

Economic Devocalization and Survival in Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015)

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Abstract

The dimensions of strategic and systematic silencing in America have ramifications for the economic survival of African Americans. The motif of devocalization has been creatively engaged in Toni Morrison's *Home* and *God Help the Child* (2015). Through experimentation with language, Morrison has mobilized her linguistic genius towards the exploration of the themes of mobility, devocalization, commodification, and convolution of other themes. Through this, Morrison once again establishes the intricate connection between her language and her artistic vision, vis-à-vis her commitment to the African American cause. A psychoanalytic evaluation of her themes of strategic economic silencing, poverty, and systematic devocalization, validates Freud's pleasure vs reality principle, unearthing her characters' emotional imbalances and how they channel the untapped desires for pleasure towards a productive end in the face of their harrowing realities. New historicism helps the paper to situate the collective complex of the African American community within the different historical periods, espousing the different discourses and how they inform and are informed by the emotional climate of the times.

Keywords: Critical analysis, devocalization and survival, literature

INTRODUCTION

After centuries of slavery and racial exploitation of blacks in America, African American writers have remained thematically preoccupied with this twin evil and its corollary effects (Eyang & Okune 2004). Its manifestations are a consciously sustained set of strategies adopted by a white supremacist majority to socially sedate and economically castrate African Americans and relegate them to the backwaters of socio-economic life. Toni Morrison, a committed African American writer, has remained committed to her artistic vision and historic duty of historicizing the present with her literary espousals of the basic principles of humanity (Giroux 2020). She engages the African American history not as an end in itself but as a veritable resource for the analysis and evaluation of present African American realities. Her artistic engagement with history and the retelling of the African American story from an African American perspective opens a wide range of discourses ranging from the place of blacks in American politics, economy, cultures, history and society, thereby problematizing the heights of injustice and the dehumanization of African Americans.

The extent of economic dispossession and psychological castration of blacks have remained endemic in the American wealthscape is a thematic priority in Morrison's textual reimagining of the African American landscape. These themes are amply implicated in *Home*

(2012) and *God Help the Child* (2015). Here, the portrayal of the themes of economic deprivation, poverty and creative survival see characters who sometimes resign to fate thereby accepting the status quo and several others who rise beyond the racial strictures, and economic barriers to self-realization and economic mobility. These are themes that are deeply implicated in the home where the life of Frank Money, the protagonist is dogged consistently by horrendous poverty, homelessness and psychosis. These forms of alienation are what he shares with his family because they are not left out of these forms of social and economic exploitation.

The sociological functions of Morrison's artistry and linguistic verve are evident in her creative articulation of African American history, culture, nationalism and socio-economic themes. Her eloquent presentation of African American race history in *Home* (2012), unearth a myriad of exploitative tactics, employed by a predominantly white supremacist system, strategically designed to exploit the vulnerabilities of an already castrated African American population. In harnessing these themes, she re-enacts the African American history culture white politics of economists, thereby revealing that the origins of modernism and modernity for blacks must be traceable to slavery periods.

In *Home* (2012), Morrison creates a social paradox where her black characters are intricately yoked in a vicious cycle of endemic poverty, trauma, lack, want and sometimes death. However, in *God Help the Child* (2015), the phenomenal rise and eventual success of Bride, the protagonist doesn't go without the attendant abuses because of her skin colour these realities are not only circumstantial to the facts of their slave history and scathing racism but as a catcher of economic weaponry in the capitalist arsenal of an exploitative supremacist white majority. It is this thematic paradox of recreating scathing poverty amid the immense wealth of the indignities of black economic exploitation in vast opulence, lack and want in prosperity, injustice in America – a nation whose mantra of four freedoms are seen as standards.

