings of alienation, "Part of why they loved it was the specter they left behind" (33). But, this doesn't signify that North was like heaven completely bereft of problems. The



violent attacks faced by these southern blacks trampled down their exuberant spirits but these negativities could not deter them from loving this city because the city had offered them plethora of opportunities which were completely unavailable in South. The city became a site where the desires of the dispossessed found an echo. At the same time, it became a site of violence which continuously threatened them. Past and present both seemed to be unsafe territories for the characters in *Jazz*. As the narrator documents this oscillating state of blacks slaves in America, the blacks couldn't fully accept both the North and the South as different kinds of violence were attached to these places.

Infact, after the abolition of slavery, Afro-Americans faced a different kind of oppression. Though they were not forced to work in the plantations, they had to work somewhere for their survival. The system of sharecropping and shacks replaced slavery. But in this system, Afro-Americans were not paid for work. Share croppers were mostly illiterate people who were befooled by their masters and eventually share croppers felt themselves cheated as owners used to reap benefits. Despite strenuous hard work all through the day, share croppers were left with no pay at the end of the year. Shacks where these slaves were made to stay didn't offer any respite as it didn't give enough protection from heat and cold. So, when these Afro-Americans got the opportunities of job in the North, they were happy as they would be paid. So, they rushed to that land where they hoped to improve their life which is completely drenched in misery. Lynching of blacks was another problem faced by blacks in the South. The whites of the south were unhappy because they had to lose their slaves which would snatch their owner status from them. Ku Klush Khan used terrorist attacks to threaten blacks. Lynching and hangings served as a reminder to all the blacks that they were not truly free. South became a place of suffering and Northern spirit came as a bag full of promises. Harlem became the black capital of the world as here in this city these blacks believed that they could regain their dignity and liberty. The hope of the new Negro which found expression in the hopes of a new city surfaces in these lines, "I'm strong...and indestructible" (7).

And once these blacks came to the unknown land, they fell in love with this city which was full of hopes and aspirations. Despite a small house and meager salary offered by unattractive jobs, the city was a place they cherished to stay in. And soon this temporary love got converted into permanent love. But, this feeling of love and awe brought disillusionment for blacks. As the characters of *Jazz* grew up with the ever-growing city, they were only left with the superficial attraction and love that the city held for them. And in this process they had stopped loving themselves and each other. And, this lack of love drifted them away from their own identities. This transition which the city brought in the lives of Afro-Americans was detrimental to their survival. Northern City spread its own kind of violence for black characters in the novel. The city emerged as a place full of complexities whose love was understood only in the hunting part.

Moreover, the city had left men in such a position that they couldn't forfeit this situation now. Resultantly, the blacks started tracing their past to locate their roots so that by associating them with those memories, they could create a habitable environment to live in the city. The point to be noted is that blacks intersected nature and culture in their lives. According to the concept of new urbanism, the city and country should not be treated as mutually exclusive spaces. Rather, these two spaces should overlap with each other. The absence of any one of them was bound to create a void in the lives of Afro-Americans. This void got created in the lives of Joe and Violet Trace. The city was full of possibilities yet it laid a trap for the Afro-Americans. The city became the centre and everyone revolved around it. The love of the city became so dominant that it snatched away the real feeling of love amongst them.

The city life followed a monotonous pattern. The inner emptiness of the city expanded with time and left deep imprints on the city territory. In the novel, the city left a huge impact on the psyche of all characters. Joe's extra-marital affair with Dorcas and subsequent murder of Dorcas, Violet's fascination for birds and her attack on the corpse of Dorcas at funeral are some of the incidents which pinpoint the effects of the city on the mental landscape of people. The study of the characters of Joe, Violet and Dorcas thus



becomes important from an ecocritical point of view in relation to the sense of place created by the city and their past lives in the wilderness of the South. Joe and Violet both belonged to the third generation of slaves. They had heard about the entire history of horrors of slavery from their ancestors. Even their own generation had been sufferers and witness to the tortures and lynching of black slaves. Further they were crippled by the state of penury to which they were subjected to by the white owners. This led all of them to the journey towards the city. Despite the discrimination faced by them during journey where white passengers were dealt respectfully and no heed was paid to the black passengers, the southern slaves were happy during this journey to their dreamland.

Disillusionment towards the city is clearly visible later on in their lives but despite this choking atmosphere, its inhabitants, especially blacks, rose with the expectation of a new sunrise in their lives. Joe and others like him got so much involved in the monotonous rut of the city life that they forgot to pay heed to Mother Nature. Nature was completely forgotten by Joe. Infact, trapped in the busy life of the city with which he even felt disillusioned, Joe could not decide whether the city was good or bad for him. Unable to fathom his situation, he expressed his dilemma through these words which are spoken by the narrator, "There is no air in the city, but there is breath" (10).

Here again, one observes how love for city was antagonistic to the love of nature. The love for two could not move simultaneously. Nature and culture of the city were considered poles apart and the narrator left no meeting ground for both to intersect. And it was this mutually exclusivity of these two regions which drifted Joe back to the Wild. Being a woodsman, a lover of nature, it was very hard for Joe to assimilate himself into the culture of the city. Though he tried very hard, his attraction and hunger for nature couldn't get fulfilled. Had these two forces of nature and culture thrived together, Joe

wouldn't have felt this alienation. And this is the point which Morrison wants to bring home to the readers through the character of Joe. According to Morrison, rather than segregating these twin concepts of nature and culture, she through her character Felice asked them to associate these twin concepts because this association of nature and culture on the land of the city was the only real solution which could bring happiness in the lives of blacks. As Morrison speaks through her character, "How many trees can you look at?" (207).

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