

*Toni Morrison, “Whiteness” and the New
History of Race in America: A Critical
Overview*

Ayan Mondal

Toni Morrison’s contribution to the paradigm of black-aesthetics and literary criticism is as rich as her fictional oeuvre. She is hailed as one of the pioneers who heralded the discourse of “Whiteness” in literary studies in the 1990s offering fresh strategies for the reading of American canon. “In “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” and *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, notes Hanna Wallinger, “Toni Morrison contributes significantly to the debate about the canon of Ameri-

can literature in general and, in particular, it's underlying discourse of what she calls the "dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence" (Wallinger 2007, 115). Morrison's "Unspeakable Things Unspoken", published in 1989 in the *Michigan Quarterly Review* was originally delivered as the "Hector Tanner Lecture on Human Values" at the University of Michigan on October 7, 1988 at the wake of her reception of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and the Robert F. Kennedy Award for her masterpiece *Beloved*. Her lecture seems to be prompted by the culture-Wars regarding the inclusion of works by the ethnic minorities in the American canon. With the boom of multiculturalism in America since the 1960s and the strong insistence of "Afrocentrism", to elevate the "racial" and the "ethnic" above the "universal" and "national", Morrison's enquiries and formulations generated fresh ideas and new dimensions in American literary criticism. Before turning to an exploration of these critical enquiries, it would be relevant to study the background against which Morrison was expressing her concerns – the culture Wars in America.

In his "Introduction" to his edited book *Loose Canons: Notes on the Culture War*, Henry Louis Gates Jr writes:

The conservative desire has been to cast the debate in terms of the West versus the Rest. And yet that's the very opposition that the pluralist wants to challenge. Pluralism sees culture as porous, dynamic, and

interactive, rather than as the fixed property of particular ethnic groups. Thus the idea of a monolithic, homogeneous “West” itself comes into question (nothing new here: literary historians have pointed out that the very concept of “Western culture” may date back only to the eighteenth century). But rather than mourning the loss of some putative ancestral purity, we can recognize what's valuable, resilient, even cohesive in the hybrid and variegated nature of modernity. (Gates Jr 1993, xvi).

Gates clearly argues that mere insistence on some “monochrome homogeneity” of culture disrupts the multicultural ambience of America. He points out that though vulgar cultural purists and nationalists like Leonard Jeffries and Allan Bloom had thrived on the absolutist black/white binary declaring themselves as enemies of pluralism, the American world is “multicultural already”. Exemplifying America’s inherent celebration of cultural diversity, Gates contends that musicians like Miles Davis, John Coltrane and Duke Ellington impacted world music; Wynton Marsalis took equal delight in jazz as with Mozart, Judith Jameson and Alvin Ailey blended Western dance forms with Afro-American indigenous modes of dancing; Romeare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence were adept in their study of Western artists and yet could masterfully pioneer Afro-American visual art. To highlight the multicultural essence in black literature Gates further stated:

And in literature, of course, the most formally complex and compelling black writers —such as Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Langston Hughes, Zora Hurston, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Gwendolyn Brooks —have always blended forms of Western literature with African-American vernacular and written traditions... Morrison's master's thesis was on Virginia Woolf and Faulkner; Rita Dove is as conversant with German literature as she is with that of her own country. African-American culture, then, has been a model of multiculturalism and plurality. And it is this cultural impulse, I believe, that represents the very best hope for us, collectively, to forge a new, and vital, common American culture in the twenty-first century. (Gates 1993, xvii)

Countering the ‘conservative penchant of charging multiculturalism with “politics”’ (Gates 1993, xiv), he brings in his defence Cardinal Newman who held that the university should compulsorily promote “the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence” (qtd. in Gates 1993, xv). He also cited Edward Said who opined –

Our model for academic freedom should therefore be the migrant or traveler: for if, in the real world outside the academy, we must needs be ourselves and only ourselves, inside the academy we should be

able to discover and travel among other selves, other identities, other varieties of the human adventure. But most essentially, in this joint discovery of self and other, it is the role of the academy to transform what might be conflict, or context, or assertion into reconciliation, mutuality, recognition, creative interaction” (qtd in Gates 1993, xv).

Writing at a time when the Culture Wars impacted the US academia considerably, Morrison’s critical standpoint in “Unspeakable Things Unspoken” is at once compelling and provocative. Her viewpoints in the essay should not be read merely as an apology for Afro-American literature to find room in the university curriculum. That would just have been another voice that concurred with the plea of the multiculturalists like Henry Louis Gates Jr. Morrison rather provides a theoretical framework to study canonical American texts in a new vein and to trace the symbiotic relationship of the governing themes of those literary masterpieces to the ideas entering the Afro-American population in the nation. Such an enquiry, therefore, unsettles the very idea that the American canon is distinctively “white”.

