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Narrative Levels and Voices in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to explore the various levels of narration in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. The insights provided by the postulates of narratology, which is the study of narrative structures and how narratives generate meaning *a la* Gerard Genette and others have been used as tools for analysing how the primary or 'matrix' narrative about Pecola, a black girl who longs for blue eyes in her quest for beauty and love, is conjugated with several embedded or 'hyponarratives' about the lives of the blacks against the backdrop of slavery and racism. Thus Pecola's story is narrated at several levels including historical, psychological, feminist, mythic and intertextual plains which enable the narrative to be read at several levels thereby according it great depth and variety.

Key Terms: matrix and hyponarrative, diegetic and extradiegetic levels of narration, overt and covert narrators, intertextuality and allusions

According to Mieke Bal, "A narrative text is a text in which a narrative agent tells a story" (Bal 16). This implies that the text is a function of both story and narration. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan also views text, story and narration as the three integral and reciprocal aspects of a narrative. A story is a succession of events which are combined and ordered according to specific principles of combination like chronology and causality. A story also partakes of actants or characters that participate in or execute story events. The narration of these events involves a "narratorial agent" which, as described by Bal, is "a linguistic subject ... which expresses itself in the language that constitutes the text" (Bal 16). While story comprises events, the "text is spoken or written discourse which underlies their telling" (Rimmon-Kenan 3). Further,

Of the three aspects of the narrative fiction, the text is the only one directly available to the reader. It is through the text that he or she acquires knowledge of the story (its object) and of the narration (the process of its production)... [The] narrative text is itself defined by these two aspects: unless it told a story it would not be a narrative, and without being narrated or written it would not be a text. (Rimmon-Kenan 4)

The study of narrative structures is also concerned with the study of narration in the story apart from the study of narration of the story: how the structure of the narrative comprising the levels and/or voices of narration is manipulated to achieve the designated effect or

purpose. This highlights the importance of identifying the factors crucial for understanding a story besides the constructs of time, character and narrational perspective. Such factors, according to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, include the “narrative level to which the narrator belongs [and], the extent of his participation in the story ...” (Rimmon-Kenan 94). Narrative level is an analytic notion which describes the relation among the plurality of narrative instances within a narrative. When a character in a story begins to tell a story of one’s own, it creates a narrative within a narrative. The original narrative, comprising the main story-line is called a “frame or matrix narrative” (Jahn 38). The frame or matrix narrative in a complex story invariably contains an “embedded narrative or hyponarrative” (Jahn 38). John Barth also observes that in a complex narrative “there are tales within tales within tales” (Barth 45). Thus in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, the main story of Pecola’s desire for blue eyes and her subsequent rape by her father is embedded within the matrix narrative of Claudia, the narrator, who tells the story of her companionship with Pecola and their childhood days.

The concept of narrative levels was first propounded by Gerard Genette in *Narrative Discourse* (1979). The notion of narrative levels identifies and distinguishes the multiple narrating acts that make up most narratives. The level at which an event is related to a given space, or the fictional world in which narrated events occurs, is called the “diegetic level”¹ (Genette 228), or the primary story which is told. When a story is told by a character inside a diegetic level narrative it is called ‘metadiegetic’ (Genette 229) level/ narrative. The first or the outermost level is called the ‘extradiegetic’ (Genette 229) level at which an external narrator who might be an imaginary agent, recounts the entire narrative that frames the primary story.

Pecola’s desire for blue eyes is evidently the primary story in *The Bluest Eye*. The body of the text is divided into four parts, each containing three unnamed chapters. The first chapter of every part begins with an episode involving Pecola, which is told from the point of view of Claudia who recounts her childhood experiences. However, her viewpoint is shaped by her adult reflections about the past and the society. The story is narrated at the ‘extradiegetic’ level by Claudia who is also the ‘homodiegetic’ (Genette 245) narrator as she is one of the characters in the story as well. The ‘extradiegetic’ narration of Claudia contains the story of Pecola’s childhood, the story of her desire for blue eyes and the story of her realization that she is loved neither by the society nor by her parents because she is an ugly black girl. The stories narrated by Claudia are interspersed with occasional stories told by an omniscient narrator. This narrator recalls information to which Claudia has no access. The narrator tells the stories from Pecola’s life that involves other characters and weaves these into Pecola’s story through flashbacks. Within this ‘extradiegetic’ narrative of an external, omniscient narrator is embedded the story of Pecola’s mother, Pauline and that of her father, Cholly Breedlove. The story of their past life, their marriage, their quarrels and the birth of their children is narrated by an omniscient narrator who can be called, in Genette’s terms, the ‘heterodiegetic narrator’ (Genette 248), who does not otherwise participate in the narrative action. As such, the story of Pecola is narrated by different narrators at different levels in *The Bluest Eye*.

