

ISSN:0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English



Vol. 7, Issue-I February 2016

7 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Episodic Plots in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and Alice Walker's *Meridian*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, the giant figures in the field of African American literature share the reality in the lives of the blacks in general and black women in particular. Both use a novel as a genre to expose the vulnerable past of the blacks who faced racism as well as classism. The objective of this paper is to show how both of these writers have used episodic plots in their novels. The paper studies particularly Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* and Walker's *Meridian* in this respect. It shows the similar episodic plot development in the respected novels of both of the novelists. The paper investigates how Morrison and Walker using episodic plots develop the story of their respective novels. The attempt is done to study some similarities as well as the dissimilarities in the episodic plot development in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and Walker's *Meridian*.

Keywords: episodic plot, conflict, climax, denouement, characters.etc.

Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, mostly acclaimed women novelists on the map of African American literature depict the miserable world of the African Americans. About Morrison's writing Kavita Arya asserts : " The novels of Toni Morrison artistically document the writer's consciousness and concern for the historical situation of the exploitation of African Americans in America, thereby showing her heightened awareness of the interconnection among racism, sexism and classism." (125) Being the true artists in fiction writing Morrison and Walker use various techniques in the development of their narration. Both have used different styles in the narration of their novels. There are some similarities in their narrative technique. Morrison has used episodic plot in her *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula*. Similarly, Walker has developed an episodic plot in her novel *Meridian*. *The Bluest Eye* is divided into four seasons, viz winter, autumn, spring and Summer and then these divisions are further divided into episodes. The seasonal divisions of the novel make the readers aware about the different aspect in the lives of the characters and the further formation of the episodes discuss the issues in detail. Though the plot of the novel is episodic it does not violate the organization of the storyline. Each episode is linked logically which organized the novel perfectly as a whole. Similarly Morrison's *Sula* too exploits the same technique of episodic plot formation for the narration of the story. The novel

Sula is divided into some episodes which are titled as a particular date. The particular entitled episode discusses the incidents which happened in that particular course of time. These three novels are similarly developed using the episodic plots by the respective novelists. Similarly Walker's *Meridian* follows the episodic plot development. The novel is divided into various episode with specific names. The particular chapter discusses the happenings related to particular character. About Walker's writing Gerri Bates observes: "Best of all, Walker weaves an exciting tale around womanist issues in the African American community." (20)

Morrison's both novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are in episodic plot. The plot is developed in both of these novels in the forms of episodes. Though the story of the novels is written in the episodes it does not lose its organization. The book is divided into four sections- autumn, winter, Spring and Summer and further these divisions are developed with the episodes. Morrison in the very beginning develops the plot with conflict, mystery as well as surprises. The plot requires an element of mystery as E.M. Forster writes: "The plot then, is the novel in its logical intellectual aspects: it requires mystery, but the mysteries are solved later on: the reader may be moving about in worlds unrealized, but the novelist has no misgivings." (67) There are many questions in the mind of the readers about the sudden incidents that they have gone through in the novel. About the plot of the novel *The Bluest Eye* Mballia comments: "The story proper actually begins in the present on page twelve. However, by page seventeen with the introduction of Pecola and certainly by page thirty with the description of the Breedlove's storehouse the reader does not know what time period exists. Does Pecola come to live with the Mac Teers after the Breedlove's abandoned store house is burned or does Cholly burn some other prior dwelling place, and then the Breedloves come into the abandoned store? Such questions arise because of Morrison's clumsy handling of time throughout the novel she is not yet skilled in structuring plot's (38) The initial situation of *The Bluest Eye* is the blacks's marginal existence due to their color. Racism is the initial situation in the novel. With the conflict between the whites and the blacks the action rises in the novel. In the novel there is external as well as internal conflict. External conflict is that is existed outside in the white dominated society. The whites considers the blacks as inferior and ugly. The external conflict which develops the plot of *The Bluest Eye*. It is visible in the locale setting of the novel. The blacks like Breedlove family live in a very unclean and uncomfortable places whereas the white Fisher family lives lavishly. This external conflict creates internal conflict in the minds of the black characters like Pauline and Pecola who all the time think to achieve the white standards of beauty. Pauline faces internal conflict and joins white Fisher family as a maid and imitates the ways of the whites. Whereas Pecola's internal conflict help in the rising of the action. She goes to The Soaphead Church and asks for the blue Eyes. Cholly also with his whimsical nature create conflict and finally the action of the novel reaches to its climax when Cholly rapes Pecola. There is no such final solution provides by Morrison as in the novels one may find. Morrison does not provide any final conclusion or solution to the readers at the final denouement of the novel in *The Bluest Eye*.

