

# Political Aesthetics of Toni Morrison's Jazz

Razia

Postgraduate student (Masters in English)  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

**ABSTRACT:** The following study attempts to understand the politics of aesthetics in the context of Toni Morrison's *Jazz* by using Rancière's idea that aesthetics is subordinated to politics. The title of the novel with its evocation of Afro - American musical form (aesthetic form) and its different sites (here in this case Harlem is the focus of attention) of black revolutionary struggle plays an explicitly political role in expressing the desire for the Black liberation in the U. S, Africa and the Caribbean. In Rancier's view aesthetic is distanced from action as opposed to politics but a sufficient split of action. Distance does not imply a lack of practical involvement. As for him aesthetic experience is not the experience of an aesthete, a drawing art for art's sake but the "distribution of the sensible", a dissociation of the body of the platonic artisan who is supposed to focus only on the art. In this sense aesthetic is not purely alludes to inaction but more of the contemplation of action and not just the beauty of the art itself. As in jazz is not a form of actual political action but it induces individuals to express their desire to act, towards liberation. This political aesthetics of Jazz is played out through the body of the text. The novel stimulates the style of jazz music to tell the falling marriage of Joe and Violet Trace. The novel focuses on the style as much as the narrative / stories of the Harlem communities in 1926. As in the forward Morrison talks about her aim to "establish the structure where meaning, rather than information, would lie; where the project came as close as it could to its idea of itself - the essence of the so-called jazz age ... improvisation, originality, change. Rather than be about those characteristics, the novel would seek to become them." Her desire to convey the meaning through form/structure takes the ideas from jazz, it is jazz which creates much of meanings through sounds not words. It is in this way, study attempts to show how language becomes political, (it is by merging of language with cultural form 'jazz music'), it departs from the dominant representation of "Blacks" and rewrite the history of 'Black' Americans, what she claims as, "a cultural specificity that is Afro American". So, it is in this way aesthetics and politics come together.

**Keywords:** *Politics, aesthetics, Harlem Renaissance, language, Jazz music, culture, black Identity.*

The opening scene of the novel, "Sth, I know that woman" immediately establishes the orality of the novel, harking back to African American storytelling culture. The tone of the narrator's words seems to be addressing someone (reader) who is as if looking at the same scene as she / he is. (In colloquial terms, narrative voice can be taken as saying, "I'm gonna gossip about that woman"). As Christa Crane notes that, "the opening is suggestive of one person gossiping to another, thus seducing readers and drawing them into the story at a provocatively intimate level to experience and transform identity formation". It is in this sense a friendly dialogue between narrator and reader is imagined. This frank self - reflexive voice of the narrator, or rather orality alludes to the style of jazz music (western African cultural heritage), a new language. As John Gennari defines jazz "as a progenitor of new forms, an inventor of new languages, a creator of new ways to express meaning. The blues notes, microtones, polyrhythms, and extended harmonies of jazz constitute a musical vocabulary and grammar that cannot be accurately represented by the standard notational systems of Western music ... ". Gennari defines jazz as a protest against standard musical form that combines different styles, and reaches towards a new musical language where meaning and emotion is evoked not through lyrics but through this assimilation of sounds. In the forward, Morrison depicts a similar desire to "establish the structure when meaning rather than information, would lie ... The essence of the so-called jazz age ... improvisation, originality change. Rather than be about those characteristics, the novel would seek to become." The "I" first person narrative voice who remains behind the scenes in the narrative, resembles the figure of a jazz soloist. Just as a jazz soloist who sings the stories in a nonlinear fashion, Morrison's narrative voice tells the stories of various characters which are susceptible to improvisation and change.

Morrison's emphasis on structure which would create meaning, suggests that she wants to create sound (sth sound in the beginning) on the pages of the text that give life to her story. Here, in the following passage language resonates jazz, "Dorcas lay on a chenille bedspread, tickled and happy knowing that there was no place to be where somewhere, close by, somebody was not licking his licorice stick, tickling the ivories, beat-ing his skins, blowing off his horn while a knowing woman sang ain't nobody going to keep me down you got the right key baby but the wrong keyhole you got to get it bring it and put it right here, or else". Here the repetitions and onomatopoeia give musical quality to the narrative. Apart from giving musical quality to the body of the text jazz has a greater political purpose to it . Jazz music serves no entertainment, as Brendt defines sounds of the jazz as, "the human voice, plaintive and complaining crying and screaming, sighing and moaning" (in short a call of anger) it is a reminder to their awful past and repressed desires.

