



Toni Morrison's Folktale as a Framework to Protest and Interrogate

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Abstract: This paper intends to look at Toni Morrison's Nobel Lecture and the folk tale she narrated as well as her other works like *Playing in the Dark* and "Peril" as a framework to understand how language(s) operate in a particular paradigm. The paper tries to look at Lorde's and Angelou's poems to understand if Morrison's concern resonates in them

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Toni Morrison, as we have witnessed many times in her novels, prefers breaking patterns and conventions to following them. When Morrison delivers a lecture, the readers or listeners might not be surprised when it transforms into a story or rather, a folk tale. The folk tale, as Morrison explains, can be found in several other cultures with different clothes and accessories adorned; it may speak different languages but it always means the same. Morrison narrates to us the one she is familiar with, or the one she would prefer the readers to be familiarized with. In her version, the one who represents the experienced writer is an old blind woman. Morrison, however, carefully adds that in an alternate culture and alternate tale, it could be an old man as well. This is a characteristic feature, to be noticed in all the responsible writers, who have ever

challenged norms and frameworks—they are cautious to not give birth to another stereotype and oppressive framework. Morrison self-consciously states this in her work *Playing in the Dark*.

Morrison's version with multiple adjectives builds a multi-layered identity for the old woman. The woman is the daughter of slaves, she is black, she is American and she is isolated and lives literally and figuratively in the margins of the society and the town. Morrison does not call her African-American but American; these representations and each of the descriptions translate into statements and stances that Morrison takes. In the beginning of the story comes a group of young people "who are bent on disapproving her clairvoyance", their intention is to reveal the fraud, that they believe the woman is. This description of the young group, stands different from the one they transform into, in the second half of the story. In the first half, they are the arrogant power holding section of the society, who look at the old woman's blindness as "profound disability". Their slyness reveals itself when they plot to use her "disability" to expose her; they laugh at her disability and thus the inability to reproduce what she cannot perceive. The woman at the end answers. "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that, it is in your hands. It is in your hands". By answering so, she shifts the responsibility of the action to those, who hold the power. This scenario represents an everyday power instance, where those in power or the dominant section of the society declare that there is a bird in their hands. Further, they pose a question assuming an unconditional right to ask questions to others. However the other sections of the society, even the creative and the oppressed communities do not dare to stretch their hands and investigate the presence of the bird. The declarative statements released by the power, is not challenged, the society voluntarily believes that there is a bird in their hands without question. Rather, they are forced to answer

questions posed by the power and prove their identity and creativity. At these points of vulnerability, they shift the responsibility back to the power and answer, “it is in your hands”.

The tale divides itself into two sections. Morrison includes her reading of the story in the first part. For her, the old woman becomes the practiced writer; the bird becomes language, whose life depends on the users. Language, in the hands of the power assumed, is a tool to exploit and manipulate the rest of the world. Those in power, talk a different language, a more declarative language; a language that reaffirms stereotypes and assumes the right to question.

This language, according to the old woman, is susceptible to death; only a dead language can mechanically produce discourses, that condition the society and mob, to act in a certain way. They anticipate a reaction to their language—a dead one—which is in favor of their ideology and the status quo of their social position. According to her, a dead language is an “unyielding language content to admire its own paralysis.” An example of the dead language of the power is the statist language which is “censored and censoring. Ruthless in its policing duties, it has no desire or purpose other than maintaining the free range of its on narcotic narcissism, its own exclusivity and dominance.” This kind of language, censors new stories, that could be a potential threat to the regime, new ideas are not tolerated, interrogatives are cut down, new thoughts that are in opposition to the dominant thoughts, are erased and suppressed. But they are not explicitly and visibly done. They “[excite] reverence in schoolchildren, [provide] shelter for despots, [summon] false memories of stability, harmony among the public”. It requires education and perspective to realize, that this language of the state and power is a dead and oppressive language. “Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence”, thinks the old woman. This language of authority seeps into every other field and sector of the administration to manipulate and to support and consolidate power. As these kinds of languages are, by nature,

manipulative, they hegemonize the society. The old woman gives examples of languages that must be “rejected, altered and exposed”. She says, “Sexist language, racist language, theistic language—all are typical of the policing languages of mastery and cannot, do not permit new knowledge or encourage the mutual exchange of ideas.” This kind of language grows everyday and power motivates to find better medium of persuasion. Despite all the noise and assertive mechanisms, that these languages of power produce, they (according to the old woman) are dead.