Morrison has developed *Sula's* plot in episodes where the initial situation is the black women's struggle for their individual rights. The conflict between the blacks and the whites that is shown at the earliest develops the plot. The division of the novel in the various titled episodes makes the readers aware about the incidents happened in the specific time. The action rises with the relationship of the characters like Sula, Nel, Eva, Hannah, Ajax, and Jude with each other. The action reaches to its climax when Nel sees Sula with Jude in love making. Similarly, like *The Bluest Eye* Morrison shocks the readers in *Sula* with introducing the characters like Shadrack who behaves whimscically. The readers being unaware of his history remain curious about the further happenings. The next episode titled as "1919" introduces Shadrack. 1920 introduces the Wright family who lived in a Northern town called Ohio. It is here in the chapter 1920 the readers come to know about Helen's daughter Nel during a trip with her mother to South. It had been an exhilarating trip but a fearful one. She had been frightened of the soldiers on the train the black wreath on the door the custard pudding she believed lurked under her mother's heavy dress the feel of unknown streets and unknown people. She looked for a long time and suddenly a shiver ran through her "I am me she whispered" "me" (28) Morrison develops the plot of the novel with showing conflict which is necessary in for the development of the plot in the very beginning of the novel the conflict emerges with the theme of class exploitation of the blacks due to slavery. "A joke a nigger joke...just a nigger joke" (4). Morrison has started the story with a nigger joke which exposes the class conflict in African-American white dominated society. The plot of the novel is developed with highlighting the futile existence of war veteran Shadrack and Plum; the lives of Nel and Sula, two friends who are contradictory to each other at last Sula's futile attempt to achieve individuality. The plot of both *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* is episodic. In both of these novels Morrison has developed the storyline taking help of the episodes. But at the same time she structured all the plots logically in both of the novels. The difference is the thematic patterns in the development of the plot. The plot of *The Bluest Eye* centers around the racial discrimination of the blacks in general and a black female girl child in particular. The novel starts with the horrible details that the narrator Claudia gives about her friend Pecola's immature pregnancy. "We thought, at the time. That it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow." (04) It is from here Morrison starts developing her plot in the novel with the victimization of a black female child under the male chauvinism. Unlike *The Bluest Eye* Morrison develops the plot of the novel *Sula* with the close friendship between the protagonist, Sula and her friend Nel. "They never quarreled, those two, the way some girlfriends did over boys or competed against each other for them." (84). The plot of *Sula* reaches to its climax when Sula's close friend Nel sees her husband Jude with Sula while making love. The problems those were posed by the novelist in both of the novels i.e. *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* are not resolved at last. There is no denouement which means the resolution of the problem. The novels are written in the different episodes but they never lose its organization. Each episode is linked with another.

Similarly like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *Sula* Walker too has used episodic plot in her novel *Meridian*. She too like Morrison with each episode has developed the story of the

novel. Walker has named the episodes of *Meridian* after characters' names. Each episode give information of the incidents happened with the particular character. The first episode entitled as "The Last Return" makes the readers aware about the Civil Rights movement. Just like Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* Walker's novel *Meridian* too starts with the actual past that happened before. : "Meridian is a novel ,an extend prose narrative presented in episodic format dealing with characters in both human and symbolic form." (Bates :80) The novel is divided into 3 sections namely 'Meridian', 'Truman Held', 'Ending', and in these sections there are other episodes..The other episodes are loosely connected to each other. In the first section there are fifteen episodes .It is entitled as Meridian who is the central character of the novel. This section generally discusses about the life of Meridian, her mother Mrs.Hill, Meridian's relationship with her mother as well as her father, Meridian's childhood as well as youth, her relationship with her husband Eddie and Truman, her lover, and her participation in the civil rights movement. In the second section which is entitled as Truman Held discusses about Truman and his relationship with Meridian and the white girl Lynne. It focuses upon the racial discrimination of the blacks with introducing one character namely Tommy Odds. The last section entitled as "Ending" talks about the initial nature of the civil rights movement where the revolutionary group ask questions to Meridian on killing in the revolution. But Meridian does not agree with their opinions.

Walker highlights the Civil Rights Movement in *Meridian* so it becomes a historical novel. As the narrator writes in the very first episode about the history of Chikokema : "the town of Chikokema did indeed own a tank .It had been bought during the sixties when the town people who were white felt under attack from " outside agitators"- those members of the black community who thought equal rights for all should extend to blacks .They had painted it white, decked it with ribbons (red,white,and of course blue) and parked it in the public square." (02) The lines makes it clear that *Meridian* is a historical novel at the same time the very first episode gives the initial idea of the black white conflict. The protagonist, Meridian is seen as a civil right activist in the first episode who stands for the rights of the black children who were not allowed to attend the show that was arranger at the town: "standing with the children, directly opposite both the circus wagon and the tank, was Meridian...with alarm, Truman glanced at the tank in the centre of the square. At that moment, two men were crawling into it, and a phalanx of police, their rifles pointing upward, rushed to defend the circus wagon." (06) The scene shows conflict in the blacks and whites and with this initial note the first episode of *Meridian* starts developing.

