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Language Appropriation and Cultural Reconstruction: An example of Morrison's *Song of Solomon*

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Cultural fragmentation as a result of collective trauma evokes the question of representation as a means of identification during conflict. In the period of intellectual revolution, language lies at the core of the problem since speaking is the negation of silence and silencing. The question of the appropriate way to express and reclaim one's past, culture, and identity falls within the scope of historical constructors/ re-constructors' negotiations. While some of them, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, suggest writing in national and ethnic languages for the sake of their people, others like Chinua Achebe prefer writing in the dominator's language to display and prove the culture of the dominated through creating an international discourse. However, the latter standpoint calls also for a New Language that is guilt-free using language appropriation. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* is worth pointing at work to illustrate the significance of language appropriation. Morrison assumes a kind of escape, a spiritual one, embedded in language. Milkman, the protagonist, has an identity that is split spatially as Homi Bhabha labels that. While his identity must just match his social reality, Milkman is stuck in the after effects of cultural identification. As a result, in order to piece together his fragmented reality, he must fly back to his origins. During his journey, he learns about the past through an encoded song, *Song of Solomon*. Although the lyrics are mostly written in English in addition to some African dialects, the song sounds like nonsense while it bears cultural connotations. Thus, language is used within a specific context that makes it able to cope with the signified.

Keywords: Representation, Language Appropriation, Cultural Reconstruction, Identity, Epistemology.

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"The fact is that technological activity and the scientific approach are not satisfied with simply modifying nature. They seek to master it, and in the process they tend to destroy it; and, before destroying it, they misinterpret it. This process began with the invention of tools."

"So now you are going back to the Stone Age! Isn't that a little early?"

"Not at all. The beginning was the first premeditated act of murder; the first tool and the first weapon – both of which went hand in hand with the advent of language"

–Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 1991

Introduction

Henri Lefebvre (1991) in the quote above summarizes the master-slave relationship in America. Whites have been qualified as masters because they possessed the means by which they could produce and control technological activity and scientific approach. They did not only seek to modify the life of Africans, but they also sought to master it. In the process, they destroyed it, and before that, they misinterpreted it using language. Therefore, the role of language is crucial in coding the master-slave conflict.

The misinterpretation of the life of Africans included the misrepresentation/ one-way representation of Africans. The invention of concrete tools of dominance implied the production of theoretical tools to satisfy the mind-brain dualism. The most important question that comes to mind in this context is whether language was able to solve the conflict after creating such a space. In other words, was language a tool for just coding conflict, or was it an effective tool for decoding it as well?

Since concrete tools go hand in hand with the production of language, African Americans had to move from the passivity of receiving actions to the activity of producing their own concrete and theoretical tools. In fact, they had two ways out; either to construct, or reconstruct their own space. Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) revolves around those two possibilities and the success or failure of each of them.

This article investigates Morrison's treatment of African American tools that lead to the formation of an appropriate and healthy African American space. The investigation is framed by Fanon's psychology of decolonization. It will first ponder on the Fanonian phases of intellectual revolution and the role of language in the development of those phases before identifying with them in *Song of Solomon*.

Fanon and the Psychology of Decolonization

For the image _as point of identification_ marks the site of an ambivalence. Its representation is always spatially split _ it makes present something that is absent _ and temporally deferred_ it is the representation of a time that is always elsewhere, a repetition. The image is only ever an appurtenance to authority and identity; it must never be read mimetically as the 'appearance' of a 'reality'.

—Homi Bhabha, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1967

The reconstruction of colonized people's identity witnesses different changes from times of revolution to post-liberation. Those changes are due to the psychology of oppression that promotes the splitting and negation of one's identity. In fact, the incoherence of personal identity refers to cultural fragmentation which is the result of cultural representations. In the case of black people, cultural identification based on the skin colour, i.e. the inferior complex makes the black man trapped with no possible answers because of inadequate questions. In other words, Frantz Fanon poses the question of whether the black man wants to be white (1967) while he (the black man) is aware of the impossibility of that desire that causes anxiety. To find a way out, the black man experiments other ways that make him whiter such as talking in the colonizer's language without any shortage (1967). Actually, the black self that represses the black culture always struggles with a kind of alienation. Therefore, assimilation is never the answer.