Another language, that counters this power articulation is the one that challenges and refuses the structure. It refuses to provide answers for these power structures; in turn, it interrogates traditional frameworks of power and denounces declaratives. This language of protest, that challenges the power and revives cultures and languages, threatens power. Thus, such expressions have always been censored from society.

Giordano Bruno to Galileo to Hypatia, intellectuals were burnt or sentenced to death for the crime of heresy. They have not been deemed criminals for believing what they believed, but for questioning the beliefs that the power and those in domination circulated, to remain powerful. They faced death for articulating their beliefs and for finding the language to spread it. Morrison's works were present in the American list of banned books; as were several other authors; there also have been instances where authors have been exiled from states. This acceptance of the existence of multiple languages and the inevitability of their existence, is important. Morrison brings in the Tower of Babel story, to explain the inability of the state to accept the presence of multiple voices, multiple languages and the inevitability of differences and dissent. When the old woman thinks, “She would not want to leave her young visitors with the impression that language should be forced to stay alive merely to be. The vitality of language lies in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers.

Although its poise is sometimes in displacing experience it is not a substitute for it”, she takes a position which is contrary to the state. She becomes the representative of a creative community of consumers and producers of a language, that accepts the existence of a dead and undemocratic language of power.

Morrison explains this further in her essay “Peril”¹. In the essay, she talks about how authoritarian regimes curb the freedom of creative and outspoken artists who might prove as a threat to their power and position. She talks about the various methods by which these regimes force their control over people, who express their dissent. These methods have become more and more sophisticated over time. Acts of protests against the government and the dominant ideology have always been looked at, as acts of treason. Even in the twenty-first century, such steps are termed seditious and such subjects, anti-nationals. With state-sponsored mechanisms and institutions, these voices are oppressed and only the "state-approved art", as Morrison calls it, reaches the general public. Other than violence and naming, Morrison identifies a third human response to chaos², stillness. This stillness could mean anything; it could certainly be art as well. Morrison unveils and projects the horror of a future where the state removes all quality and valuable art, only because, they stand against oppressive ideologies (1-4). The inability of the opposition, to involve in productive and intellectual discourses with artistic dissents—rather than forceful suppression and removal of these oppositions from visible social spaces—give way to further questions, regarding the credibility and validity of the actions of the dominant and powerful sections. It, hence, becomes the responsibility of other artists and writers, to protect those who face the atrocities and violence of the state.

¹ Appears in the book *Burn this Book* edited by Morrison herself.

² State induced chaos when art and artist are at risk. The forced absence or disappearance of these voices create unsettling circumstances and chaos.

In the first part of her lecture, Morrison discusses this act of killing of language and expressions. The young group, represents the regime who has caged the bird of language, and, in whose hands the fate and life of language rests. She recognizes how the state forces its subjects to commit 'tongue suicide'. The young have the agenda to mock at the wisdom of the blind lady and to humiliate her. The second section of Morrison's lecture begins when the old woman starts to consider the possibility of the non-existence of the bird and looks at the young group of people, as genuine enquirers of truth and wisdom. This section gives way to the birth of a new language and culture, that can interrogate and protest against the old oppressive language of the state.

Here, the group of young transform into fellow writers who have come to protect language and their contemporaries, who are aware of the past and the present. Mockery does not motivate their question; the old woman guesses, that their motivation could also be found, in their desperation "to be spoken to" and their desire "to interrupt and violate the adult world". This is another form of protest that the new generation showcases, where they hold the elder generation accountable and demand answers. Thereafter, a new language starts to narrate the story forward—a "language invented on the spot". This is a language of questions, one which finds answers as well. They question their received inheritance while producing a better one for the future generation, as they weave a story together in this new language. This is their solidarity towards their fellow and elder generation of oppressed artists and the general public.

Morrison in "Peril" demands other writers to protect the fellow artists who receive the violence unleashed by the state. From being the representatives of state and power, the young group of people turn into magicians, who make meaning appear from the nothingness in their hands. Their questions and protests turn into a piece of art, slowly and smoothly. The transition

does not hurt the listeners. Morrison attempts to show the ever-present protests in arts and vice versa; the dividing line is invisible because they intersperse into each other and exist as one whole. She advocates for such works of art which declare solidarity, which protest, which are aesthetic and political as well. She indirectly exposes us to the different literary tools and techniques of rhetoric, metaphors and other linguistic features that help artists and writers to maintain the balance. Her lecture itself, is an example of the kind of literature she asks for, the folk tale again conveys the same—one that realizes the importance of language and keeps it alive while it tries to extend solidarity to those who face adversities in the hands of a dead language.