In *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison creates a succinct picture of the scathing picture of (process) of a black child's journey from childhood to adulthood from innocence to self-awareness, from naivety to maturity. Bride, unlike Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* – who is defined by ambitious yearnings for “acceptable” qualities of female beauty. This irreconcilable longing for white standards of female beauty is intensified by the nagging poverty that characterizes her upbringing. Bride, on the other hand, rises beyond the climate of hate, how self-esteem and self-loathing to socio-economic relevance in twenty-first century America. However, her rise is not without its attendant emotional and psychological battles engendered by racism and other stereotypes. Even though the novel is one of a few of Morrison's novels with a contemporary setting, the reality remains a racial given. Charles Chestnutt's exploration for this kind of life is that:

“... white people had not changed their opinion of the negroes, except for the worse the general belief was that they were just as inferior as before and had moreover been spoiled by a disgusting assumption of equality, driven into their thick skills...” (1988, p. 109).

From the brief insight into each of the novels under analysis. It is clear that the obvious thematic thread that connects Morrison's novels is that of poverty in black communities. However, in the articulation of her artistic vision, she provides a counter-response to the race question, which reveals a new dimension to the race adopt strategies of vilifying white supremacist injustices, engendering a co-existence that was redolent of mutual suspicion and mistrust, steering an implacable opposition to imperialism.

Slavery both as an institution and as an industry fuelled the drive towards economic self-sufficiency in America (Eyang 2014; Imbua 2015; Eyang 2016). It was the powerhouse of the industrial and agro revolution. However, the obvious economic imbalances in the wealth scale of the nation where slaves and later blacks were prevented from enjoying part in the economic revival of those years.

In *God Help the Child* (2015), Booker, a knowledge enthusiast traces the beginning and root cause of the black dilemma of slavery and racism to the aggressive pursuit of economic prosperity and the self-aggrandizement by the practitioners of economism. We are then told that he, Booker,

“...suspected most of the real answers concerning slavery, lynching, forced labour, sharecropping, racism, reconstruction, Jim Crow, prison, labor, migration, civil rights and black revolution movements were all about money” (p. 110).

Psychoanalytically, the implications of such insatiable fixation on economism and the drive for personal economic prosperity and the mobilization of all resources towards its attainment and the need for labour has adverse economic effects on the black characters (community). What the characters are or what they have become is the result of the socio-cultural materials that have been used in making them such as the circumstances of their existence.

Morrison’s historicization of the present implies or derives from the fact that her textualization of present realities and her thematization of present problems find answers and even solutions in history. Her artistic historicization of present socio-economic issues gives her artistry a unique flavour. Jennifer holder Kirwan in detailing Morrison’s comment on the importance of history to the analysis, evaluation and interpretation of the text notes that to Morrison; “the enslavement of African and African Americans in the United States is something that the characters don’t would to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people, don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember” (p. 415), and because of this idea of disremembering the fact of slavery and the subsequent racism, African American committed literature takes up the role of remembering these facts of history, thereby re-inventing and re-enacting what is today seen as African American heritage.

Conscious efforts by the American society to work on the collective psyche of the American people to disremember the fact that such an evil happened is given a fillip by anti-black writers (Eyang 2002; Eyang 2016b). But as a counter-response to the artistic rebuttal of African American history and culture, Toni Morrison recreates such a history from the African American point of view. Slavery as an institution, having been fuelled by economic goals, took centuries for its beneficiaries and operators to let go (Akoda & Imbua 2005; Eba & Imbua 2017). In later decades, it manifested in racism, including Jim Crow, etc, as strategies to pressure blacks back to the life of servitude and slavery for economic gains.

ECONOMIC OPPRESSION AND SURVIVAL IN *HOME* (2012) AND *GOD HELP THE CHILD* (2015)

Slavery as an institution, having been fuelled by economic goals, took centuries for it beneficiaries and dogged operators to let go (Eyang & Okune 2004). In later decades, it manifested in racism, lynchings, Jim Crows etc as strategies to pressure blacks black to the life of servitude and slavery for economic benefits. Bookers, Brides boyfriend in *God Help the Child* (2015) has the assertion that:

Money withheld, money was stolen, money as power, as war. Where was the lecture on how slavery alone catapulted the country from agriculture into the industrial age in two decades? White folks:

hatred, their violence was the gasoline that kept the profit motors running... (p. III).