This is the reason why Alice Manfred Dorcas's aunt thinks of jazz as "it faked happiness, faked welcome, but it didn't make her feel generous, this juke joint, barrel hooch, tonk house, music. It made her hold her hand in the pocket of her apron to keep from smashing it through the glass pane to snatch the world in her fist and squeeze the life out of it for doing what it did and did and did to her and everybody else she knew or knew about". Music speaks to her desires. Toni Morrison reflects on the reason why jazz speaks desire in an interview, "emotional closure, jazz always keeps you on the edge. There is no final chord". Moreover, music

gives voice to her past, how her family sister and brother were killed in a riot, and repetition of all these similar narratives in the form of music fills her with angst and a sudden impulse to act. As Elizabeth M. Canon mentions in her essay, the emotion connected to this juke joint is not happiness or generosity but the desire to be someone not moulded by the world as she is, and this desire instigates a violence to do something in this world that so obstructs her.

This desire represented by jazz to liberate and find equality also can take the shape of violence. As Rancière rightly says, "Social revolution is the daughter of aesthetic revolution". So, it is jazz (aesthetic revolution) that is needed to achieve social equality. As Alice Manfred Dorcas's aunt thinks "the lowdown music (and in Illinois it was worse than here) had something to do with the silent black women and men marching down Fifth Avenue to advertise their anger over two hundred dead in East St. Louis, two of whom were her sister and brother-in-law, killed in the (race) riots". So this "New Negro" man desire to present his new subjectivity forces him to fight for his rights. The idea being he is not inferior that whites had built their systems of first slavery and then racism. But he was a man. When after WW I white veterans returned to reclaim their old jobs, expecting the black men and women, who held them to return to their lower status positions. Instead, African American rebelled in the race riots.

Jazz aesthetics in relation to the setting of the novel *Harlem* of 1926 recalls the Harlem Renaissance, a political movement. The idea of using art resonates with the Harlem Renaissance. It is black Aesthetic movement, it encapsulates a group of writers, founders, and musicians, who found art to be the key to black political expression. W.E.B Du Bois proposes this concept in his essay "Criteria of Negro art" in the same year this novel is set, 1926. He states that the power of black art is where "the apostle of beauty ... becomes the apostle of truth", he was pushing contemporary artists to use art to advocate truth or history. And jazz music as such is used by African American poets, artists and authors to signify protest, struggle, frustration, and the fight for freedom.

Harlem Renaissance is a facet of a larger movement that is the "New Negro Movement" a new generation of black people, two generations out of slavery using the arts as a way to help to gain broader civil and political rights, some of the framers of what became the Renaissance make the argument that the artistic worth of the people has to be proven by the worth of the art and literature they produced. Especially for the people who have been defined without any culture and without any record of achievement. So, Rancier's idea of linkage ("community") between aesthetics and politics is implied here. According to Rancier in aesthetics (work of art) sensible can be distributed in three ways that structure the manner in which the arts can be perceived and thought of as forms of art and as forms that inscribe a sense of community: the surface of 'depicted' signs, the split reality of the theatre, the rhythm of a dancing chorus. These forms define the way in which works of art or performances are 'involved in politics', whatever may otherwise be the guiding intentions, artists' social modes of integration, or the manner in which artistic forms reflect social structures or movements.", He goes on to give an instance of *Madame Bovary*, when *Madame Bovary* was published, or *Sentimental Education*, these works were immediately perceived as 'democracy literature' despite Flaubert's aristocratic situation and political conformism. However, in the case of black aesthetics the presence of aesthetics and politics is not simply an implication but it is the jazz that is directly involved in political making the claim aesthetic is political.

In this way Harlem (this being the main premise of Morrison's *Jazz*) becomes the centre of achieving liberation. It shapes up a space of resistance in which all sorts of cultural resurfaces under oppressive conditions. City is influenced by the Great migration. During the Great migration of the 1920s people moved to Northern cities in search of safety, economic opportunities, and work. According to many critics, Northern cities attracted a large number of migrants to their emerging black communities, which had notable effects on the cities' scenes of music art, poetry and dance as a central component in the Harlem Renaissance. So, the idea of moving to large Northern cities was also a cultural decision to many. Narrative voice describes the city as a, "City like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things. Hep it is the bright steel rocking above the shade below that does it". Violet and Joe move to the city as a couple to make money and new ways of self-expression. Narrative shows that they feel a sense of freedom even before they reach their destination. Their first contact with the freedom of the city starts on the train ride; they spend the last half of their way to New York dancing on the train, to imaginary music only they can hear, "Joe stood up, his fingers clutching the baggage rack above his head. He felt the dancing better that way, and told Violet to do the same. They were hanging there, a young country couple, languishing and tapping back at the track ... "Again the music is imbued within the description of the city space: "up there in that part of the city - which is the part of the city - which is the part they came for - the right tune whistled in a doorway or lifting up from the circles and grooves of a record can change the weather from freezing too hot to cool".