Fanon (2007) suggests that intellectuals' resistance occurs in three stages which are assimilation, the rediscovery of the past and revolution taking into consideration the influence of those intellectuals on their people. During the first stage, the intellectual assimilates the colonizer's culture even his way of thinking. After that, the repressed memories of childhood start to appear on the surface. Therefore, the black self is expressed through the aesthetics of the *other*. During that stage, intellectuals hesitate to assimilate the style of the colonizer because they are trying to idealize their own culture. However, in the third phase, the intellectuals start to be aware that projecting the struggle of resistance and leading people towards revolution is both relevant and fundamental. The third phase is more about authenticity. Intellectuals fail to assimilate as they fail to be genuinely black in expressing their pre-colonial culture. As a result, they are aware of their hybridity, and they use it to liberate their nations.

Linguistically speaking, during the first stage, the black man uses a white theoretical tool, i.e. whites' language to cope with his body which leads to the fragmentation of his image of identification. During the second phase, the black man

tends to construct other than reconstruct their space. Stated differently, they reject the space that has been created by whites through abrogating the knowledge generated from it, and trying to go back in time to use theoretical tools that existed before whites' colonization of their space. That cultural nostalgia, once again, alienates the black self from its reality because it tries to coerce the presence of something which is already absent.

Accepting hybridity, in reality, is the only way for the black self to reconcile with the past. The colonizer's culture cannot be just abrogated because they have been influenced by it for a considerable amount of time. At the beginning, they feel guilty for not being able to be genuinely black. Later on, appropriating/reconstructing the colonizer's culture in a way that harmonizes with blacks' identity sets them free. The colonized find themselves always trapped in what they want to be either whiter or authentically black: a wish that causes them anxiety. However, focusing on who they really are instead of what they want to be protects them from identity crisis.

Cultural hybridity is mirrored through language which is appropriated by intellectuals who seek revolution. For Africans, the way of reconstructing/constructing the past and identity opened a debate among those who were with writing in national languages against the ones who preferred to write in an appropriated language. While historical constructors, including Ngugi wa Thiong'o, suggested writing in native languages for the sake of their people, historical reconstructors, like Chinua Achebe, preferred writing in the dominators' language to display and prove the culture of the dominated through creating an international discourse. However, the later standpoint called also for a New Language that was guilt-free using language appropriation. Nevertheless, as it is mentioned before, the colonized space contained the colonizer's knowledge that has been reinforced through time. Thus, writing in appropriated language encouraged reconciliation rather than writing in national languages.

In the case of African Americans, it has been highly impossible for them to re-create a purely black culture. First of all, the diversity of Africans' origins prevented them from forming a unified black culture. Moreover, some of the masters did not even permit slaves to talk to each other (William L. Andrews 2019), and therefore, they have lacked a space to practice their culture. As a result, they have not been able to write in African languages due to their origins' diversity and cultural forgetfulness.

The Harlem Renaissance from 1920s up to the 1930s featured the celebration of African orality with jazz improvisation. Yet, they have used English lyrics with African techniques to celebrate their African culture. Accordingly, Africans who have been taken to America and adopted whites' culture for generations could only become African Americans.

Language Appropriation and Reconciliation in *Song of Solomon*

Being a writer she thinks of language partly as a system, partly as a living thing over which one has control, but mostly as agency – as an act with consequences.

Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 1993

For Morrison, the question of the effectiveness of language in coding/decoding conflict has always a one important answer which is agency. Language, as a system, is a mediator between means and ends. Concrete tools, or means, control language and use it as an agency to reach specific consequences. It is worth noticing that the means-ends relationship is not meant in a linear manner, but in a way that indicates circularity. Moreover, the mediacy between means and ends does not occur in a sequence of time through which concrete actions take place before the theoretical framework: they go hand in hand timelessly.

The advance and success that the scientific approach has realized necessitated different theoretical tools or epistemology to practice power such as the inferior complex. Africans as well as Americans in America have been influenced by the inferior complex. Whites' representations have created racial tensions not only between masters and slaves, but also between free blacks and American white people after and during the Civil War and the civil rights movement. As a result, African Americans have had a need to return to Africa and to reject whatever is white including language. That is a need explained by Toni Morrison in her novel *Song of Solomon*. However, most importantly, she questions whether flying back to Africa is the real solution.

African Americans, unlike Africans, could not think of constructing their own space as a genuinely black one because of, as mentioned before, the diversity of their origins and cultural forgetfulness. Alternatively, they had a wish of returning or flying back to Africa. Re-constructors, on the other hand, proposed another kind of flying that is expressed through language in *Song of Solomon*.