In the tripartite structure of her essay “Unspeakable Things Unspoken”, the very first section deals with the usual universalist ramifications sparked off by the rather nebulous label “American literature”— ideas concerning “value” and “quality”, the propensity of neutralising racially inflected literature as “race-free” and also her

arguments regarding enhancing and expanding critical readings of the American canon rather than blindly enshrining the canonical writers. Referring to critics and scholars like Ivan Van Sertimer, Edward Said and Martin Bernal, Morrison also tries to re-contextualize her readings of the American canon in terms of the role played by the invisible, yet indelible presence of the dark and abiding Afro-Americanism within the structural contours of texts authored by whites and always regarded to address “humanistic” and “universal” themes. It is pertinent now, to address these issues comprehensively.

Pointing at the isolation of literature labelled as “American” from “other” literatures, Morrison writes:

There is something called American literature that, according to conventional wisdom, is certainly not Chicano literature, or Afro-American literature, or Asian- American or Native- American, or...It is somehow separate from them and they from it, and in spite of the efforts of recent literary histories, re-structured curricula, and anthologies, this separate confinement be it breached or endorsed is the subject of a large part of these debates. (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” [hereafter “UTU”] 1989, 124)

Morrison underlines how “American literature” became ideologically synonymous with “White American literature” in common critical parlance, and the term “white”

too race-neutral and obvious to be mentioned and marked. The necessity to attach prefixes like “African”, “Chicano”, “Asian” or “Native” to American literature bespeaks their “otherness” and the exclusivist impulse during the American culture-wars, which separated them from the American canon. Her project stemmed from her urge to parenthesise the words “white” and “race”—uncovering the pale of “racelessness” that was invested in the category called “white”—giving them access in “serious discussion of literature” (Morrison 1989,124). She makes her stance explicit stating that “quality” and “value” accorded to works of art are always relative and independent of “timeless” and “universal” paradigms constructed by the West. Citing her personal appreciation of Greek tragedy because of its “similarity to Afro-American communal structures and African religion and philosophy” (Morrison 1989, 125), she inferred that the same genre can hardly be a source of pleasure for those who do not feel at home with it. Therefore, one’s appreciation or dislike of Greek tragedy hardly correspond to the “civilization that is its referent as flawless or superior to all others” (Morrison 1989, 125). Therefore, Western civilization generally and Western canon specifically need to be analysed and rethought of, by unmasking the veneer of neutrality and laying bare the crucial roles played by “race” even in texts that claim to be least bothered about it. Morrison points out unequivocally:

For three hundred years black Americans insisted that “race” was no usefully distinguishing factor in human relationships. During these same three centuries every academic discipline, including theology, history, and natural science, insisted “race” was the determining factor in human development. When blacks discovered they had shaped or become a culturally formed race, and that it had specific and revered difference, suddenly they were told there is no such thing as “race”- biological or cultural, that matters and that genuinely intellectual exchange cannot accommodate it...It always seemed to me that the people who invented the hierarchy of “race” when it was convenient for them ought not to explain it away, now that it does not suit their purposes for it to exist. (Morrison “UTU” 1989, 126)

Morrison therefore wanted to find a distinctive space for “Afro-American literature” to rejuvenate and resuscitate literary studies in the United States while contextualizing the “routes canon debates have taken in Western literary criticism” (Morrison 1989, 126). In drawing that trajectory, she pointed out that displacements within the canon or rather the expansion of the canon is inevitable — “Certainly a sharp alertness as to *why* a work is not worthy of study is the legitimate occupation of the critic, the pedagogue, and the artist” (Morrison 1989, 128). She repudiates not the resistance, but “the virulent passion that accompanies this resistance and, more importantly, the quality of its defence weaponry” (Morri-