Sigmund Freud's interpretation of this rather unfortunate approach is in his finding that the guiding psychological principle of human relationships in the twentieth century is the pursuit of labour for economic gains. This cruel necessity, therefore, creates a pattern in which blacks who are the labour force, are compelled to channel their natural desires for pleasure towards meeting the selfish economic requirements of capitalist America.

Even though Freud explains in his concept of "pleasure principle" and "reality principle" that all civilizations had been built by the expression of pleasurable tendencies which are channelled towards the reality of the economic need for survival and labour (Marcuse 2012). However, the case in America is different. It is different because it is forced labour without the approval of the black labourers themselves. This forced denial has caused huge deposits of unexpressed feelings in the personal and collective unconscious of blacks, resulting in protests revolutions, etc.

So, as a graduate student, Booker: turned to economics its history, its theories to learn how money shaped every single oppression in the world and created all the empires nations and colonies..." (2005 p. III). In Freud's concept of pleasure vs reality principle, the capitalist establishment in America who in the pursuit of labour for economic gains compel blacks – who are the labour force to channel their natural desires for pleasure towards meeting the selfish economic requirements of the establishment. Sigmund Freud's analysis of replacing pleasure with the reality principle places emphasis on the clear need and craving for labour in an age that is largely driven by economic interests. To Freud, the underlying psychology of twentieth-century interactions is the pursuit of labour for economic needs for survival. This is what Freud implies when he explains the replacement of the "pleasure principle" with the "reality principle". However, these repressions are as continuous as the need for economic mobility for every society and the craving for labour. As a result of this, the repression might become excessive leading to a psychological/mental imbalance for the victim as labourers in the venture of meeting economic needs and the call for production, it is pleasurable to work when there are benefits accruable to people, but when there are none, humans become sickened and begins to look for ways of more liberatory and beneficial engagements with labour and production. Terry Eagleton (1996) supports Freud's view when he says that:

We are prepared to put up with repression as long as we see that there is something in it for us: if too much is demanded of us, however, we are likely to fall sick. This form of sickness is known as neurosis; and since as I have said, all human beings must be repressed to some degree, it is possible to speak of the human race, in the words of Freud's commentators as the neurotic animal (p. 152).

The neurotic reflexes of Morrison's characters are driven by historic oppression and prolonged repressions of their desires; it is either the desire for freedom, the desire to be loved, the desire to find a psychological fallback or a physical home, the desire to be accepted the agitation for equality, the desire for economic mobility and political rights or the desire to find their sense of gender equality or individuality from their psycho-social castration.

Frank Money in *Home* (2012) is a man lost in his search for a home, as the little of the novel implies. He is a defeated hero in the battle for his manhood. He turns everywhere in search of it. He could have found his manhood and subsequently, the lost home if he searched inwards. He tried hard to find his identity but failed to do so because of his lack of introspection, accounting for the tragic consequences of a dehumanizing history and the derogations of his person and race by the larger hegemonic American society. The theme of

poverty exemplified by joblessness and homelessness remains a crippling reality in *Home* (2012). In this novel, we are presented with narratives of cruel poverty in the money household. Morrison tells of the fact that:

... during the years, Cee slept with her parents on the floor, on a thin mat hardly better than the pine slats underneath. Uncle Frank used two chairs put together; young Frank slept on the back porch, on the shanty wooden swing even when it rained (p. 45).

Apart from the inability to afford a comfortable place to sleep, in spite of the fact that Luther and Ida, Cees and Frank's parents worked two jobs each. It was cotton picking in the day and sweeping lumber shacks in the night. Luther as a field worker worked for two planters the lumbering job is particularly hazardous. Despite the lethal asthma she had, she continued because at the end of the three years squatting with Lenore, they could now rent a place of their own.

