

SUPPRESSION, OPPRESSION, AND SURVIVAL: THE EXPLOITED WORKER IN TONI MORRISON'S JAZZ

Shamaila Dodhy¹, Nasir Umar Muhammad²

¹Department of English
University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan.

²Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Federal University Dutse, Nigeria.

Email: shamailadodhy@yahoo.com, umarmuhammadnasir@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Karl Heinrich Marx's worker loses his identity as he descends to the level of commodity by working like a machine in a capitalist world. Capitalism thrives on exploitation, unemployment and monopoly of the capital. I endeavour to locate how Toni Morrison's Jazz accentuates the struggle of oppressed members of the black community against firm structures of slavery, feudalism and capitalism. Morrison addresses strain perpetuated on burdened people through exploitation of economy; thus Jazz epitomizes the marginalized section of the society, which is not given equal opportunities to sustain and have no access to wealth and positions of privilege. The dominant class uses power and discourse to make the system appear logical and natural. Analysis is based on examples from the text, which are stylistically worked out and structurally scrutinized. It is an examination of social realities of African-American community which has decided to raise voice against injustice.

KEYWORDS: bourgeoisie, capitalism, economic, exploitation, labourer, proletariat

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Karl Heinrich Marx, (1818-1883) a nineteenth-century German philosopher, is recognized as a revolutionary, whose works led to the establishment of many communist regimes in the twentieth century. He is documented as the most influential modern thinker and one of the greatest social scientists of the last two centuries. He is known for establishing principles of modern study of sociology, economics and proletarian revolution. His economic analysis of capitalism is based on his account of the labour theory of value

which considers capitalist profit as the extraction of surplus value from the exploited proletariat. He rejects capitalism in favour of worker's struggle for better wages and healthier working-conditions. It is highlighted by him that the drive within a Capitalist for greater profit and aggression for capital accumulation stands in sharp contrast to financial struggle of a wage earner. Exploitation is inbuilt in the capitalist method of production, just as it was a component of feudal society and slave society earlier on. He strongly believes that the moving force behind human history is neither religion nor any political ideology but its economic systems because the lives of people are determined by their economic circumstances. Capitalism is the only dominant economic, political and ideological force which governs the state of affairs. To understand any social or political context, any event or product, it is essential to comprehend material and historical circumstances in which they take place.

2.0 DESIGN OF THE STUDY

This paper approaches the selected text through the method of close reading embedded within the perspective of Marxist literary criticism. According to Eagleton (2002), "Marxism is a scientific theory of human societies and of the practice of transforming them; and what that means, rather more concretely, is that the narrative Marxism has to deliver is the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression" (xii). For Marxists, literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function as it is grounded on the background and ideology of the author. It is an assessment of the political tendency of a literary work, defining whether its social content analyzes the class constructs validated in the literary work. As such, it is hoped that this study will enhance the appreciation of Morrison's *Jazz* as it aims to explain the literary work by drawing attention towards its form, style and, meanings and how the novel mentions the working class and promotes the concept of work through creating a classless society.

3.0 MARXIST ANALYSIS OF MORRISON'S JAZZ

Toni Morrison's *Jazz* has been critically viewed from many different perspectives. The novelist is stimulated by black music which is "multidimensional in space and time" (Raussert, 2000, 521); "the issues of indeterminacies, fictive history, lack of closure and self-conscious narrative" (Hogue, 2002, 178) are presented in a jazzy fashion which is sometimes "sordid, provocative, disorderly, and chaotic; other times, divine, exciting, restoring, and invigorating" (Pici, 1998, 382), but I contend that the novel is concerned about economic problems being faced by the under-privileged section of the society who are struggling to come out of their financial slump by working hard, day in and day out "for physical subsistence" (Marx, 1932, 653).