son 1989, 128). Such “defence”, she concedes, is suicidal because it inevitably ends up paralysing and sometimes disfiguring and sacrificing the sacred texts. Morrison writes— “The canon fodder may kill the canon. And I, at least do not intend to live without Aeschylus or William Shakespeare, or James or Twain or Hawthorne, or Melville, and so on. There must be some way to enhance canon readings without enshrining them” (Morrison 1989, 128). The suicidal “defence weaponry” that Morrison was suggesting was the critical drive to insulate the American canon from discussions of race by mantling it with a protective garb of aesthetic superiority. What followed was the concomitant urge to resist the blatantly articulate black literatures, rooted in the dismal histories and the indigenous ethos of the Afro-Americans, from entering the precincts of the canon. Morrison cites in this context Terrence Rafferty’s observations regarding Milan Kundera’s exclusion of American fiction-writers from his personal idea of novel. Kundera in *The Art of the Novel*, Rafferty observed, ‘gives off the occasional whiff of cultural arrogance’ (qtd in Morrison 1989, 128) by excluding from the “transcendent idea of the novel”, heroes from the culture of the New World. While agreeing to Rafferty’s observation of Kundera’s Eurocentric bias in theorising the art of fiction, Morrison equally feels amazed and refreshed at the comments of Rafferty. She was amazed to note a parallelism of Kundera’s critical position regarding European fiction as aesthetically superior, with the American critics’ ostracisation of

Afro-American writers in the margins of creative and critical discourse. She notes:

With the substitution of certain phrases, his (Raferty's) observations and the justifiable umbrage he takes can be appropriated entirely by Afro-American writers regarding their own exclusion from the "transcendent idea of the novel". For the present turbulence seems not to be about the flexibility of a canon, its range among and between Western countries, but about its miscegenation. The word is informative here and I do mean its use. A powerful ingredient in this debate concerns the incursion of third-world or so-called minority literature into a Eurocentric stronghold. (Morrison 1989, 129)

She forwards specific ways by which such an incursion was resisted from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries. The overpowering assumptions that marched across centuries were as follows: (1) Afro-American art, or for that matter minority art doesn't exist at all. Afro-Americans are "artless"; (2) Afro-American aesthetic standards, even if the art exists, are much inferior compared to the standards of their white counterparts; (3) Afro-American art can claim superiority only when it matches up to the "universal" criteria of Western art; (4) Afro-American art is like unrefined raw ore, that is in dire need of refinement by a Western or Eurocentric smith.

Morrison historicises her contemporary situation by narrating the received history of Greece, after Martin Bernal. She observed how Bernal pointed out the strategies of silencing many histories and socio-cultural discourses in favour of Egyptian roots of Greece, only to “fabricate” and establish its Aryan or European lineage. The following excerpt from Bernal’s *Black Athena* succinctly sums up the reasons behind such fabrication:

The Ancient Model had no major “internal” deficiencies or weaknesses in explanatory power. It was overthrown for external reasons. For eighteenth and nineteenth century Romantics and racists it was simply intolerable for Greece, which was seen not merely as the epitome of Europe but also as its pure childhood, to have been the result of the mixture of Native Europeans and colonizing Africans and Semites. Therefore the Ancient model had to be overthrown and replaced by something more acceptable. (qtd in Morrison 1989, 131)

In a way, therefore, the structuring of Greek history was necessitated by the demands of establishing its European roots. Similarly, Morrison argues that the silencing of Afro-American voices was conducive to the vested interest of building the American canon as an apparatus to be controlled by the whites. “Canon building”, Morrison argues has always been, “...empire building. Canon defence is a national defence” (Morrison 1989, 132). However, Morrison ends the first section of her essay

with the promising note that in her contemporary times, much research and analyses attempted to render “speakable” what was formerly occluded as “unspeakable”. She presents the strong foothold that the Afro-Americans acquired through years of struggle:

We are (now) the subjects of our own experience, and in no way coincidentally, in the experience of those with whom we have come in contact. We are not, in fact, other. We are choices. And to read imaginative literature by and about us is to choose to examine centers of the self and to have the opportunity to compare these centers with the “raceless” one with which we are, all of us, most familiar. (Morrison 1989, 133)

The second section of Morrison’s essay successfully defends the charges labelled on Afro-American art throughout centuries, while the third section applies her critical formulations on her own fiction. In the second section of her essay, she urges the readers to consider three specific theoretical focuses, which she felt “require(d) wakefulness”. First, she harped on a comprehensive and distinctive “theory” of literature that can truly accommodate the complex nuances of Afro-American history, culture and artistic strategies. Second, she called for a re-examination of the American canon (particularly the works of the founding nineteenth century texts of the American Renaissance) and to locate in them the veiled “Afro-American presences”. Such serviceability of the

Afro-Americans, both to the writers and the white characters the text sheltered, has to be closely studied to understand how they address questions of identity and permit access to the realm of lawlessness and danger which would not have been possible through “white” bodies or agencies. What needed to be studied and researched, therefore, was “the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure- the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine” (Morrison 1989, 136). Third, she talked about similar research on contemporary/non-canonical literature (both mainstream and minority) to study the ‘resonances, the structural gearshifts, and the uses to which Afro-American narratives, persona, and idiom are put in contemporary “white” literature. And in Afro-American literature itself the questions of difference, of essence, are critical. What makes a work “black”?’ (Morrison 1989, 136). The present dissertation, however, specifically intends to address the second focus of Morrison listed above and to examine the serviceability of not merely the black characters, but “blackness” as a trope in three nineteenth century canonical white American texts.

