



Toni Morrison's *Recitatif*: A curious dialogue on the crucial racial identity

Jaya Singh

Assistant Professor, Department of English, SPM Govt. Degree College, A constituent college of University of Allahabad, UP, India

Received: 09 Jul 2021; Received in revised form: 12 Aug 2021; Accepted: 21 Aug 2021; Available online: 01 Sep 2021

©2021 The Author(s). Published by Infogain Publication. This is an open access article under the CC BY license

(<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Abstract— *Race is a construct created by the dominant culture to subjugate and exploit a specific group of people, while excluding them from mainstream society. Throughout history, the black race in America has consistently been marginalized and silenced, unable to voice their suffering due to this exclusion. However, there have been numerous writers who have taken on the responsibility of breaking this silence and challenging the differentiation between races through their creative writing. One such influential figure is Toni Morrison, a goal-driven writer who has dedicated herself to exposing the suffering caused by race. In her work "Recitatif," Morrison's purpose is not simply to reveal the struggles of race, but to experiment with different narrative techniques. She aims to confront the subtle, unspoken racial codes present in the story, shedding light on the complex and sophisticated nature of racial dynamics through indirect remarks. Morrison's presentation of ambiguous identities in "Recitatif" serves as an experiment, forcing us to consider the significance of human existence beyond just racial aspects. In the presence of the black and white communities, identity is often confined solely to one's race. However, Morrison challenges this notion, urging us to recognize the multifaceted nature of individuals and the importance of embracing diversity. Through her groundbreaking work, Morrison has made a significant contribution to the canon of African-American literature. Her writing has helped shape and define this body of work, ensuring that the voices and experiences of the black community are not only heard but also celebrated.*

Keywords— *Dominant culture, Race, Unspoken racial codes, Human existence*

Recitatif (1983), the only short story in the literary oeuvre of Toni Morrison is remarkable for the examining of silenced racialized codes of society. The story, published before the trilogy of Morrison is a high-wire attempt to address racial issues by undressing race in the story. Unlike other writers who may have rushed through their pieces or filled their novels with unnecessary content, Morrison approached her craft with precision and purpose. She composed eleven novels and one short story, each with a clear objective in mind. It is important to emphasize just how extraordinary this is. Many writers navigate their creative process in the dark, relying on their subconscious and stumbling through their work. They progress chaotically, often encountering dead ends and taking shortcuts along the way. However, Morrison was never one to follow this path. The weight of responsibility she felt did

not allow for such haphazardness. In her final book, "The Source of Self-Regard," she meticulously dissects her own novels, providing detailed self-critiques akin to a literary lab technician reverse engineering an experiment. This fusion of poetic form and scientific method is what sets Morrison apart in writers' eyes. It is also what makes any close reading of her work immensely rewarding, as you can be certain that every page and every line has been carefully crafted, with the original intention at the forefront.

With "Recitatif," Morrison was explicit about her intentions. This extraordinary story was designed as an experiment to strip away all racial codes from a narrative centred around two characters of different races, for whom racial identity is crucial. This deliberate approach showcases Morrison's commitment to exploring complex themes and challenging societal norms. By delving into

Morrison's unique writing process and her deliberate choices, we gain a deeper appreciation for her literary contributions. Her ability to seamlessly blend poetic beauty with scientific precision is a testament to her unparalleled talent. As we engage in a close examination of her work, we can be confident that nothing has been left to chance, especially not the original intention behind each piece.

Toni Morrison was a highly influential writer who made significant contributions to the establishment of African-American literature as a canon. She developed theories and methodologies for reading, writing, understanding, and critiquing African-American literature. Morrison challenged and scrutinized Western theories that were used to critique texts by black writers, aiming to establish a fresh perspective on assessment and in-depth analysis. In her groundbreaking work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) Morrison revolutionized the way African-American literature was perceived and evaluated. She delved into the complexities of black experiences, shedding light on the unique cultural and historical contexts that shaped these narratives. By challenging traditional western approaches to critiquing texts by black writers, Morrison sought to create a new framework for understanding and appreciating African-American literature. Morrison's theories emphasized the importance of engaging with African-American literature on its own terms, rather than through the lens of dominant Western perspectives. She advocated for a deep reading that considered the nuances and complexities of black voices, allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of their work.