Certainly, Morrison argues the complexity of living under circumstances which are still influenced by representations. African Americans are always feeling that they are still rejected by whites, and that they do not belong to their culture even if they are born in their lands. However, escaping is not the solution either. Solomon is

the great grand-father of the protagonist, Milkman. He escapes slavery to go back to Africa leaving behind his tribe, wife, and twenty-one children. Actually, the number of his children and the tribe he belongs to show how American he is, and how he cannot just quit leaving huge responsibilities behind. Nevertheless, it is admittedly correct that his action is perceived as a heroic act:

“Wow! Woocce! Guitar! You hear that? Guitar, my great-granddaddy could flyyyyy and the whole damn town is named after him. Tell him, Sweet. Tell him my great-granddaddy could fly.”

“Where’d he go, Macon?”

“Back to Africa. Tell Guitar he went back to Africa.”

“Who’d he leave behind?”

“Everybody! He left everybody down on the ground and he sailed on off like a black eagle. ‘O-o-o-o-o Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone/ Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home!’” (Morrison 1977, 531)

The way the protagonist talks about his great grandfather; that excitement, gives the impression that he is feeling proud of him even if Solomon has, consciously, abandoned his own family.

The act of literally flying back to Africa is a myth expressed in slave narratives. Therefore, the realization of a part of their culture, despite circumstances, enhances their collective identity. In other words, blacks have to experiment with their reality to conscientize their identity. Experimenting using African tools seems as a logical beginning for them. Thus, objectifying the myth by naming a town after Solomon helps in creating a coherent theoretical and concrete black space. However, flying back to Africa myth is a part of their culture, and not their whole culture. Instead, Morrison suggests a way out by reconciling with the past and the present by coping with an African ‘American’ identity.

For Solomon’s son, Jake, he wants to change his name when the Civil War ends. When he is asked about the place he lives in he says Macon, and when he is asked about his father’s name, he answers that he is dead. As a result, the drunken registrar registers his name as Macon Dead. That story connotes that the African wants to cut any relationship with his past to engage in constructing a new one. That act of misinformation leads the following generations, including the protagonist, to suffer from an identity crisis. In this context, the language of the African personality is denied its role as an agent of identity in favour of American names. The consequences of that agency/mis-agency are reflected in the behaviour of his son Macon Dead II, the father of the protagonist.

Macon Dead II is known as a materialistic father who travels to the north to blindly assimilate whites' lifestyle. Unlike his grandfather, Macon wants to express part of his *Americanity* through his behaviours. Just like what oppressing whites could do, he does not care about people's life or emotions when it comes to money, "I ain't aiming to get him down. I'm aiming to get my own money. He can go on and die up there if he wants to. But if he don't toss me my rent, I'm going to blow him out of that window" (52) Macon struggles with a lack of spirituality which is inherited unconsciously to his son Milkman. Milkman tries to avoid being like his father, but in the process he attempts at driving his life the same way as his father has done. Because he tries to cut ties with his family and be independent, he always expresses his desperate need for money:

I just know that I want to live my own life. I don't want to be my old man's office boy no more. And as long as I'm in this place I will be. Unless I have my own money. I have to get out of that house and I don't want to owe anybody when I go. My family's driving me crazy. Daddy wants me to be like him and hate my mother. My mother wants me to think like her and hate my father. (362)

It happens that he hears about a place where gold is hidden there, and he starts his journey for the sake of being wealthy to be independent from his family. However, his spiritual aunt, Pilate, influences him and he journeys to find about his ancestral origins other than the gold. Actually, the spiritual awakening gives Milkman a sense of confidence and relief.

It happens that Milkman learns about his origins through language. In other words, the story of his ancestors is embedded in language; in a song called: The Song of Solomon. At the beginning of his journey, he listens to scattered pieces of the song until he pieces them together to find out that it is the song of his great grand-father, Solomon. In fact, Toni Morrison, in the song, merges African elements with English lyrics.

It is agreed upon the fact that African culture features orality which is mirrored on the Song of Solomon. In fact, the onomatopoeic words that are used in the song's refrain gives rhythm to the story such as, "Come booba yalle, come booba tambee" (303). Moreover, those rhythms make the song sounds like children's song. It is known that part of cultural heritage is preserved through children's practice of that culture in the street through mythic and legendary songs. Language, as an agent, gives a dynamic dimension to the story. It is what fuels Milkman to have a logical explanation of his past and identity.