When Morrison almost looks subjectively at her own subject-position as a black woman and also as a writer well aware of the strategies of evasions, she sheds light on the creative impulse that results in such “absences” of Afro-Americans in white texts. “The spectacularly in-

teresting question is”, she writes, “What intellectual feats had to be performed by the author or his critic to erase me from a society seething with my presence, and what effect has that performance had on the work?” What are the strategies of escape from knowledge?” (Morrison 1989, 136). In spite of gruelling turbulence in the contemporary nineteenth century society which was in the heights of slavery and abolitionism, the nineteenth century writers chose the imaginative “romances” and Morrison specifically enquires where in the romances lay the “shadow” from which the text had escaped or diverted, and which areas in the text needed novelistic inventions to ensure such a “release” and departure from the politics of the times. It was strikingly ironical that the New World which was trying to carve its own niche in the domain of fiction, had to subscribe to “the Eurocentric Western position in literature as not only “universal” but also race-free” (Morrison 1989, 138). Yet, the results of such a defence were to “lobotomize” literature making it narrow and myopic. Morrison compared such critical silences with the act of paralysing the work of art— “Like the surgical removal of legs so that the body can remain enthroned, immobile, static- under house arrest, so to speak” (Morrison 1989, 138). Writers of Young America, according to Morrison, could write freely without any subversive threat or inhibition of getting “written back”, “talked back” or even “gazed at”. Morrison contends humorously enough that Edgar Allan Poe could never have imagined “her” reading of his *The Gold Bug* dis-

torting the speech patterns of her black ancestors. The canon of American literature, according to Morrison had been made to appear “inevitably white”. Therefore, Morrison was not merely arguing in favour of the inclusion of Afro-American literature in the canon (which to a large extent had been achieved, by the time she was penning her essay), but rather a re-examination of the ostensibly white canon to locate fissures and crevices there that might upset its “purity”. She blames the critical discourses that had always attempted to safeguard such purity:

Perhaps some of these writers (of Young America) although under current house arrest, have much more to say than has been realized. Perhaps some were not so much transcending politics, or escaping blackness, as they were transforming it into intelligible, accessible, yet artistic modes of discourse. (Morrison 1989, 139)

The act of “lobotomizing” literature, the very act of remaining blind to the strategies of transformation the writers took recourse to, to evade blackness, was, according to Morrison “an exorbitant price for cultural (white-male) purity” and therefore what was imperative was the “re-examination of founding literature of the United States for the unspeakable things unspoken (that) may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significances” (Morrison 1989, 139-140).

Morrison's critical work *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) is a more comprehensive theorization of the idea of "whiteness" as a construct and has metamorphosed the entire approach of reading and analysis of canonical American texts which the erstwhile critical discourses tried to homogenize as distinctively "American". Such discourses have insulated the classic texts authored by whites as texts independent in their own right uninformed and unshaped by the four-hundred years old presence of the black population in the American soil. Morrison in the second and third chapters of her book "Romancing the Shadow" and "the Kindness of Sharks" provides certain clues that may subvert one's understanding of some "canonical" white texts after formulating a novel theoretical discourse on the ideas of "whiteness" and "Africanism" in her introductory chapter "Black Matters". It is relevant at the present juncture to shed light on Morrison's theoretical insights presented in this book.

Morrison begins with the claim that her study intends to *extend* the scope of American literature and re-situate the entire corpus in a much wider critical landscape. She asserts that her project stems from her desire of reviewing the texts as well as the textual criticisms, and to point out those aspects of the texts on which there have been critical silences. An urge to explore such strategic silences in American texts in matters of race, Morrison believed, became possible not only because of her "readerly" subject position, but the "writerly" one:

As a reader (before becoming a writer) I read as I had been taught to do. But books revealed themselves differently to me as a writer. In that capacity I have to place enormous trust in my ability to imagine others and my willingness to project consciously into the danger zones such others may represent for me.