Through her meticulous analysis and insightful critiques, Morrison paved the way for a more inclusive and diverse literary landscape. Her work not only challenged existing notions of African-American literature but also opened doors for future generations of writers and scholars to explore and celebrate the richness of black literary traditions. Toni Morrison's immense contributions to African-American literature cannot be overstated. Her theories and methodologies have reshaped the way we approach and appreciate this genre, offering a fresh and profound perspective that continues to inspire and influence scholars and readers alike. The concept of race, which is constructed by society, demands a critical examination of the social structure of "racial" groups and the resulting inequalities. Racism, on the other hand, is the belief that different groups of humans possess distinct behavioural traits based on physical appearance, leading to the division of races based on the perceived superiority of one over another. In modern times, racism often stems from societal perceptions of biological differences among people. These perspectives can manifest as social actions,

practices, beliefs, or even political systems that rank different races as inherently superior or inferior to one another, based on presumed shared inheritable traits, abilities, or qualities.

In her non-fiction work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) Morrison mentions, "The only short story I have ever written, "Recitatif" (Morrison 1983), was an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (Morrison, 1992 xi) The concept of race occupies a highly contentious area of academic debate. The term "race" has long been linked to notions of inferiority and superiority, hierarchy, and persecution. It has been approached as both a scientific and pseudo-scientific concept, as well as a social construct. As Miles (1993) asserts, regardless of how the term is employed, it carries certain implications. "An acceptance of the existence of biological differences between human beings, differences which express the existence of distinct, self-reproducing groups." "Race refers to a category of people who share certain inherited physical characteristics, such as skin colour, facial features, and stature. A key question about race is whether it is more of a biological category or a social category." (Miles 243)

Racism encompasses a complex web of systems, institutions, and factors that confer advantages to white individuals while inflicting widespread harm and creating barriers for people of colour in terms of access and opportunities. It is crucial to understand that systemic racism did not originate from the actions of a single person or group, but rather it is deeply rooted in the historical development of our laws and institutions, which were established upon a foundation of white supremacy. This insidious form of racism permeates our society, manifesting itself in policies and practices that perpetuate advantages for white individuals while simultaneously disadvantaging people of colour. Moreover, it also manifests in interpersonal communication and behaviour, such as the use of derogatory slurs, bullying, and offensive language, which serve to uphold and reinforce the existing inequities and systemic racism.

The term "white supremacy," as defined above, pertains to the systematic marginalization and oppression of people of colour. This oppression is rooted in a socially constructed racial hierarchy that grants privileges to those who identify as white. It is important to note that this definition does not encompass extremist ideologies that promote the genetic or cultural superiority of white individuals, nor does it endorse the notion of a whites-only society. The physical differences among individuals,

particularly in terms of skin tone, are readily apparent both in the United States and across the globe. Historically, these physical distinctions were utilized by scientists to classify people into different races. Regrettably, racism has deeply entrenched itself in the United States, with the southern regions being particularly affected. Black individuals endured mistreatment and were denied the same rights enjoyed by their white counterparts. They faced pervasive discrimination, with Africans being unjustly portrayed as ruthless and unattractive.

Historical examples of attempts to categorize individuals based on race further emphasize the concept of race as a social construct. In the Southern United States during the era of slavery, the skin tone of slaves gradually lightened over time due to the birth of mixed-race children from relationships between slave owners and other white individuals with slaves. Interestingly, when slaves were initially brought to the Americas nearly four centuries ago, a larger number were taken to Brazil, where slavery remained legal until 1888, compared to the land that eventually became the United States. Brazil, at that time, was a Portuguese colony, and Africans were utilized as slave labour by the Portuguese. Similar to the United States, a significant amount of interracial reproduction occurred in Brazil, primarily resulting from the exploitation of female slaves by their owners. Consequently, Brazil has witnessed a greater number of racial intermarriages throughout the centuries compared to the United States. In order to ensure that individuals are treated with dignity, it is imperative to grant them economic rights, social rights (including access to education), and the rights to cultural and political participation, as well as civil liberties. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the struggle for human rights and the fight against exploitation extends to all races, not just one particular group.

The thought-provoking short story provides an opportunity for an intriguing discussion on race, as it skilfully plays with the ambiguous portrayal of racial identity. This cleverly challenges readers to empathize with characters based on their own racial background and comprehension. Throughout the story, deciphering the racial codes becomes a challenging task, as it requires inferring deeper meanings related to racial identity. Morrison's experiment in this narrative has a clear objective: to explore the fundamental aspects of human connections, which inevitably involve the exploration of one's own identity and evolves the human race.