This existence of two languages; a dead language of the power and a very alive language of protest and art can be found in African American women's literature. What is the difference between poetry and rhetoric? While poetry is an artistic and aesthetic expression of feelings, emotions or events; rhetoric is a tool that helps the artist, the subject or the speaker to convince and persuade towards a particular thought or ideology. Together poetry and rhetoric are better. Yet, there is a difference. Lorde begins her poem "Power" like this, "The difference between poetry and rhetoric / is being ready to kill / yourself / instead of your children". The first reading might take us to all the mothers of Morrison who chose death or abandonment for their beloved children than slavery and sexual violence. Lorde does not indicate to this act of mercy but talks about the power of poetry against the power of a dead language's rhetoric. Lorde's choice of arrangement of words makes the four lines seem ambiguous. What is poetry? Being the subject of the act of killing or being both the subject and the object? The word "yourself" kept separated from the lines causes this ambiguity. What is rhetoric? Your innocent children being killed or you taking up the responsibility of the act?

The second stanza is filled with images of violence. She locates herself in a desert of violence and describes this desert as white; the dead child in the poem has a black face. These images of color indicate that the violence in description is racial. The language of poetry aids her to describe her raw human helplessness as she longs for one drop of kindness in a desert of death; where the only witness she could find is the blood of a child. This language of poetry helps her with expressing her guilt for longing for that drop of blood, as her own child is dying. She wishes for truth, in the stereotypes about black woman being witches and black magicians, so that she can transform her hatred into destruction. This helplessness of a mother, who herself is at the edge of death, and her fruitless efforts to bring back her child from death, is what poetry articulates. Poetry is the language of the oppressed, where they express their hatred, dissent and disappointments with power.

Rhetoric is a dead language where a power assuming police man can kill an innocent child and stand upright without guilt. This dead language helps the guilty prove their innocence by converting color and race into crime. This language of power becomes louder than physical evidence recorded. Justice and evidences can be turned and interpreted, accordingly, to the wishes of those in power, to persuade themselves and a law that exist for convenience of the power holding community. This language holds the power to persuade even a black woman, with all her inherited sense of victimhood, that the white man is always right and an assertive declarative sentence uttered by a man of power, despite evidences, cannot be interrogated. When the black woman says, "They convinced me" the violence of the language of persuasion becomes evident. She is not convinced. They convinced her by a historical violence. The poet says, "until she let go / the first real power she ever had / and lined her own womb with cement / to make a

graveyard for our children”. This collective decision of Black mothers to choose death for their children instead of lives of violence, is what poetry is about.

She understands the difference between the language of poetry which is alive, and the language of dead rhetoric—the language of power. She provides an example of a violence she would have been capable of, had she not understood, the difference between poetry and rhetoric. She would have paid back and responded to the violence, in the same language by “raping an 85 year old white woman / who is somebody’s mother”. And the reaction of the rhetoric dead language would merely have been “Poor thing. She never hurt a soul. What beasts they are”. Only a dead language can see the innocence of an 85 year old white woman and not a black child. Only a dead language of power can pronounce color and race as crimes. Lorde, through her poetry, tries to protest against this rhetoric, by understanding the difference. Only when she understands, can she restrict herself from committing the same, in her poetry.

While Lorde reveals the difference between these two languages, Angelou in her poem “Televised” interrogates the language of the power. The one that is rhetoric and whose aim is to convince that the assumed normal is the only normal. It questions the language of the biased television, which chooses to telecast only certain aspects about certain communities and on the other hand, completely dismisses the same aspects of certain other communities or areas. For example, while only poverty and illiteracy of certain communities are projected(whose identity can be much beyond being just poor), poverty and lack of resources of some other communities are silenced, for the benefits of the bureaucrats.

The images of “sad-eyed faces of bony children” always follow the catastrophic announcements that the television has to make. This digression intended to generate empathy and

thus move away from questioning the power has always been successful for the television. What is catastrophic for the state can seem less pathetic when in contrast with images of children with “distended bellies”. These images only seem to mock their misery and transform them into commercial and political gain for the state and the television. But Angelou does not take the state sponsored language and accept it. She interrogates it. “Why are they always Black?”, “Whom do they await?”, “Why do Black children hope?”, “Who will bring them peas and lamb chops and one more morning?”. These are questions that the state language does not ask, these are questions that the television forbids answers to. However, an art that is alive and poetry that resists and protests against the oppressive rhetoric of the state ask questions that make the state and the stake- holders uncomfortable. The need for such a language is what Morrison’s talks advocate for.

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