(Morrison 1992, 3)

Morrison points out further that despite the pervasive influence of the African-Americans in the United States behind shaping the Constitution, culture and the national literature of America, historians and critics have ignored their influence altogether. Specifically in respect of literature they champion the all-enveloping homogenous grand-narrative of a particular “Americanness” which the white male perspective has always insulated and safeguarded from any relationship with “the overwhelming presence of black people in the United States. Morrison, therefore, tries to uncover the ideas that lie concealed in the White American consciousness and strongly holds that what needs to be focused upon is a comprehensive understanding of this black presence. She claims that the “contemplation of this black presence is central to any understanding of the American national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination” (Morrison 1992, 5). Addressing this fabricated “Africanist presence” as “American Africanism”, Morrison notes that the construction of “Africanism” as an ideological category was executed not merely by the US, but by the cultures of other nations

like England, France, Germany, Spain. Differing from the philosophical ideas that might signify the term Africanism, Morrison records:

I am using the term “Africanism” not to suggest the larger body of knowledge on Africa that the philosopher Valentine Mudimbe means by the term “Africanism”, nor to suggest the varieties and complexities of African people and their descendants who have inhabited this country. Rather I use it as a term for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people (Morrison 1992, 6-7).

Morrison, however, was far from suggesting a counter-hegemonic black perspective by what she calls “exchange of dominations” (Morrison 1992, 8) and replacing the Eurocentric scholarship with another dominant Afro-centric scholarship. She was interested in the ways by which literary imagination “plays” and how often literary criticism robs literature of either its overt or covert ideological mechanisms. She was suggesting a close scrutiny of literary “blackness”, not for its own sake but for deciphering the concomitant cause of literary “whiteness”. She was surprised at the diverse ways in which “race” is either ignored as a graceful, generous and liberal gesture by scholars or has specifically been focused on the racial object rather than the subject. Morrison notes:

It seems both poignant and striking how avoided and unanalysed is the effect of racist inflection on the subject. What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on nonblacks who held, resisted, explored or altered these notions. The scholarship that looks into the mind, imagination and behaviour of slaves is valuable. But equally valuable is a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination and behaviour of masters. (Morrison 1992, 12)

Morrison notes that such shift of focus from the “black” object to the “white” subject “may provide access to a deeper reading of American literature- a reading not completely available, now, at least, I suspect, because of the studied indifference of most literary criticism to these matters” (Morrison 1992, 9).

Referring to the practice of some avid, but radically non-academic readers as well as some powerful literary critics who habitually exclude African-American texts from their reading list, Morrison notes that such ignorance about the black culture, sentiments and ethos would hardly restrict themselves from becoming writers and critics of repute in the United States. What was more alarming to Morrison, was the blindness of such literary critics to the ways in which the “black surrogacy” (Morrison 1992, 13) has informed, shaped and stabilized

the literature they do read. Morrison expresses her disillusionment at the customary trait of most literary critics of camouflaging this black presence, as her lasting resort in the writers. She states:

Writers are among the most sensitive, the most intellectually anarchic, most representative, most probing of artists. The ability of writers to imagine what is not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar, is the test of their power. The languages they use and the social and historical context in which these languages signify are indirect and direct revelations of that power and its limitations. So it is to them, the creators of American literature, that I look for clarification about the invention and effect of Africanism in the United States (Morrison 1992, 15).

She scaffolds her thesis by referring to traditional criticisms of Henry James's *What Massie Knew*, Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Willa Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl* and novels by Hemingway and Flannery O'Connor which have very safely and tactfully evaded either perspectives on black representation or how the black agency could articulate the universal themes of their novels. She, from her subject position as a writer herself, looked into the ways in which their imaginative process work to conceptualize what is "not the self, to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar" (Morrison 1992, 15). In the Chapter "Romancing the Shadow" she fur-

ther historicizes the ways by which American literature came to be crafted by the young nation not only with the drive of an imaginative flight from the repressions of the Old world and the possibilities of freedom in the New World. The New World attracted new immigrants in myriad ways and the new setting welcomed them with the vision of a “limitless future, made more gleaming by the constraint, turmoil and dissatisfaction left behind” (Morrison 1992, 34). Morrison succinctly observes:

There was very much more in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to make the trip worth the risk. The habit of genuflection would be replaced by the thrill of command. Power- control of one's destiny- would replace the powerlessness felt before the gates of class, caste and cunning persecution. One could move from discipline and punishment to disciplining and punishing; from social ostracism to social rank. One could be released from a useless binding, repulsive past into a kind of history-lessness, a blank page waiting to be inscribed. Much was to be written there: noble impulses were made into law and appropriated for a national tradition; base ones learned and elaborated in the rejected and rejecting homeland, and also made into law and appropriated for tradition. (Morrison 1992, 35)