Through a skilful use of multi-layered narration, Morrison relates Pecola's desire for blue eyes as an endorsement for beauty and acceptance to Pauline Breedlove's unimaginative and ethereal approach to life. Pauline, Pecola's mother is full of self-contempt because of her distorted concept of beauty borrowed from the celluloid. She is greatly distraught by the fact that Pecola has a dark complexion. As Pauline remarks about Pecola, she had a "head full of pretty hair, but Lord she was ugly" (*The Bluest Eye* 98). Pecola's already hopeless situation is further complicated by her father, Cholly Breedlove's crippling sense of unworthiness. He commits the most horrible atrocity against his daughter by raping her in a state of drunkenness.

Morrison also connects Pecola's desire to Geraldine's fear of funk, Soaphead Church's sterile religiosity and to Maureen Peal's fate as an eternal dream child and Claudia's yearning to be whole. Geraldine and Maureen Peal are the members of the black middle class. They attempt to overcome their inferiority about their blackness by emulating the whites. Maureen has the lightest skin of the coloured children. Claudia describes her as "high-yellow dream child" (47). Initially, Maureen shows some kindness towards Pecola, but when the children enter into an argument, Maureen yells at them: "I *am* cute! And you ugly! Black and ugly black e mos. I *am* cute!" (56).

Geraldine too is light skinned like Maureen, but her fear of being black is enormous. She hates darker skinned blacks and in order to differentiate herself from them she needs to "get rid of the funkiness. The dreadful funkiness of passion, the funkiness of nature, the funkiness of the wide range of human emotions" (64). Pecola represents everything Geraldine finds disgusting and degrading. "She had seen this girl all her life.... Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt" (72). Both Geraldine and Soaphead Church struggle with their blackness. Geraldine lashed out at Pecola because she hates dark skinned blacks. Soaphead Church's attempt to help Pecola merely deludes her about the possibility of possessing blue eyes. Thus Pauline Breedlove, Maureen Peal, Geraldine and Soaphead Church are wary of their blackness just like Pecola. Ironically, they pass on their hate and disgust onto Pecola who is made the scapegoat of their deep rooted inferiority.

Claudia, on the contrary, has no fascination for the white standards of beauty. She finds nothing enchanting about the Shirley Temple Cup or the doll with blue eyes and blonde hair. In fact, she tears apart the white dolls that were given to her as birthday or Christmas gifts, in order "to see what it was that the whole world said was loveable" (14). She refuses to internalize the values and norms of the white culture. Claudia is grounded in reality and is ready to fight for her self-respect. She attacks Rosemary Villanucci because she must assert her pride; it is this very feeling that also causes her to attack the white dolls. She is angered near the end of the novel by the fact that she had not been strong enough to survive her childhood. The injustice suffered by Pecola, Frieda and her is a burden that no child should endure. The discrimination and injustice faced by Pecola drives her mad and she eventually takes refuge in the world of fantasies. Claudia understands that "we are wrong" (164) to place such a burden on children, but she does not care anymore, because she had only wanted to help Pecola, and it is "much, much, much too late" (164) to save her. The stories of Pecola's parents, Soaphead Church, Geraldine and Maureen Peal are embedded in the primary story-

line describing Pecola's precarious situation in her world and her consequent doom. The embedded narratives in *The Bluest Eye* perform significant "explicative function[s]" (Rimmon-Kenan 92) as they explain the circumstances leading to Pecola's tragic fate. Morrison thereby explores the devastating effects that the Western ideals of beauty and romantic love have on a vulnerable black girl.

Thus, at one level, *The Bluest Eye* is the story of Pecola's desire for beauty and acceptance. However, at another level, the narrative is more than her personal history. Morrison posits racial discrimination as the root cause of conflict of artistic and societal values between the Afro-American and the white cultures through Pecola's story. The conflict is complicated by the dominance of one culture over the other, which is manifested in the form of near dissolution of a community embodied in Pecola's story.

The transition from one narrative level to another enables the articulation of the story at different levels or layers. The act of narration at different levels helps to advance the telling of the narrative by providing explanations, thematic as well as structural, for different aspects of the primary story or the matrix narrative and accords temporal as well as spatial multiformity to it. Thus, it is possible to read and analyze Morrison's stories within the matrix narrative of slavery as they do not remain confined to individual stories of Pecola only. Pecola's story becomes a historical recapitulation of the cruel and inhuman institution of slavery and racism as the black girl's peculiar condition is adequately foregrounded in the preconceived notions of beauty and worth made available by the 'extradiegetic' accounts of the stories of Mrs. Breedlove, Pecola's mother, Maureen Peel, Geraldine and so on.

