

Stylistic Analysis of Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye": A Bakhtinian Reading

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This paper attempts to discuss stylistically some of the linguistic features of Morrison's *The Bluest Eyes*. Its main aim is to study this novel in the light of the Bakhtinian approach of multiple voices. This novel is analysed stylistically to give a voice to the silenced reality of depression for black men and women. Using stylistic analyses is important in understanding the literary texts based on linguistic evidences. In the paper the researchers attempt to clarify stylistically how polyphony is contextualized in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in which the writer goes beyond describing her single vision, but she gives a broad space for her characters to express their different perspectives.

Key words: *Stylistic analysis, Bakhtin, polyphony, racism, Morrison.*

Introduction

Polyphony is a term first used by Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895–1975) who is one of the most famous literary theorists in the Twentieth Century. This writing technique is best captured in Dostoevsky's novels. Contrasted perspectives are presented and they result in multi-voiced narratives. Bakhtin describes Dostoyevsky's novels in his *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1984) saying: "A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but not merged on the unity of event" (1984, p. 6).

Bakhtin's works were widely known and published during the Russian revolution. His views of the novel quickly received a wide welcome all around the world. In his polyphonic novel the voice of the author is not obvious. Instead, there are many voices and viewpoints which represent different truths. In a polyphonic novel several worlds of visions are presented and developed without interrupting the unity of the whole. According to David Lodge, a polyphonic novel is a novel in which there are different voices and different truths, which are not dominated by the single voice of the author (1990, p. 86).

This mode of writing is different from the traditional mode of writing novel. Polyphonic narrative is the opposite of monological novel where characters are only mouthpieces for the writers. In monological novel subjects are incorporated through a single consciousness. Characters exist exclusively to convey the author's ideas, not their own (Mishra, 2016). But in Polyphonic novel everything is determined by the creative task which is "the task of constructing a polyphonic world and destroying the established forms of the basically monological (homophonic) European novel." (Bakhtin, M. M.1984,p. 5) It lacks a traditional plot and character development. In polyphonic novel there are many linked stories, each with a different protagonist, but, at last, they all are related to the central content. Kundera states that any literary text particularly narrative by its very nature needs to be an experiment with multiple voices. He emphasises: "the novel ha[s] tremendous synthetic power, that it could be poetry, fantasy, philosophy, aphorism, and essay all rolled into one" (Salmon 1988, n.p.). Kundera adds that the polyphonic novel must be seen as "that which brings together every device and every form of knowledge in order to *shed light on existence*" (1988, n.p.).

Coupland (2007) mentions that the project of a polyphonous, multilayered identity is studied by the African Americans by the use of some linguistic variables in order to hide or avoid some indexical associations for those people. He (2007, p. 165) adds that they sometimes project their 'real' identities as African Americans, as gay men and as drag queens. But their main performance target is to project fictional identities as 'white women'. The drag persona of a white, heterosexual, upper-class woman inverts the 'real' social categorisation of these performers (Bakhtin, M.M. 2016),

Bakhtin emphasises the reason behind using multiple voices when he claims: "In every person there is something which only he himself can reveal in a voluntary act of self consciousness and expression, something which is not amenable to an externalising, second hand definition." (1984, pp. 47-48)

The Objectives

The main objectives of this paper are:

1. To analyse Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* stylistically using the theories of the philosopher and critic Bakhtin of polyphony.
2. To show how the novel is seen and studied as a 'polyphonic' novel where the voices of the characters are not merged with the voice of the author.
3. To consider the Bekhtinain theory of polyphony in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* where characters are free from the author's domination. The characters' voices are equally important, and their views are extremely independent (Thornborrow, J. and Wareing, S 1998).
4. To inspect the relationship between Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and Bakhtin's theory of polyphony from a stylistic perspective. By stylistically analysing selected passages from *The Bluest Eye*, the researchers attempt to prove that there are many different voices dominating the text, which reminds readers of the type of literature Morrison is producing.

Stylistic Analysis: A critical Approach

Stylistic analysis is given many different definitions by different scholars. Short, M. & Candlin (1989: p.1) best describe stylistic analysis as "an approach to the analysis of literary texts using linguistic description." David Crystal in his *A first dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* gives another view when he defines stylistics as a part of linguistics that "studies certain aspects of language variation" (1980,p. 76). In order to analyse any literary text stylistically, one has to depend on his/her knowledge of linguistics. Leech (1969, p.14) defines stylistics as: "the most effective means of achieving both clarity and diction and a certain dignity is the use of altered form of words."