But, despite the promises and hopes the New World generated (Truslow coined it as the “American Dream”), the founding literature of young America was replete

with transactions with different fears, anxieties, tensions, repressions and inhibitions and such experiences were variously labelled as “gothic”, “sermonic”, “romantic”, “Puritan” etc. Paradoxically enough, the European disorder and anarchy which the young country wished to leave behind began to be projected in the literature of the new nation. In the nineteenth century, the literary form which could accommodate the “uniquely American prophylaxis” (Morrison 1992, 36) was “romance”. This new genre began to embrace the fears of the new nation— “Americans’ fear of being outcast, of failing, of powerlessness: their fear of boundarylessness, of Nature unbridled and crouched for attack; their fear of the absence of so-called civilization: their fear of loneliness, of aggression both external and internal” (Morrison 1992, 37). Morrison critiques the usual critical conjecture that romances are ahistorical and atemporal, with her unequivocal contention— “There is no romance free of what Herman Melville called “the power of blackness”, especially not in a country in which there was a resident population already black, upon which the imagination could play;” (Morrison 1992, 37). The creative possibilities of the country began to get enriched by the presence of the black population, the fabrication of an American Africanism, which Morrison intended to probe deep into. Such a fabrication was essential to craft the fresh American identity as the “new white man” and writers did not craft this distinctive American identity merely by establishing difference with the European cul-

tural and aesthetic standards, but by maintaining a racial difference. Citing the example of William Dunbar about whom Bernard Bailyn had written in his *Voyagers to the West*, Morrison pointed out that the new white man was conditioned by a “sense of authority and autonomy he had not known before, a force that flowed from his absolute control over the lives of others” and functioned as a “bordered gentleman, a man of property in a raw, half-savage world” (Morrison 1992, 42). Like Dunbar’s experience, concerns over authority, autonomy, newness, difference and power turned out to be the governing themes of American literature and all white men tried to posit their privileged subject-positions against the “bound and unfree, rebellious but serviceable black population” (Morrison 1992, 45). Therefore, Morrison argued, statements regarding the supposed racelessness of the very American identity and the founding texts that projected such identity, made by strong assertions, are false. She contends:

Statements...insisting on the meaninglessness of race to the American identity, are themselves full of meaning. The world does not become raceless or will not become unracialized by assertion. The act of enforcing racelessness in literary discourse is itself a racial act. Pouring rhetorical acid on the fingers of a black hand may indeed destroy the prints but not the hand. Besides, what happens to that violent self-serving act of erasure to the hands, the fingers or the finger-prints of the one who does the pouring? Do

they remain acid free? The literature itself suggests otherwise. (Morrison 1992, 46)

Therefore, what needed compelling study were the inescapable ways in which the very texture of American literature was impacted by the “dark and abiding” Africanist presence in order to unmark and render visible American “whiteness”. The founding nineteenth century texts, sometimes were not about Africanist presences or even black characters and could still address such presences as shadows hovering “in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation” (Morrison 1992, 47). Even when the literary works “spoke for Africans and their descendants, or of them” (Morrison 1992, 50), they turned out to be “master-narratives” and hardly ran the risk of getting written back— “The legislator’s narrative could not coexist with a response from the Africanist persona” (Morrison 1992, 50). Morrison proposes in the book four distinctive topics for critical investigation. They are:

(1) the role of the Africanist character(s) as surrogates to regulate the white writerly imagination— “Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfilment of destiny” (Morrison 1992, 52).

(2) the ways in which Africanist idiom/language/dialect is often employed to highlight difference, “how the dialogue of the black characters is construed as an alien,

estranging dialect made deliberately unintelligible by spellings contrived to defamiliarize it; how it is used to establish a cognitive world split between speech and text, to reinforce class distinction and otherness as well as to assert privilege and power” (Morrison 1992, 52), and by encoding in that language aberrant ideas of “illegal sexuality, fear of madness, expulsion, self-loathing” (Morrison 1992, 52)

(3) the specific purposes to enhance and project the ramifications of the ideology of whiteness through an Africanist character and the ways in which the “other” is used as an agency to “ease and order external and internal chaos” (Morrison 1992, 53) of the self and to “explore and penetrate one’s own body in the guise of the sexuality, vulnerability and anarchy” (Morrison 1992, 53) of the other.

(4) analysis of Africanist narratives “represented” within a “master-narrative” as having the ulterior purpose of projecting a “discourse on ethics, social and universal codes of behaviour, ...assertions about and definitions of civilization and reason” and how such a narrative is deployed in the “construction of a history and a context for whites by positing history-lessness and context-lessness for blacks” (Morrison 1992, 53).