In the following description of Harlem / City, political aesthetics comes into being. As it is in this description, she is reclaiming the history of "black" community at large, "there is nothing to beat what the City can make of a night sky. It can empty itself of surface, and more like the ocean than the ocean itself, go deep, starless. Close up on the tops of buildings, near, nearer than the cap you are wearing, such a city sky presses and retreats, presses and retreats, making me think of the free but illegal love of sweethearts before they are discovered. Looking at it, this night sky booming over a glittering city, it's possible for me to avoid dreaming of what I know is in the ocean, and the bays and the tributaries it feeds: the two-seat aeroplanes, nose down in the muck, pilot and passenger staring at schools of passing bluefish, money, soaked and salty in canvas bags, or waving their edges gently from metal bands made to hold them forever." In this description Morrison is able to weave the narrative of life and death, lovers who are full with life and "nose down in the muck" is a suggestion to an aeroplane crash. (Ellen oddy)

Language of the narrative as fragmented, vocal, prosaic therefore elusive sometimes (reminder of jazz tradition) becomes the ultimate tool to actualise this protest. Here the language embedded with cultural heritage (jazz) of Blacks suggests the political purpose of the narrative. She believes that "the best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and

irrevocably beautiful at the same time". She desires to show experiences, voices and struggles and dreams of individuals who according to the dominant culture have been defined just as in terms of "race" their black identity. Also, American history is told through books, newspapers and letters, which ignored the lives of peoples throughout the twentieth century. So she takes the political responsibility upon herself to redress history and represent the plights and horrors of her ancestors. As she puts it, "there is a great deal of obfuscation and erasure so the presence and heartbeat of the black people has been systematically annihilated in many, many ways and the recovery is ours". Morrison's awareness of the history of blacks has always been a matter of fact, "Man kills wife. Eight accused of rape dismissed. Woman and girl victims of. Woman commits suicide. White attackers indicted ... "It forces her to narrate actual buried history. Narrative voice recalls Violet's and her mother's personal horrendous experiences, Violet grows up in Virginia with her mother. Who in the face of horrendous Jim Crow laws and lynchings goes insane and commits suicide. As a result Violet as a child remains traumatised throughout her life caused by racial identity.

One of the other most touching racial experience is that of Golden Grey, the interracial son of Vera Louise Gray and Henry LesTroy. He is the product of a forbidden love between a white woman and black man. When Louise's father got to know about her daughter's pregnancy, "realising the terrible thing that had happened to his daughter made him sweat, poured from his temples and collected under his chin; soaked his armpits and the back of his shirt as his rage swamped and flooded the room." Despite being father to seven black children he was unacceptable of her daughter's pregnancy. So he sent her away. Result of all golden as white looking man is raised to believe that he is so. His mother does not claim him as her own but says that he was adopted. When his nurse, True Belle, tells him the truth of his parentage, Golden's sense of his own identity is destroyed. He is actually a black but raised as a white. In this way he straddles the two worlds but belongs to neither so he reverts to a natural existence that lies beyond the community.

It is by embracing her cultural roots she wants to give significance to the existence, the components, the significance and the values of black culture. In an interview she indicates that her writing is embedded with in folklore, music and storytelling because she wants to convey the black consciousness as she says, "I am simply trying to recreate something out of an old art form in my books the something that defines what makes a book 'black'", African American culture, "the thing out of which I come". This subjectivity is asserted in the novel by setting forth the story of how Joe, Violet and Dorcas's "love" triangle turns into Joe, Violet and Felice's love triangle. The idea is that the second would turn out to be a calamitous one too, just as in the earlier case Dorcas is shot by Joe and Violet tries to slash Dorcas out of jealousy at her funeral. Even the narrator assumes the drastic consequence, he/she has been colonised so much that it is impossible to expect any subjectivity from "Blacks' ". Narrative voice says, "Narrative demands sadism ... but what turns out different is who shot whom".