The division of bourgeoisie and proletariat in the society is firmly established as we look at the opening scene of the novel. It opens with a violent attack of Violet on funeral of Dorcas, the ex-beloved of her husband. To explain why she is transformed from 'Violet' to 'Violent', the writer takes us back to her traumatic childhood experiences, which led her to develop a fractured psyche. The father of Violet is a casual man, least concerned about his responsibilities concerning his wife and children. He spends his time in visiting different places and on his way back, he used to carry novelties and rare gifts for people while ignoring the starving members of his family. This led to a state when Rose Dear, Violet's mother, is forced to leave her humble habitat by debtors who "tipped her out of it like the way you get the cat off the seat if you don't want to touch it or pick it up in your arms. You tip it forward and it lands on the floor" (Morrison, 1992, 98). Her children are underfed and she used to hold an empty cup in front of people posing as if she is sipping hot coffee out of it. This led Violet and her sisters to work at a very young age in cotton fields to survive.

Toni Morrison portrays "naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation" (Marx, 1848, 659) going on in the United States in the following words:

Everybody with fingers in a twenty-mile radius showed up and was hired on the spot. Nine dollars a bale, some said, if you grew your own; eleven dollars if you had a white friend to carry it up for pricing. And for pickers, ten cents a day for the women and a case quarter for the men. (102-103)

Before coming to the city, Violet is trained to do all sorts of outdoor activities. She could "handle mules, bale hay and chop wood" (Morrison, 1992, 105) with

no gloves on her hands. Rose Dear who finds herself beaten by poverty, decides to kill herself by jumping down in a well “a place so narrow, so dark it was pure, breathing relief to see her stretched in wooden box.” (Morrison, 1992, 101). The grandmother, on finding the grandchildren in trouble, decides to leave her job and a comparatively comfortable life-style in the residence of Vera Louise. On coming back to the village, subsistence of her granddaughters becomes the only mission of the old woman. She spent four years in organizing their shack. She spent all her energies in “stitching by fire, gardening and harvesting by day. Pouring mustard tea on the girls’ cuts and bruises, and keeping them at their tasks” (Morrison, 1992, 101-2). Consequently, Violet with her two sisters has to leave her home to work in cotton-fields, to send money for the rest of the family but the income is too meagre for survival. Almost all the members of the family are working but the land owners of the South America are not giving them enough money thus “the worker sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities” (Marx, 1932, 652). These workers sink lower and lower in the social scale, losing what little hold they once had on physical existence. No survival strategy is working which finally makes Joe and Violet take the decision to migrate to a Northern State of America.

Survival strategies that they have learnt in rural life do not work in city life. There Joe has “worked gins and lumber and cane and cotton and corn, [he] butchered when needed, plowed, fished, sold skins” (Morrison, 1992, 106) but these skills are not the demand of the city as Marx says that the modern bourgeois society has established “new classes, new conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones” (Marx, 1848, 657). Therefore, he has to unlearn what he has learnt earlier. Here he becomes a tool in the hands of capitalists, as he has to sell beauty products by going door-to-door introducing fairness creams that might bring change in social conditions of the blacks. Joe has got this job because he himself being a member of the minority group, he will have an access to meet black women who might be prospective buyers of whitening creams and beauty products. In consumer markets, the products are introduced by employing varied marketing strategies to increase the sale. Joe works on percentage, the more he sells the product, the more money he earns.

Joe and Violet, when decide to marry, plan not to have children because Violet has seen in her childhood that children who are the blessings of God become heavy stones on hearts of mothers when they do not have enough food for them. Violet being poor cannot afford to go to hospital so she goes to cotton fields to injure herself and her foetus. This also contributes in making her a disturbed soul, which led her to pass sleepless nights carrying dolls in her hands and pillows by her side. As she has killed her unborn babies with her own hands in fear of hunger so she keeps parrots that she has taught them to say, "I love you" (Morrison, 1992, 3). Aborting becomes one of the survival strategies used by the couple to pass a comfortable life. The couple has torn off their dreams and suffered throughout their lives. Both husband and wife have to carry out "back-breaking labor" (Morrison, 1992, 27) before going to bed. Science and technology must be implemented to lighten the workload and to shorten the working day which is life-threatening for the proletariat. The working class should collectively strive for human emancipation. In *Jazz*, it is observed that the slavery of the South America is replaced by the social-enslavement of the North America. The wife does hair-styling as an unlicensed hairdresser of the whole community. She goes from home to home to provide services at minimum charges. She cannot charge higher them because she cannot afford to open her own beauty-saloon. She is aware of the discriminating laws of the society, which will never allow her to open a salon and become a competitor to white people of the community. Her existence will threaten the business of bourgeois who are making money, so Violet being a proletariat has to get herself exploited by the legal system and social classification. On the other hand, the husband sorrowfully relates, "I worked everything from whitefolks shoe leather to cigars in a room where they read to us while we rolled tobacco. I cleaned fish at night and toilets in the day till I got with the table waiters" (Morrison, 1992, 127). The characters, therefore, are struggling hard to survive with almost no opportunity to acquire wealth and power. The gap between bourgeois and proletariat is unbridgeable.