To “render the nation’s literature a much more complex and rewarding body of knowledge” (Morrison 1992, 53), therefore, Morrison suggested the new reading

strategies in the third chapter of their book, “Disturbing Nurses and the Kindness of Sharks”. Following James Snead’s observations regarding Faulkner’s literary devices, Morrison also listed some of the prevalent linguistic strategies that fiction employs by way of engaging with the blacks and “blackness”. First, by economising stereotype which relieves the writer from the burden of accurately portraying blacks with all their specificities; second, by “metonymic displacement” which vaguely relies on received ideas of colour coding, displacing, rather than signifying the Africanist character; third by “metaphysical condensation” which ahistoricizes social and historical differences between races making them appear “universal”; fourth by “fetishization” which projects erotic fears, inhibitions and desires on the “other”, establishing gross differences where difference is in fact negligible; fifth by “dehistoricizing allegory” where the very process of “civilizing” becomes indefinite and infinite; sixth, by employing disjointed, explosive and repetitive language and justifying the same by attributing it to the “black” narratives and objects over which the author/narrator hardly has any control.

Morrison’s book seems to have been considerably influenced by Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, particularly his elaborations regarding the very representation of the “Orient”. The following passage from Said well illustrates the point:

The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little...on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as “the Orient”...that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, “there” in discourse about it. And these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient. (Said 1995, 21-22)

The idea of Europe’s dependence on the fabricated and displaced orient to define itself and the ways by which “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and underground self” (Morrison 1992 3) parallel Morrison’s thesis in *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison’s account of the serviceability and the agency of the Africanist presence offering a playground for the “white” imagination by way of setting itself off against blackness, very clearly reflects the Saidian undertone. Again, philosophically speaking, there are clear undertones of the Hegelian dialectic of master-slave relationship in Morrison’s theoretical account. Hegel in the “Self-Consciousness” section of his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit* points at the crucial turn in history when the unidimensionally

perceived power-relation between the master's autonomy and the slave's thralldom gets subverted and the slave embraces an "independent self-consciousness" to challenge and unsettle the authority of the master. In other words, through the initial stage in history where the slave has to depend on the master, a time comes when the entire process gets inverted as the slave comes to realise the master's vulnerability and dependence on the slave. The following passage from Hegel is worth quoting in this context:

For self-consciousness there is another self-consciousness; self-consciousness is *outside of itself*. This has a two-fold meaning. First, it has lost itself, for it is to be found as an *other* essence. Second, it has thereby sublated that other, for it also does not see the other as the essence but rather sees itself in the other. (Hegel 1998, 161)

The Hegelian dialectic that substantiates the master's constitutive dependence on the slave can be related to Morrison's "Africanist presence" that becomes the essential factor in articulating the universalist ramifications of the American canon. The very act of hegemonically preserving the sanctity of "whiteness" / "Americanness" of the white canon therefore becomes redundant. If Americanness is all about freedom, individualism, happiness, prosperity, dreams and enlightenment, all these facets required realisation by means of the bond-

age, servitude, sufferings, and the “dark, abiding, signing” presence of the Afro-Americans.

Morrison’s discourse on the canon can also be studied as a reaction to Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr’s book *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (1991) which was a blatant attack on the fallacies of multiculturalism and Afrocentrism. Even after acknowledging that diversity had been the essence of the American nation since its inception, he focused on a common national identity, “the American creed”, invested with the power of holding the pluralities together. Schlesinger considered “multiculturalism” as a threat to the “apparatus” controlling schools, universities and also the economy of the nation. He thought of the Afrocentrists to be more pernicious than the other separatist groups, in that, those groups never tried to superimpose their ethnocentric mythologies on the curriculum of public schools, which the Afrocentrists were desperate to address. The drive of the Afrocentrists to focus Africa as the centre of the achievements of the world, Schlesinger believed, was a serious threat to academic excellence or self-esteem which are independent of “racial pride”. In the “Introduction” to his book Schlesinger writes: “The ethnic upsurge (it can hardly be called a revival because it was unprecedented) began as a gesture of protest against the Anglocentric culture. It became a cult, and today it threatens to become a counter-revolution against the original theory of America as “one people”,