In Morrison's novel, we are also shown that poverty is heightened by stringent laws, enacted by the government, especially as part of the Jim Crow ideals. Lily is Frank's girlfriend with whom Frank lived before his journey to Lotus, Georgia, to save his sister. Lily finds it difficult to rent an apartment even though she had saved enough for a house. She is confronted with a notice that reads: "No part of this said property hereby conveyed shall ever be used or occupied by any Hebrew or by any person of the Ethiopian, Malay or Asiatic race excepting only employees in domestic service" (p. 73). It implies that the only qualification for living in the apartment is that one must remain a domestic servant. This becomes a strategic weapon to prevent blacks from aspiring beyond their present status of servitude. It makes it stringent and difficult for those who seek a life of freedom beyond the confines of social definitions to find accommodations and jobs of their choice. As for Lily, the frustration that builds up afterward spirals with both psychological and emotional effects. It affects both her mood and her relationship with Frank. This experience and its engendering attitudes, together with Frank's lack of interest in working towards economic and social freedom, strains their relationship irreparably.

Finally, when Frank announces to her that he was leaving to attend to important family matters, she felt one deep pulse and from then on her frustration intensified. She is frustrated too that Frank doesn't share her irritations on: "...unpaid bills, frequent gas leaks, mice, runs in her last pair of hose, hostile, quarrelling, neighbors, dripping faucets, frivolous heating and the insane price of hamburger..." (2012 p. 75). Yet Frank does not take any of these irritations seriously. He doesn't seem to share these concerns because he could not even afford the bills. This did not only trouble Lily, but it infuriated her that Frank never shared her pains and enthusiasm for achieving the goals of independence and financial freedom. However, it is not entirely true that Frank is bereft of ideas, neither is he entirely unambitious. His noncommittal approach to life is a result of snatches of hallucinations that have come to define his life after a traumatic war experience in Korea. His endless and unsuccessful search for a home as well as the meaning of home for blacks in America. These factors caused his psychological castration and the mental imbalance that haunts him through the novel.

Frank's psychotic disorder embarrasses him frequently. Once he was on a queue with Lily at a church function waiting to get food, Frank suddenly bolted, running through the crowd. It happened after he had helped a little girl in whose image Frank replayed the memories of a child he had shot and killed in Korea, and that of his tender younger sister, Cee who is now in dire need of his rescue. His snatches of hallucinations and irrational behaviour scared some, annoying others and surprised the rest. It embarrassed Lily she ponders on his actions, thus:

How could we change so quickly? Laughing one second and terrified the next? Was there some violence in him that could be directed towards her? He had moods, of course, but was never argumentative, or the least threatening (p. 77).

But it is entirely unfortunate that in his poverty he was not able to keep a relationship. In his hysteria, he is rejected. And in his search for a home, he becomes lost in the maze of racial and emotional problems in the United States, the two great concerns of the work.

RELIGION AS SURVIVAL IN *HOME* (2012) AND *GOD HELP THE CHILD* (2015)

Before the civil war “The two great concerns of black writing were the institution of slavery and the destiny of free blacks. An important body of writings is death precisely with religion. In a sense, this represented a turning away from the immediate problems of slavery and subsequently, racism. But much religious literature, from the spirituals to the writings of Alexander Cromwell addressed itself simultaneously to the hope of an afterlife and the need to ameliorate the black man's present condition. By its very nature escape from slavery was a dangerous and dramatic endeavour. It stimulated a whole sub-genre of black autobiography. The fugitive slave narrative. Many of these were dictated or ghost-written by white abolitionists because most fugitive slaves were by necessity illiterate. However, some of the narratives were written by the fugitives themselves notably the narrative of Frederick Douglass (1993) an American slave.

Religion, although seen by far as the most important black institution, has been bitterly criticized by some modern black writers such as Richard Wright and James Baldwin. However, it is agreeable that a careful study of the psychological and emotional gains of religion reveals that it has rather been a therapeutic institution in helping to douse and heal the pains of several centuries of slavery and suffering. In Frederick Douglass's *Narrative...* he tells us that religion is being seen and used as a protective shelter by slaveholders and their progenitors of slavery shown thus:

“I assert most hesitantly, that the religion of the south is a more covering for the most horrid crimes – a justifier of the most appalling barbarity – a satisfier of the most hateful frauds and a dark shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest and the most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (p. 75).