The lyrics also includes African names like Muhammet and Yaruba. For Morrison, names are of a significant importance since she opens her story by saying in the dedication section that “The fathers may soar/ And the children may know their names”. Away from the story, African children of slaves have not been named by their fathers, but the masters have given them western names. As result, part of their culture has been lost in the process of naming. Accordingly, Africans have been denied their theoretical black tools since “definitions belonged to the definers–not the defined” (Morrison 1998, 196). In the story, it is essential to hear about African names since Milkman is in the quest to find his true identity.

Moreover, the saying in the dedication points out to two main rights which are strictly related to language. First, the right of fathers to fly, meaning being spiritually mature through meeting their culture of origins. The act of flying can, also, be taken as a concrete act that implies a theoretical explanation. The second right is the right of children to know their names. The fathers own the language through the naming lineage, so the concrete act of flying and the realization of an African myth should be followed by the continuity of the process of naming.

Thus, the song does not signal *Africanity* using the oral language only, but also a folk tale of flying Africans. As it is mentioned earlier, influenced by representations, the dream of African slaves and free blacks has always been to fly back to Africa which is a wish that complicates the situation of African Americans other than settling it. In contrast the song talks about flying, “Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone/ Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home” (307). The meant flying, the flying that encourages healing other than escape is a spiritual one; the one that is expressed by Solomon’s offspring, Milkman.

Milkman, in this bildungsroman novel, is in a quest to find his identity and true self. The African names in the song present his black and old origins since names are the first things that human beings claim to be theirs. That first issue is a language that refers to the names and without a name there is no named. As a result, reclaiming the African names in the song is a way to weaken the effects of representation. In the same vein, including the African folklore like orality and myths suggests that Africans do have a culture unlike the representations that indicate that they are uncivilized.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the song then mirrors how Milkman is African and American at the same time. It suggests that it is time to reconcile with ones past, and to accept the hybridized self without any sense of guilt because. But, the spiritual flying means

that he flies and learns about his origins without the need to go back to Africa because he is an American too. Thus, the *Americanity* of Africans, in the song, is represented through English language appropriation.

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خودسازی زبان و بازسازی فرهنگی: بررسی موردی سرود سلیمان اثر موریسون

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پراکندگی فرهنگی در نتیجه آسیب‌های جمعی، مسئله بازنمایی را به عنوان وسیله‌ای برای شناسایی در تعارض تداعی می‌کند. در دوره انقلاب فکری، زبان در هسته اصلی مسئله قرار دارد، زیرا گفتار، نفی سکوت و خاموشی است. مسئله، روش مناسب برای بیان و بازیابی گذشته، فرهنگ و هویت شخص در محدوده مذاکرات سازندگان تاریخی یا بازسازندگان قرار می‌گیرد. در حالی که برخی از آنها، از جمله نوگی و تونگ نوشتن به زبان‌های ملی و قومی را به خاطر مردم خود پیشنهاد می‌کند، برخی دیگر مانند چینوا آچهبه نوشتن به زبان سلطه‌گر را برای نمایش و اثبات فرهنگ افراد تحت سلطه از طریق ایجاد یک گفتمان بین‌المللی ترجیح می‌دهد. با این حال، دیدگاه اخیر همچنین خواستار زبان جدیدی است که با استفاده از خودسازی زبان، بدون پس‌زمینه منفی باشد. سرود سلیمان اثر تونی موریسون برای نشان دادن اهمیت خودسازی زبان، قابل مطالعه است. موریسون نوعی فرار را فرض می‌کند، فراری معنوی که در زبان گنجانده شده است. میلکمن، قهرمان داستان، هویتی دارد که از نظر فضایی تقسیم شده است، همانطور که هومی‌باوا به آن برچسب می‌زند. در حالی که هویت او باید با واقعیت اجتماعی‌اش مطابقت داشته باشد، میلکمن در تأثیرات بعدی هویت فرهنگی گیر کرده است. در نتیجه، برای اینکه واقعیت تکه تکه شده خود را کنار هم بگذارد، باید به سرچشمه خود پرواز کند. در طول سفر، او از طریق یک ترانه رمزگذاری شده به نام سرود سلیمان در مورد گذشته یاد می‌کند. اگرچه اشعار بیشتر به زبان انگلیسی است ولی همراه با لهجه‌های آفریقایی سروده شده است، پس ترانه بی‌معنی به نظر می‌رسد در حالی که دارای مفاهیم فرهنگی است. بنابراین، زبان در چارچوب خاصی استفاده می‌شود که آن را قادر می‌سازد با مدلول کنار بیاید.

واژه‌های کلیدی: بازنمایی، خودسازی زبان، بازسازی فرهنگی، هویت، معرفت‌شناسی.

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