Words create certain feelings and reactions, therefore, language plays crucial role in understanding and analysing any literary work (Leech, G.N., and Short, M.H. 2007). Thus, before analysing the literary text stylistically, one should read and fully understand the literary text. In this regard, some points should be taken into consideration for the purpose of analysing the text from stylistic perspective. These include the points of view presented in the text, the symbols and metaphors used and the literal meaning behind them, the tenses, techniques of narration, and some other literary devices. Through this style, the writer succeeds in conveying his message to the readers easily. Hence, the technique of stylistic analysis includes looking at all the details of the literary text, examining all its parts and identifying their functions (Watson & Zyngier, 2007).

Fish (1981) defines stylistics by saying that stylistics was born of a reaction to the subjectivity and imprecision of literary studies. For the appreciative raptures of the impressionistic critic, stylisticians purport to substitute precise and rigorous linguistic descriptions, and to proceed from those descriptions to interpretations for which they claim a measure of objectivity. Stylistics, in short, is an attempt to put criticism on a scientific basis. (33)

Thornborrow and Wareing (1998) identify three main aspects of stylistics that should be viewed when dealing with the analysis of any literary text. These aspects focus on:

- The use of linguistics (the study of language) to approach literary texts
- The discussion of texts according to objective criteria rather than according purely to subjective and impressionistic values
- Emphasis on the aesthetic properties of language (for example, the way rhyme can give pleasure.

This means that it is essential to deal with such aspects in order to get a full understanding of a literary text. In this respect, Wales (2001), Burke (2014) and Bray (2018) state that the main concern of stylistics is to analyse and interpret linguistic features within a literary context, such as poetry, novels, plays, etc. This is because such interpretations may relate the functional themes of these literary texts to the linguistic features.

Levels of Stylistic Analysis

In order to analyse any literary text, Finch (1998, p. 208) identifies three levels of stylistics. These levels are: micro level, which is concerned with the linguistic form; intermediate level which has to do with the discourse dimension of texts; and the macro level which focuses on the communicative situations of texts.

In addition to the above levels, Leech and Short in *Style in fiction* (2007) affirm that there are many other levels of stylistic analysis. These levels may include:

Grammatical level: which includes and syntax. This level studies grammar, phrases, tenses, and part of speech. Grammatical level makes the intention of the writer clear.

Morphological level: According to Mark and Kirsten (2005, p.1) “Morphology refers to the mental system involved in word formation or to the branch of linguistics that deals with words, their internal structure, and how they are formed”.

Semantic level includes pragmatics which studies the meanings and the characters' points of view.

Pragmatics emphasises the hidden meaning in a literary text. It discusses the way readers recognise the invisible meaning in any literary text.



Lexical level focuses on the use of nouns and verbs. It discusses the use of words whether they are simple or difficult; archaic or modern; concrete or abstract; unique words and borrowed words from other languages. Abstract nouns emphasise the mental state of characters while concrete nouns describe the characters' physical appearance (Bakhtin, M. M. 1981).

In this paper, the researchers intend to examine the morphological and semantic levels because the Bakhtinian approach is related to the novel's point of view and the theme of race and discrimination that are mainly related to these two levels.

Toni Morrison's Biography

Toni Morrison (1931 -), is a famous black novelist. She writes many novels which they all discuss the themes of black feminism. Morrison's novels are famous for their beautiful language, impressive themes, and ornately black characters that search for a place in the white society. Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is the first novel published in 1970. It traces the tragedy of a black girl who is attempting to be accepted by the white community. Morrison wrote many other novels discussing the same theme of black women and their damaged psyches like *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Love* and *A Mercy*. Morrison's novels all focus on rural Afro-American communities and on their cultural heritage, which she examines with minute details and clear language. She does not only tell about the communities, but she describes them. Morrison depicts the suffering and the pain of the blacks through flashbacks and different techniques used by characters. She succeeds in letting the world see how the white masters look at their black slaves as animals.

Morrison's novels are more than narratives but they are a history of the black communities. She is criticised for not using a white character as a protagonist in her novels. She justifies that she desires to create a world for the black people and find them a place in the literary canon. She dislikes seeing black people writing for the white people, but they must write about themselves, their problems and their tribulations. Her only aim is to create a world for black people in which white people do not exist. Therefore, she does not use white characters in her novels.

Morrison is defying the entire world that literature is not and cannot be monopolised by one single culture. Literature is for all cultures and all nations regardless of their colour.

The Bluest Eye: Thematic Concerns

The central theme of the novel is the idea that black people are valueless and worthless who lack the standards of beauty. The blacks have inherited this view which was handed down to them at birth.