However, for Morrison and many other African American writers, the church plays a key role in the creative search for survival among black communities. In *God Help the Child* (2015), Booker, as a graduated student is said to have:

“turned to economics – its history its theories, to learn how money shaped every single oppression in the world and created all the empires, nations and... colonies” (p. 111)

His contemplations were a result of inevitable hunger and lack that characterized his life while growing up. That is why he cherished the weekend banquets that followed the Saturday morning conferences because during the week there was little or no food to eat. In many instances they ate frugally, even when they had meagre food to eat, they ate only oatmeal in-season fruit, rice dried beans, and whatever green leaf was available' Kale, cabbage, collards, mustard or twimp greens. So they look out for those weekend breakfast, menus because they were deliberately sumptuous weekends, were anticipated because the meals at service followed several days of scarcity. It is the same scenario in *Home* (2012). We see that the massive pool of blacks to church conventious was more for food than for religious reasons because of hunger and poverty, everyone, especially those from black communities come to church. The attendees at these church services are not only church members, but also non-

believers who crowd the entrance and line up for food. And this group of churchgoers always outnumbered members of the congregation – the actual believers.

Booker's pursuit of a higher degree serves to fill a psychological void a kind of cure for the traumatic impact of his meagre economic life, even as he hopes to learn something of value and perhaps find an accommodating place for despair... there he focused on tracking wealth journey that policed his anger caged it and explain everything about racism, poverty and war" (p. 122).

As a form of psychotherapy, reading becomes for him a source of escape from the realities of poverty. The knowledge of the origins, structures, causes and solutions of slavery provides hope and psychological healing. The sense of confidence and independence that he develops later is a result of this knowledge and healing.

Rhetorical Devices

Toni Morrison's language power partly lies in her ability to manipulate rhetorical strategies such as: anaphora, metaphor, personification, paradox, simile, allusions, etc. Her effective use of language to re-enact the brutal effects of slavery, even though it was abolished over a century ago, the horrific memories that have remained in its trail have become a permanent scar left on the black American psyche. Descendants of slaves and other black sojourners in America are left to grapple with the mental agony and physical torture that are corollaries of that agonizing era. For Morrison, as with most African American writers, this becomes the subject matter not only for political debate but for social change among blacks, and potent literary engagement, realizable through her effective manipulation of rhetorical devices. Prominent among the list of rhetorical devices in the texts are her use of anaphoric expressions, personification, metaphor, paradox, enumeration, simile, antiphrasis, parallelism, epanalepsis, antanagoge, onomatopoeia, allusions. Amplifications, analogy, etc.,

Anaphora

Anaphora repeats a word or phrase in successive phrases. Abrams & Harpham (2014) looks at it as "the deliberate repetition of a word or phrase at the beginning of each one of a sequence of sentences, paragraphs, lines of verse, or stanzas" (p. 3) In the opening chapter of *Love*, the narrative voice preludes the text with a set of anaphoric expressions, thus: "As a child, I was considered respectful; as a young woman I was called discreet (p. 3). Each of these sentences begins with 'as a....' to give it a repetitive effect. The same rhetorical device is used in several sections and chapters. On page four of the same text, we find the same device. We are told by May that: "Maybe it wasn't their honesty; maybe it was their success" (p. 4). The term, according to Abrams & Harpham (2014) is a peculiar biblical style. According to them, "Anaphora is frequent in the Bible and in verse or prose strongly influenced by the bible" (p. 345). From Morison's allusion to the bible, she borrows anaphoric patterns of expression to create rhythm in her prose and emphasize her themes. The rhythm which is facilitated by anaphora is a factor that gives pleasurable reading and impresses Morisson's themes in the reader. The artistic effect it provides to reading makes it easier for the writer and her work to appeal to the emotions of the reader.