However the triangle comes out to be different this time. Dorcas' best friend Felice, contacts Violet and Joe because after three month she could not stand the fact anymore that both Violet and Joe are still struggling to cope with what happened. Felice tells them that Dorcas wanted to die, she didn't seek medical help because she had simply given up on life. So, it kind of removes the burden of guilt from them and something of this intensity occurs to them which comes out in the form of laughter. As Felice says, "People are mean", Violet said, "plain mean", Mr Trace said, "No comic is what they are", "He laughed a little then, to prove his point, and she did too". When the couple begins to dance, Felice says, "Somebody in the house across the alley put a record on and the music floated into us through the open window. Mr. Trace moved his head to the rhythm and his wife snapped her fingers in time. She did a little step in front of him and he smiled. By and by they were dancing. Funny, like old people do, and I laughed for real. Not because of how funny they looked. Something in it made me feel I shouldn't be there. Shouldn't be looking at them doing that". So, Felice becomes the witness and participant in a moment of transformation as Joe and Violet, overcoming their pain connected through the music. This triangle as opposed to the previous one turns out to be full of life and creativity. Their transformation at a greater level suggests that "Blacks" are capable of asserting this kind of subjectivity which has not been expected from them and defined only in terms of their racial stereotypes. Even the narrator, who is most probably part of this community, could not expect this assertion of subjectivity, "I missed it altogether. I was so sure it could describe it I was so sure it would happen. That the past was abused with no choice but to repeat itself at the crack and no power on earth could lift the arm that held the needle." 'Blacks' existence as inferior is taken to be inferior Morrison shows but with the moments like Harlem Renaissance its force depicted in aesthetics, people started articulating their subjectivity.

Morrison not only rewrite deliberately ignored experiences and subjectivities, challenging history but she also adds layers to it through the character of Malvonne. When Malvonne finds a bag of letters which had been stolen by his nephew, at first she is inclined to mail them, but opens them instead. She reads 'each one.' After reading one urgent letter, she "resealed the letter carefully and thought she would add another penny stamp". From here, she continues to read so many letters. Another is a local girl's application to a law school, after reading the letter Malvonne "did worry that if the girl did not get to be a lawyer she would end up with an apron job. Malvonne, she adds a note in her own hand, "I do not have the one dollar right this minute, but as soon as I hear that you received this application and agreed that I should come, I will have it by then if you tell me you don't have it and really need it". When Malvonne reads a letter between two illicit lovers, she decides to attach a magazine clipping, "urging caution and directing daddy's attention to a clipping from Opportunity Magazine". Malvonne's act of editing, adding, supplementing letters, pieces of historical documents with her own moral judgement not only adds humour in the narrative but serves as a challenge to history. It also acts like a performance of jazz itself. As Morrison describes jazz performance in which the musicians are on stage. And they know what they are doing, they rehearse, but the performance is open to change, and the other musicians have to respond quickly to that change. Somebody takes off from a basic pattern, then the others have to incorporate themselves. In the same way

Malvonne is merging different forms such as newspaper clippings, she is emphasising by adding, she is editing by forgetting something. Thereby Morrison's desire to establish the structure of "improvisation, originality and change" in the text are fulfilled.

To conclude, one can say that Morrison protests and reclaims the silenced history of the Afro American community through her novels' aesthetics. Both the form (style) and the content (language) combine together, appropriating the power of black aesthetics, (jazz) sought to rewrite "Black" American history which has constantly been erased by dominant history. It is in this sense aesthetics and politics come together and aesthetics of Jazz proves to be political.

#### Works Cited:

1. Morrison, Toni. *Jazz*. New York: Vintage, (1992) 2004.
2. Rancière, Jaques. *The Distribution of the Sensible .The Politics of Aesthetics*. London: continuum, 2004.
3. Du Bois, W.E.B. *Criteria of Negro Art*. *The Crisis*: 1926.
4. McKay, Nellie. "An Interview with Toni Morrison." *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Ed. Danille Taylor-Guthrie. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1994.
5. Cannon, Elizabeth M. "Following the Traces of Female Desire in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*." *African American Review*, vol. 31, no. 2, 1997, pp. 235–47. JSTOR.
6. Oddy, Ellen. *Merging aesthetics and politics: Toni Morrison's jazz affect in JAZZ (1992)*. *Literature Music Research*, 2015.
7. Albrecht-Crane, Christa. "Becoming Minoritarian: Post-Identity in Toni Morrison's 'Jazz.'" *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2003, pp. 56–73. JSTOR,
8. Berendt, Joachim E. *The Jazz Book: From Ragtime to Fusion and Beyond*. Rev. Gunther Huesmann.
9. Trans. H. and B. Bredigkeit, Brooklyn: Lawrence Hill, 1992.