The characters Walker has portrayed are the fictional characters and they are the participants of the Civil Rights movement. In these episodes the novelist has used the flashback technique very skillfully. With the help of this flashback the story of the novel moves forward. In the very first episode the protagonist Meridian and Truman, the black male civil right activists meet. Though the novel is in the form of episodes the traditional method of plot development as : initial situation,conflict,rising action,climax,denouement become unavoidable in the plot development. The novel has an initial situation of the civil right movement. Meridian, the protagonist in the very first chapter is shown as a civil right activist. It is significant to mention

her role and her failure to convince the revolutionary group which makes her to suffer. The patriarchic ideology doesn't allow the group to follow Meridian's advice. So here She is seen as a sufferer who instead of her dedication into the Civil Rights movement is seen a neglected figure. It makes a psychological impact upon Meridian .AS Gillespie rightly narrates: "Her involvement with the work of the civil rights movement and her experiences with discrimination begin to take a psychological toll on her. (207) Already she was a neglected individual at home. Then her relationship with Eddie, her husband and Truman her lover failed. She is sexually harassed too in the novel when she is just as an adolescent girl .One white man Dexter seduces her and his assistant just makes her to see his seduction with the another girl . When Meridian loses her sight and goes to the physician she is even molested by him. Later she finds herself in illness and becomes very sick. As Gillespie writes : Sometime she can walk, and at other times, she can not." (80)

Besides this Civil Rights movement the other issues such as gender marginalization, racism, intra-racial marriage are also discussed in the next coming episodes. Walker has shown gender discrimination of Meridian, Her mother Mrs. Hill ,Wild Chile and one white girl Lenny in the novel. With this central idea of gender marginalization the episodes entitled 'Meridian', Wile Chile', 'Sojourner 'are framed flawlessly in the novel. Conflict .being the significant aspect of the plot occurs in the novel with each episode. At the very beginning Meridian faces a question: " Will you kill for the revolution? " She says " : " I will go back to people ,live among them, like civil rights workers used to do." (19)

While discussing the Civil Rights movement Walker has posed a question of the evils of male patriarchy as well. With giving the story of Mariline O' Shay the plot arouses curiosity among the readers. The story reveals the lower status of women in the African American society. Each episode of Meridian discusses different issues in the novel .The episode 'Sojourner' which is actually a name of the largest Magnolia tree in the country, helps in the development of the plot because conflict continues with this episode which discusses the history of the black slave girl,Louvine.She used to tell stories to the children. She was considered ugly at the Saxon: " On the Saxon plantation in America Louvinie had been placed in charge of the kitchen garden .She was considered too ugly to work in the house ,and much too dour to be ground the children." (32) Once unknowingly one student died of heart attack while listening to her story and she was considered wholly responsible for the same..She was punished for her act. Her tongue was cut down": " Louvinie's tongue was... she buried it under a Magnolia tree." (34) The conflict between the blacks and the whites become a dominant idea in this episode. Walker has developed an initial ides in each episode and she has lined the particular episode logically as well. 'The Sojourner', 'Wile Child', 'Meridian' these episodes look separate but they convey the same idea of women's victimization on the account of gender. The episode Wile Child narrates about a poor and neglected parents less girl child namely Wile Child who later dies due to an accident. The episode is continued in the next episode titled as 'Sojourner'. In this episode Wile Child is died and her body is not accepted by the Saxon college authorities. At last her body was

carried to the middle of the campus beneath the Sojourner. It is the bondage of marriage and motherhood that Meridian's mother felt, Meridian does not want to be a victim of the same. So she abandons her husband Eddie as well as her child. Even she is not interested in the proposal of Truman who deserts her wife Lynne on the account of racial segregation. Lynne, a white girl is also a victim of age old patriarchy as well as the ideology of racism. In the novel one episode thoroughly discusses the impact of intra racial marriage. Both Truman and Lynne marry and start living together. They have one daughter Camara too. But Truman's friend Tommy Odds who is a victim of the age old ideology of racism does not want Truman to live with Lynne. So he talks ill words about her and persuades Truman to desert her wife, a white woman Lynne. At last the happy married life of Truman and Lynne is destroyed on the account of racism. Later Lynne is raped by Tommy Odds, which shows not only the evils of racism but also of patriarchy. The plot reaches to its climax when Lynne's daughter Camara is raped and eventually died. Thus, in *Meridian* Walker using episodic plot discusses many more themes.

Thus, episodic plot in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula* and Walker's *Meridian* open new avenues for narrative styles. Both have done a successful attempt in the development of the plot. They have discussed various issues like sexism, classism, racism, child abuse, motherhood, parentage, female solidarity, feminism, womanism etc., and using episodic plot simply and lucidly. The episodic style used by the respective novelists is very relevant as well as significant today in the world of literature since it enlightens the insight of the readers making him aware about multiple issues.

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