Personification

Personification is the technique of giving inanimate objects, or abstract concepts human attributes. Personification, also known in its Greek work as *prosopopeia* is defined by Abrams & Harpham (2014) as a kind of metaphor "in which either an inanimate object or an abstract concept is spoken of as though it were endowed with life or human attributes of feelings...the personification of abstract terms was standard in eighteenth-century poetic

diction, where it sometimes became a thoughtless formula. This technique represents an abstract quality or idea as a person or creature is a consistent device in Morrison's texts. In *Love*, we are told that "while they talked, four rivulets coursed down the side of Heed's glass, breaking paths through moisture. Pimento eyes bulged in their sockets..." (p. 106), a rivulet is a small stream. Here Morrison gives it life through attributing to it human qualities of being able to break paths. And we are told that these revolts "...are 'Lying' on a ring of onion, a tomato slice exposed its seedy smile.." (p. 106), where she also gives the rivulets the human qualities of smiling.

The author uses personification to help the reader develop an empathic connection between himself and the distant object being described. "The words dance in my head to the music in my mouth." here, she also gives human qualities of dancing to an abstract object as words. So, words are said to be dancing.

It is apparent from the foregoing that Toni Morrison employs an approach to style that is capable of containing the weight of the experience, temperaments and survival strategies of African American characters who face a socially deprived society that is marked by racial enmity and violence.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Morrison's unique ability for the invocation of black history into reading and understanding current African American life is mediated through her unparalleled quality of language. Toni Morrison's narratives are articulated in the ebullient style of Black speech patterns. Her narratological patterns and themes are deeply founded in history, especially African American history and mythology.

This study has revealed that Black devocalization in Toni Morrison's last four novels, as in her previous ones, are in different dimensions. The extent of devocalization is understood within the context of historical truths and put in perspective as she historicizes the present in tracing the roots of current predicaments of blacks to their past. Apart from devocalizing the black by divesting him of his language, he was expropriated of a substantial portion of his culture, thereby compromising his humanity. In Morrison's novels, she has been able to prove that these various modes are strategic by the hostile white majority, in silencing blacks, individually and collectively. Her text is as much a wake-up call to Blacks as it is to the larger American public, that it is time for blacks to unbind themselves from the shackles of slavery, where they have been bound irrevocably to their past.

Perspectives on the dispossession of blacks reveal Morrison's craft in historicizing black American racial realities, exploring dimensions of gender discrimination and black female oppression, in which case she joins her literary predecessors and contemporaries such as Zora Neale Hurston, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, James Weldon Johnson, Anne Moody, Booker T. Washington, Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, etc., to engender the discovery and development of black potentials. In many cases the method of achieving this is protest. This is why in the analysis of the dynamics of strategic silencing of blacks and self-discovery, protest remains a critical response to establishing strategies for survival. To restore their dignity, blacks must explore avenues to recreate and remake their history by emphasizing their heritage through a plethora of social engagements. For at least two centuries of African American history, "the quest for recognition of individual identity has remained a dominant focus of Black American *literature*, as it borders on the meaning of one's existence" (p. 155), which, as Butterfield would acknowledge, in connection to race, that black literature is "characterized by political awareness, knowledge of oppression, empathy for suffering as well as the sense of shared life, shared triumph, and that of communal responsibility" (p. 4). The quest for black economic mobility is a key aspect of

black growth because poverty has long been used as a social weapon by America to cement blacks to the horrid confines of life's deplorable. The absence of economic power to African Americans in the absence of his manhood. His attainment of socio-political prominence is often connected to his economic mobility.

Drawing from the findings in this study, it can be wrapped up that Toni Morrison exhibits her visionary inclination as a writer. By confronting the evils of the society against an out-numbered race, alongside her giving of voice to the oppressed members of this same black race, the writer envisions an American nation that would right the wrongs of racial disharmony which placed African Americans on the receiving end. This comes to validate the view of Chinyere Nwahunaya that writers bear the burden of showing concern for the “social health” of their immediate societies. Morrison, as the analysis has come to show, has projected the beauty of the African American self, the cultural heritage of this race as well as the mental capabilities of people from this racial background. The author has considerably made a successful stride in the redemption of the vocality of African Americans which had hitherto been silenced by the harrowing experience of American racism.

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