The main character of this novel is Pecola Breedlove who believes that her extremely hard life would be better and easier if only she had blue eyes. This novel did not receive a wide welcome when it was first published. Morrison claimed that her novel was treated like her main character: dismissed, slighted, and misunderstood

Pecola Breedlove thinks that only the bluest eyes will make her beautiful and attractive, and such eyes will make her accepted by her family, her friends and the society

Morrison argues that racism is the main source of domination and its destructive effects on the black society in general and on black families in particular is huge. She claims that the black's obsession with American standards of beauty leads them to self-hatred and self-prejudice. Susan Willis in her *Eruption of Funk: Historicizing Toni Morrison*, states: "The concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the western world." (Willis, S. 1998, P. 277)

The theme of this novel depicts how the white society and its standards of beauty make the life of the blacks unbearable. All the blacks, males and females, are tormented under the violent domination of the racial ideologies of the whites who commodify the blacks and torment their psyches. Smith Valerie. S. (2017);(1987, p. 130) argue : "First and foremost, it serves as a synopsis of the tale that is to follow, revealing the psychic confusion of the novel. It also serves as an ironic comment on a society which educates and unconsciously socialises its children like Pecola with callous regard for the cultural richness and diversity of its people."

Methodology

This paper involves the stylistic analysis of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* focusing on the themes, and the use of language. The analysis follows the theory of polyphony first emphasized by Bakhtain in his book *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*(1984). Analysing the style of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is important because it better defines her work. While analysing a text, readers appreciate the syntactic choices of the writer. Language is the means which mirrors the writer's fictional world. Analysing language help readers better understand the literary text. Technique and style are looked at as an essential part of the work's significance and value. Fromkin et al (2007) argue "...language is the source of human life

and power" (p.3). They also add that "we use language to convey information to others..., ask questions..., give command..., and express wishes" (p.173). Brooks and Warren (1952) in their *Fundamental of Good Writing*, compared style to the grain in wood stating: "The style of a work is not a sort of veneer glued over the outside. On the contrary, it is like the pattern of the grain in a piece of wood." (45)

The researchers intend to analyse the polyphonic features of Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* according to Bakhtin's polyphonic narrative theory which is a new writing technique that many writers are using in their literary texts because it gives a complete freedom to different personalities to express their different and contrasted views without being controlled by the voice of the author. The paper will not focus on the plot or the characters but on the different self-determining consciousness that have identical and similar positions and values. Bakhtin's theory attempts to put group of people on one stage and behold their different reactions and ways of expressing themselves. It is as if the narrative was written by many characters not by a single author. Attention is turned to Bakhtin's claim polyphonic novel is a multi-voiced narrative where various viewpoints and different voices are recognised.

Discussion

Following the plurality of consciousness the characters in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* are free to express their inner conflicts and consciousness without being influenced by the authors' dominance. Through dialogue, they impart their message to readers even though they might have different and contrasted points of view. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison gives her novel a more realistic sense when she uses multiple voices and narrators who interact with one another to convey their life experiences. Through these multiple voices, Morrison highlights the way in which black females are affected by race and discrimination. They lose their identity in their search to be accepted by the white society. Morrison argues that black females can neither belong to the black community nor can they accommodate themselves to the norms and values of the whites who subjugate the blacks and torment their psyches.

Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber in her *Race, trauma, and home in the novels of Toni Morrison* states that: "one of Morrison's great achievements is her ability to depict what is meant to be black."(Schreiber, E. J 2010, p.11) This stigmatisation pushes the black females into accepting the belief that they are "ugly, monstrous, and undesirable." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970, p. 203) This polyphonic technique of using more than one narrator is important to allow the readers to see the single event from different perspectives. In Morrison's *The Blue Eye* the main narrator is Claudia but there are other narrators like Cholly, Geraldine and Pecola who narrate their life experiences of displacement, and they help readers sympathize with them. This undeniable polyphonic style is important in this novel to address issues of racial discrimination and identity in the Depression-era. It is frequently linked with the ethnic

and political beliefs associated with the Black females who, historically, suffered from repression, mistreatment, depression, and domination because of race and gender. They were victims of both sexist and racist subjugation.