Dorcas' parents are burnt alive. Not only them but also her "box of dolls" (Morrison, 1992, 38) and all her childhood memories are converted into ashes during riots which turned her homeless and helpless. After taking refuge in her aunt's house, she has to follow her restrictions that she has laid upon her. Over-protection and constricted environment led her to establish friendship with a man as old as her father would be. Besides, she finds him quite generous

as he pleases her with fine and elegant gifts. Being a young girl of sixteen, she harbours many teenage desires of fancy clothing and stylish jewellery. The economics of capitalism damages the consumer psychologically. Capitalism urges the consumer to compete with others in quantity and quality of their belongings. The teenage boys of the community cannot afford to buy her such expensive gifts because they are sons of poor labourers. They can hardly take two dollars from their parents for the party being illegally arranged in a house of a poor woman where Dorcas is shot by her ex-lover in order to “keep the feeling going” (Morrison, 1992, 3). The poor woman is reluctant to call the police for she knows that she will be severely prosecuted by the authorities for organizing a dance party at her home where drinks are being served to teenage boys and girls. The legal system of Marx’s superstructure which is based on the “economic foundation” (Marx, 1859, 663) will not allow her to arrange such a party at home. She has allowed young boys and girls to indulge in obnoxious activities on “callous ‘cash payment’” (Marx, 1848, 659). Being a proletariat, she has to practice such illegal activities as a survival strategy.

When Dorcas is shot, nobody at the party calls the police or ambulance except Felice. She calls the ambulance twice but it did not come until morning. She sorrowfully relates, “The ice, they said, but really because it was colored people calling” (Morrison, 1992, 210). Legal or medical systems do little to support the marginalized section of the society. While on the other hand the callous woman, who has arranged the party of the black community, does nothing to give medical aid to the poor teenage girl whose blood oozes drop by drop into the woman’s mattress. Hence Morrison “exposes the debilitating effects of white oppression, yet she avoids sentimental praise for African Americans” (Page, 1995, 56). Through the episode of Dorcas’ death the attitude of the white community as well as the black community is exposed. It is a society where there is “no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest” (Marx, 1848, 659).

The black community is migrating to cities in hope of finding better financial prospects but they are aware that they will be offered low and humiliating jobs for which they will have to crush their self-respect. However, the jobs are physically lighter like “standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, and even cleaning strangers’ shoes” (Morrison, 1992, 106) but cast a heavy burden on the soul of the worker. If calculated from economic point

of view, a days' money in such humiliating tasks, is more than earned by the labourer in the whole harvest. White people "threw money at you" (Morrison, 1992, 106); they do so to devalue the labourer in his own eyes as well as in the eyes of the community. Morrison draws a truthful picture of a white-dominated American community which possesses all privileges because "the accumulation of capital in a few hands" (Marx, 1932, 652) has resulted in a dialectical relationship between the "oppressor and oppressed" (Marx, 1848, 657). Now times are changing, whites will have to acknowledge the entity of African-Americans not as a traditionally deprived class; who have no control over their destiny but as individuals who are born with minds that have the capacity to think and organize their ideas in an effective way. Similarly in *Tar Baby* Morrison vividly despises capitalism in the following words, "That was the sole lesson of their world: how to make waste, how to make machines that made more waste, how to make wasteful products, how to talk waste, how to study waste, how to design waste...." (1981, 20). Morrison has repetitively used the word "waste" to comment on the "wastefulness of Western capitalism which is reinforced by its lyricism" (Rice, 1994, 429). The jerky movement is employed not in a non-serious mood but it is a studied critique of what she sees as a cause of devastation of the contemporary scenario, "her novels are reflections of her increasing awareness of the nature of the African's dilemma and her increasing commitment to solve it" (Mbalia, 1991, 165).