a common culture, a single nation” (Schlesinger 1998 “Kindle Edition”). Schlesinger’s conceptualization of the “original theory” of America as a pot that melts diversities, is arguably, the distinctive point of Morrison’s attack in *Playing in the Dark*. It must be noted, however, that Morrison was, in a way, trying to speak about the unspeakable in the line of Michael Novak’s *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics*. Novak opined, “Growing up in America has been an assault upon my sense of worthiness...the new ethnic politics...asserts that groups can structure the rules and goals and procedures of American life” (qtd. in Schlesinger 1998, 47). But, whereas, Novak’s interest was to show the role of ethnicity and the strong impact it left on American life in general, Morrison’s enquiry from a strictly literary perspective, was to dig out the role and serviceability of ethnicities in canonical American literature which the nation always championed as distinctively “white”. Schlesinger’s contention, that too much insistence on multicultural and racial ideologues can hamper the cohesive national spirit of America, comes under serious attack with Morrison’s discourse that the American self was “always already” dependent on its “other”.

Reviews of Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* are as worthy of critical attention as the text is. Craig Seligman, for example, contends that a “kind of backfire has happened in literature: that for all the majority’s attempts to shut out the minority, the minority has returned, intransigent and accusatory, through the back door of the literary

subconscious” (Seligman 1993, 7). Pinson argues—“In recovering the inscribed characteristics of the ideal American male —intellectual boldness, pioneering sensibilities, and identification with the ideology of the Enlightenment —she(Morrison) foregrounds the contradictory sanguinity with which these same figures built the American Dream on the systematized degradation of enslaved Africans” (Pinson 1993, 88). Shelley Fisher Fishkin points out the originality of Morrison in her project. “Morrison's target of attack”, she writes, “is not the obvious one of racist stereotypes and language, which others have tackled before her; rather, it is the tendency of critics to assume that race is irrelevant to much of American literature and to their enterprise as critics” (Fishkin 629). Trudier Harris opines, “While some scholars might be disturbed by the negligences Morrison claims, indeed discomforted by the lines of inquiry she offers, the volume cannot be dismissed; neither can Morrison’s growing reputation as one of the more critically astute of contemporary American writers” (Harris 188).

Commemorating the 25th year of Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Joseph Darda in “A New White Man: Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* turns 25”, reads the reception of the text and the concomitant counter-texts and debates in the light of the recent election of Donald Trump as the US President. Darda writes:

Playing in the Dark offers a reminder in the first year of the Trump administration that whiteness cannot be treated in isolation from other racial categories. Instead it must be recognized as something formed within a larger racial order. The Trump era has brought to the surface a new form of whiteness, in which white men are recentered on American culture through an alleged decentring, in which whiteness is reconceived as a minoritized culture besieged by immigration and globalization. (Darda 2017)

Darda, however pointed out that the new turn towards “Whiteness Studies” addressed concerns that tend to perceive “whiteness” as “a source of individual alienation rather than structural advantage” (Darda 2017). Such concerns were ventilated in books like Arlie Russell Hochschild’s *Strangers in their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016) and J.D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016). Darda records that the *National Review* hailed Vance as “the Trump whisperer”. Vance’s stance in the book was one of complete sympathy and allegiance with the white working class section of the nation. Vance opines— “I may be white, but I do not identify with the WASPs of the Northeast...Instead, I identify with the millions of working-class white Americans as minoritized yet not racialized” (qtd in Darda, 2017). However, Darda also pointed out that Vance’s stance is in itself a “racist” stance seen in the light of Morrison- “But racialization is, Morrison stresses, an uneven process that creates and

sustains social hierarchies rather than equivalent categories of difference. Being white and poor in the United States is not the same as being black and poor” (Darda 2017)

Therefore, after almost three decades of Morrison’s publication of her thesis on “whiteness”, it still remains relevant in the Post-Obama US still being haunted by the forces set in motion by “the brash Manhattan billionaire”, Trump. Darda puts in his review:

Playing in the Dark motivated a generation of ethnic studies scholars and students to make whiteness visible. It was critical, they argued, that we not let whiteness continue to go unacknowledged and unexamined as a social norm....From the beginning, critical whiteness studies has risked recentering whiteness in the act of indicting it. The critical and commercial success of books like Vance’s memoir points to the limitations and pitfalls of making whiteness visible in the 21st century. The challenge for writers now will be making whiteness visible as part of a social structure that divests non-white Americans of resources and opportunities rather than as another minoritized cultural identity. It is a difficult thing to do because a social structure doesn’t make a very compelling protagonist. Morrison’s lectures recount her own recognition of that structure and how it organizes our literature and our lives. (Darda 2017)

Morrison's project thus needs to be expanded, analysed, critiqued and reconsidered even in the twenty-first century, to show how the present times continue what has always been the practice since the inception of nationhood in America.

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