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* begins with Pecola Breedlove's sufferings and mental breakdown. There is remorse, a sense of despair and an image of the wilderness all around. For Pecola's family: "Not even the gardens fronting the lake showed marigolds that year.... It never occurred to us that the earth itself might be unyielding. ...What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love, and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970, p.9)

Pecola's parents and all the black characters in the novel learn to abhor themselves; therefore, they fail to become good families to their children. They go through a stage of accepting racist picture. Everything is affected by racism because of the educational system. Pecola and all the black children are mistreated in school by their peers. The worst brutalisation that Pecola faces is the moment when her father Cholly rapes her. Instead of protecting his daughter, his lust towards her is stronger than his sense of protectiveness. Cholly had a very bad childhood. His parents left him when he was born and his grandmother brought him up and gave him a name. Cholly is upset because his father casted him down when he was still a child. His grandmother took care of him: "He[Cholly's father] wasn't nowhere around when you was born. Your mama didn't name you nothing. The nine days wasn't up before she throwed you on the junk heap. When I got you I named you myself on the ninth day. You named after my dead brother. Charles Breedlove. A good man. Ain't no Samson never come to no good end."(Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970,p.133)

Pauline and Cholly's reactions are justified because racism influences every moment of their life. Pecola is never given the love and attention every child of her age needs. She wonders, "What did love feel like? She wondered how do grownups act when they are in love. Eat fish together?"(Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970. p. 44). The members of Breedlove's family hate each other, and are hated by people around them due to the social racism against the blacks. The mother hates their children for believing that they are all ugly and they would not be accepted by their society.

Arunima Ray (1993 p.61) points out that the Breedlove's family thinks they are terribly ugly and poor. Their poverty could be justified but their ugliness is not accepted, and no one could convince them that they were not ugly. Pecola does not receive her parent's attention because they had a very bad history with racism. Cholly, her father, was humiliated and suffered sexual racism. The omniscient narrator examines Pauline life. Pauline suffered from loneliness, and she was forced to travel to the north in search of economic opportunity. Therefore, Pecola's parents cannot give Pecola what they lacked themselves. Having

absorbed the thought that she is unattractive and unappealing, Pecola's second hidden voice telling her that if she only had blue eyes, this would make her more loved by her parents and more accepted by the white society. Pecola's story reflects the complex structure of self-esteem of the black community in the face of the leading white cultural standards. She believes that if her eyes became blue she would become more beautiful and different and she would view the world differently (Coupland, N. 2007) . She realises the standards of beauty of the whites; therefore, she detests herself even more because she cannot be accepted by the white community.

The last scene shows that Pecola is left alone. She keeps talking to herself saying: "you don't talk to anybody. You don't go to school. And nobody talks to you. . . Even Mrs. Breedlove [her mother] doesn't say anything to you." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970, p.196) Raped by her father, ignored by her mother, she realizes that her wish of having blue eyes could not be granted because she loses her sanity (Watson, G. & Zyngier,S. 2007). Only when she is insane does she begin to believe that she could be accepted and loved because she possesses the bluest eyes. She feels more secured and protected from the pain of her existence. In her insanity, she is presenting another voice which represents the part of Pecola that pushes her to face the community. After all, this is an affirming voice, an encouraging voice; one that wants her to go outside and to help her address the aftermath of the rape. But because she continues to live after she has lost her mind, Pecola's aimless wandering at the edge of town haunts the community, reminding them of the ugliness and hatred that they have tried to repress. One would ask why Pecola sees herself as terribly ugly. Morrison answers: "Long hours she sat looking in the mirror, trying to discover the secret of the ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school by teachers and classmates alike." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 39) Morrison's mirror stands for the white society that makes her feel inferior to other beautiful girls. Only one thing can relieve her from this feeling of inferiority. It is "a miracle.... she would never know her beauty. She could see what there was to see. The eyes of other people." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* 40)

Bakhtin's multiple-voice technique reflects displacement, disarticulation and estrangement. Most of Morrison's characters cannot conquer the evil and mortification that white Americans practice on them. Black women in American society not only suffer from discrimination at the hands of white people, but they are also the victims of their Black men. In their obsession with white standards, they begin to deny their roots. Pauline, Geraldine, Cholly and Pecola see themselves ugly because the Whites see them like that Pecola's fate is a fate worse than death because she is not allowed any release from her world. Pecola has been a scapegoat for the whole community (Aronoff, M. and Fudeman, K., 2005). Her unattractiveness and ugliness make others feel more attractive. This leads Pecola to lose her mind. Through Pecola, Morrison presents a destructive example of Black American society's self-detestation, self-contempt and self-scorn, arising because they mistrust their own beauty. For Pecola the



blue eyes are the only solution to all her pains. Pecola thinks if she only had blue eyes no one would hurt and make fun of her anymore. If only she had blue eyes she would be more loved by her family particularly her father. No one would think of hurting a girl with blue eyes. (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970,p.34)

Elizabeth B House (1984, p.29) emphasises that black children, who are forced to grow up in that society which rejects their existence, begin to have impossible dreams part of their strong desires to be accepted by the community they are living in. She claims that people like Pecola who base their lives on wishes that could not be granted would hurt themselves. The responsibility is laid on people around her who planted this harmful idea in her little head. Pecola believes that only blue eyes might end her suffering. The blue eyes will assist her to regain her self- confidence and heal the scars on her heart (Crystal, D. 2016). The *Bluest Eye* describes how Pecola is constantly exposed to mental destruction and violence. If the western people continue focusing on the physical beauty disregarding the inner beauty of the individuals this would bring destruction and instability to the white society (Brooks, C. and Warren, R. P. 2015). The focus must be on whom one is, not on how one looks.