The characters in question are Twyla and Roberta, two impoverished eight-year-old girls who are under the care of the state. They spend four months together at St.

Bonaventure shelter. Twyla reveals the first piece of information about their backgrounds, stating, "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick." Shortly after, they are placed in Room 406, feeling out of place with someone from a different race. Interestingly, the story never explicitly reveals which girl is black and which is white, leaving the reader to make assumptions. Despite following their lives as they grow up and occasionally cross paths, the crucial detail remains undisclosed. This creates a captivating puzzle-like narrative, a game that Toni Morrison, the author, does not play. When she refers to "Recitatif" as an "experiment," she truly means it. The reader becomes the subject of this experiment, challenged to confront their own biases and assumptions.

The story revolves around three encounters between two girls, leaving a lasting impact on the readers' minds as they ponder questions of identity and race. The first meeting takes place at St. Bonaventure shelter, capturing attention with its shifting racial dynamics. However, the story cleverly avoids providing any definitive clues. Both girls yearn for their mothers, though they are not orphans but rather abandoned children. Twyla shares that her mother dances all night, while Roberta reveals her mother's illness. The portrayal of the mother figures is delicate and evokes sympathy. Twyla, despite her mother's absence, considers herself fortunate to have a living mother. Her mother said, "They never washed their hair and they smelled funny." (Morrison 2007, 85). This dialogue creates suspense around Twyla's race as white and Roberta's race as black. Additionally, the narrator's voice reveals Roberta's dislike of the food at the shelter. Continuing with their time at the shelter, the day before Maggie's heart-wrenching encounter with the larger girls, Twyla and Roberta's mothers visit the shelter to see their daughters. Roberta's mother brings luxurious food and a Bible, but she has a tall and sturdy build. On the other hand, Twyla's mother is dressed in slacks and appears awkward, and she doesn't bring any food for her daughter. Both girls hope that their mothers will behave friendly towards each other, but their expectations are met with irony. Roberta's mother refuses to shake hands with Twyla's mother. The discourteous conduct exhibited by their mothers has forged a deep connection among girls, fostering a genuine sense of empathy towards one another. Without a doubt, the notion of personal race identity fades away after the encounter between two young girls who appear to be an inseparable duo, much like the harmonious combination of salt and pepper. The racial difference is intrinsic and undifferentiable from the history of United States. As Edward Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism*, "the reality and history represented by realism has been censored and constructed by dominant culture," (Said 83)

The second encounter between Twyla and Roberta took place twelve years later at a Howard Johnson restaurant near Newburgh. Unfortunately, Roberta failed to recognize Twyla and instead behaved rudely by mocking her for not knowing the singer Jimi Hendrix. However, their third meeting in the check-out line provided an opportunity for the girls to discuss their marriages and new lives. They both felt proud of their marriages and the lives they had built. This meeting helped them become more comfortable with each other and reminisce about their shared memories of Maggie. During their conversation, Twyla recalled the memories of the subtle racism she experienced while working at Howard Johnson, which was not as overtly rude as Roberta's behavior.

The fourth encounter between the two young ladies was unpleasant for both of them. They became caught up in the frenzy of a racial conflict at the school gate. This time, Roberta claimed that they had both kicked Maggie and called her a black woman. However, the memories of the girls were fragile and uncertain, making it difficult to say anything with certainty. In the final episode of their meeting, Roberta displayed her uncertainty about whether they had indeed kicked Maggie and called her black. Overwhelmed with emotion, she broke down in tears and became worried about Maggie's well-being.

Throughout the story, the characters were plagued by uncertainty regarding their own identities and those of others. This sense of ambiguity ultimately led them to recognize their shared humanity. The various clues related to clothing, food, social status, and other aspects only served to further confuse the issue of race. Morrison's main intention was to encourage readers to see one another not solely through the lens of race, but as compassionate and empathetic individuals. By challenging and replacing existing social structures with love and compassion, a profound sense of connection and understanding can be fostered in human relationships. Morrison skilfully conveyed this message through the use of ambiguity in her storytelling.

REFERENCES

- [1] Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992)
- [2] ----- "Recitatif" *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Ed. Nina Baym et al. 7th ed. Vol. E. New York: Norton, 2007.
- [3] Miles, Robert. *Racism after 'Race Relations'*. London and New York: Routledge 1997.
- [4] Said, Edward. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1993.