The writer uses oblique narrative having strategic silences, memories, parallel stories with circular and backward movement including multiple discourses, abundant digressions and digressions within digressions. One of such digression comes from nowhere in the novel. It is an excerpt of an unknown letter relating the poor economic conditions of an unknown family, "I don't know what to do," she continues, "Nothing I do make a difference...children is as miserable as me. The money you senting can not keeping all us afloat. Us drowning here and may as well drown at home where your mother is and mine and big trees" (Morrison, 1992, 43). The splintered language, the awesome image of "drowning" in the jungle of impoverishment is harrowing. The image of "big trees" is like a death angel that has surrounded them from all sides. They will either have to run away from here or have to face the darkness of death that will engulf all of them one by one. Marx while commenting on bourgeoisie says, "Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the

civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West" (Marx, 1848,660). Hence, it is Capitalism that is creating "a world after its own image" (Marx, 1848, 660).

4.0 EXAMINING SOCIAL REALITIES

Gates in 1960s considers that Stowe's 'Uncle Tom' has become synonymous with "the black man all too eager to please whites around ... the embodiment of 'race betrayal' and an object of scorn, a scapegoat for all our political self-doubts" (as cited in Dinerstein, 2009, 83). As a social protest, the black community reacted against literary fantasy of African-American passivity. The post-Civil War generation comes up with the new slogan 'Uncle Tom is dead'. Silent submission is being replaced by shooting back at whites, calling them 'tyrants', 'thieves', and 'apes'. The Negroes have started professing that they are no longer 'Uncle Toms'. They should be identified as people with dignity and self-respect in relation to white people and white-controlled institutions. They should not be considered as meek and submissive, passive and childish any more. They must recognize the imbalance of power and wealth among people, the manipulation of the worker by bourgeoisie, the oppression and alienation being borne by proletariat, and the injustice being carried out by the society.

As a survival strategy, a Negro has to wear a mask because a Negro has learnt "to gauge precisely what reaction the alien person facing him desires, and he produces it with disarming artlessness" (Baldwin, 1955, 9-17). He has to do it, otherwise "they will get you killed for disrespecting them" (Johnson, 1943, 257). But now times are changing, the black community has taken up the decision to die while standing on their feet and fighting for their rights than to stand in a bended position begging for life. In 1944, *What the Negro Wants*, an anthology is compiled and published wherein writers like W.E.B. Du Bois, A. Philip Randolph, and Langston Hughes assert that black Americans want same constitutional guarantees ... white Americans took for granted and demanded to put an "end to segregation" (Egerton, 1994, 273). They have pulled down the mask of humility and submissiveness that they wore as a survival strategy and have decided to fight race war confronting the white folk fearlessly. Now the black voice is expressing the black rage against social and economic discrimination stringently "to reconstruct a stable sense of self" (Davis, 1998, 254).

5.0 CONCLUSION

Marx spent all his life and energies in educating the people about the economic structure of society, making the labourers aware of their rights and free exploitation of man by man. It is a social system in the sense that it rules and governs all our social relations of a community. What type of education we get, where we marry, our religious practices, the status symbols we carry, the size of our families are all shaped by capitalism. Human and natural resources are controlled and designed by it. The dominant class has inculcated this ideology to maintain hegemony and sustain power. Through cultural conditioning people are made to accept the status quo and are trained not to question. The tool of discourse is employed to make it appear logical. Marx exposes the society by revealing such deceptions which are hidden under false guises. People are made aware of the fact that they have developed a false consciousness and have accepted subservient, powerless roles in the society programmed by others. Ideological confrontation generated by inherent contradictions, which Marx calls dialectical materialism, will produce a change in the society. Arguing about internal tensions of Capitalism, he hoped it will collapse one day. More than a century has passed but we see that the clutches of Capitalism are stronger than before. Suppression and oppression are still the phenomena of the contemporary world, though 'Uncle Tom' is dead but "the war for racial equality" (Dinerstein, 2009, 82) and economic determinism is still going on.

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