In the novel, all the Blacks at large have suffered from "the dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, p. 81). Pecola "stepped over in madness, a madness which protected her from us" (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, p. 204). Pecola hides behind her insanity. She is representing Claudia's words "we were not free... We were not compassionate ... Not good ... We courted death to call ourselves brave, and hid like thieves from life." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970,p. 203). Haskel Frankel argues that the only thing Pecola strongly needs is to be different. She represents what racism and prejudice do to the black community and she stands for the bad and destructive impact of the whites on black children. (Frankel, H. 1993, p.3) If she was different, no one would harm her anymore. If she was different, Pauline might be nicer with her. Now Pauline's voice when talking to Pecola is likes "rotten pieces of apple, but when she speaks to the white girl, her voice is like honey." (Morrison, 1999, p.78). Passionately and enthusiastically for a year, she had always prayed to be different: "Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people". (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*,p. 44) . In her insanity, she is happy to have both the friend who might talk to her when she feels lonely and the blue eyes which will make more beautiful. But she is still worried that that her eyes might not be blue enough to make her loveable and admired. She wants her imaginary friend to tell her "If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eye."(Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, 1970, p.201) She is afraid that someone else might have bluer eyes than hers. She refuses to go back to her violent old life. The blue eyes will have lost their power. She thinks of both her family and her society. If they both reject her then there will be no escape from the pain.

Claudia's narration has two different perspectives. The adult Claudia uses her memory to describe past events, therefore, she uses the past tense. But for most of her narration, Claudia's point of view is that of a 9- year –child. Claudia is extremely compassionate narrator who always tries to understand people she describes. In addition to this first- person narrator, Morrison is using an omniscient third-person narrator whose perspective is seen when some events are not narrated by Claudia (Fish, Stanley, E. 2017).

Claudia is a survivor because she and her sister "were still in love with themselves then" (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, p. 58) Claudia says, "no one speaks to me, or ask how I feel." (Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* , 1970,p.9) When asked what she really wants for Christmas, her answer is simple; she wants attention. When she is given a white doll she is unable to hide her hatred to this doll. She is not relieved until she tears this doll to pieces. Claudia, different from Pecola, is the child who triumphs because she has pride in who she is and has an identity as a beautiful black female. Claudia could also be doing this to express her anger towards what is directly considered beautiful, little white girls. Claudia knows the reasons behind the traumatic experiences all black females underwent but she prefers to keep these reasons hidden (Burke, M., ed. 2014).

Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* discusses the black female's search for the white standards of beauty. This novel sheds light on the destroying effect of the racism on black people (Short, M. & Candlin, C. 2015). Pecola's wish of having blue eyes is impossible to take place therefore Pecola is in danger of losing her mind. This racism influences the individual physically and psychologically. In *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison discusses the mental effects of social racism and prejudice that leads to insecurity and lack of confidence among the blacks who start to see and accept themselves as inferior, and ugly (Ray , A. 1993). The research analyses the situation of the black characters and their change of heart as a result of racism and white dominant culture. Morrison reflected the 20th century prejudice against the blacks whose life is made unbearable and agonising due to that social discrimination. Thus, one can say, as Shelby Steel (1989.p. 58 .)clarifies that all the blacks are made victims but those who are not victims are certainly not blacks.

Conclusion

After analysing Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* stylistically, the researchers arrive at the conclusion that Toni Morrison's novel, according to Bakhtin, is a polyphonic novel because it is alternating between a first-person narrator and third- person narrators whose voices are interacting. This technique always reminds readers that multiple perspectives exist. Refusing to give one character the final words, Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* is a multi-voiced novel where characters do not have only one truth but they interweave many points of view which



proves that no one character holds more of the truth than the others. It is found that the narrative technique and the structure of novel have played a vital part in providing the novel a polyphonic structure. Finally, authors are realising more fully their roles as of authority over a multiple-voiced -narrative, allowing their characters to speak up for themselves in order to create a new music and a new harmony.



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