Apart from levels at which a narrative is related, a text also comprises of narrative voice(s). In every narrative text there is a narrative agent or a narrator that tells a story. The narrator is therefore central to the analysis of narrative texts. As Mieke Bal remarks: "the identity of the narrator, the degree to which and the manner in which that identity is indicated in the text, and the choices that are implied lend the text its specific character" (Bal 19). The basic question as to *who speaks* in the narrative text can be answered in the words of Genette:

A narrator is the speaker or 'voice' of the narrative discourse. He or she is the agent who establishes communicative contact with an addressee (the 'narratee'), who manages the exposition, who decides *what* is told, *how* it is told (especially, from what point of view, and in what sequence), and *what* is to be left out. (Genette 186)

According to Roman Jakobson, a narratorial discourse serves a variety of functions which are highly indicative of the narratorial voices in a text. A narrator may perform a "phatic" (Jakobson 350) function in which he maintains contact with the addressee. It may perform an "appellative" (Jakobson 351) function by persuading the addressee to believe something. Finally, the narrator may perform an "emotive/expressive" (Jakobson 351) function thereby expressing his/her own subjectivity. The narrators can be distinguished as "overt"² (Jahn 43-44) and "covert"³ (Jahn 43-44) depending on how the presence of a narrator is signalled in the text.

Morrison's narratives do not have a definite structure. They are simple even in their complexity. Morrison often employs multiple narrative voices in a single text in tune with the different narrative levels which characterize her texts. "Having more than one narrative voice tell a story recalls the call-and-response pattern found in the African-American tradition" (Beaulieu 240). Thus the narrative voices are storytellers, and their narratives resemble "the African oral story-teller tradition of the 'griot'"⁴ (Beaulieu 240).

The narration in *The Bluest Eye* switches from first-person to omniscient narration several times. The first-person narration pertains to Claudia who is the 'overt' narrator. She performs all the functions in the narratorial discourse. She performs the 'phatic' function by maintaining a contact with the readers. She gives them the information required to understand the story of the protagonist, Pecola in her introductory statement: "Quiet as it's kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941. We thought, at the time that it was because Pecola was having her father's baby that the marigolds did not grow" (4). Thus the stage is set for revealing different stages of Pecola's insanity and her eventual doom. Claudia also executes the 'appellative' and the 'emotive' function when she shares her personal emotions about the plight of Pecola. After Pecola's baby died Claudia remarks: "We saw her sometimes.... She was so sad to see. Grown people looked away; children, those who were not frightened by her, laughed outright" (162).

Claudia's voice evokes in the reader a personal feeling for Pecola's story. She takes the reader into Pecola's memories, personal experiences, girlish desires and fears, as she and her sister try to make sense of the rough and cruel world around them. Claudia and Frieda "were full of awe and respect for Pecola" (23) after she attained puberty. The girls considered Pecola to "be different from [them] now – grown-up-like" (23). Pecola wonders if it was "true that [she] can have a baby now" (23). On learning that to have a baby she needs to be loved by a man, Pecola asks Claudia "How do you get somebody to love you?" (23). In her introductory statement, and in the section that begins each fresh chapter, Claudia establishes the structure of the novel as well as introduces the major characters of the book and then becomes the central narrator.

Pauline Breedlove's story is narrated in the most pathetic terms. The omniscient narrator recounts the major part of her story. "Pauline was fifteen, still keeping house, but with less enthusiasm. Fantasies about men and love and touching were drawing her mind and hands away from work.... These feelings translated themselves to her in extreme melancholy" (88). But the more poignant moments of her life are narrated by Pauline herself. Morrison has set-off Pauline's narration in italics. The section she narrates deals with even more personal subjects like her love for Cholly, her experience of pregnancy and the mistreatment she receives from others. Pauline remarks about the lost love between her and her husband: "That was the loneliest time of my life. I 'member looking out them front windows just waiting for Cholly to come home at three o'clock. I didn't even had a cat to talk to" (91). Morrison mixes first-person narration and third-person to emphasize the beauty of Cholly and Pauline's relationship. With the passage of time, the passion between the two diminished as Pauline begins to consider physical beauty superior to love. The narrator aptly remarks that romantic

love and physical beauty are “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (95).

Thus “the structure of *The Bluest Eye* underscores the proliferation of stories and of narrative voices within the novel” (Baechler and Litz 364). Each part of the narrative begins with Claudia, the narrator, who recalls the days of her companionship and memories of Pecola. In these parts of the narrative, the voice is essentially feminist as it is associated with Pecola’s predicament. The second voice is that of the omniscient narrator who introduces Pecola’s family and also gives an insight into the past life of her father and mother. These two voices converge in the voice of the adult Claudia in the last section of the novel, who now speaks for the entire black community: “... it was the fault of the earth, the land of our town ... Certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills of its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim had no right to live” (164). This is a highly distressing encapsulation of Pecola’s life.

The narrative voice in *The Bluest Eye* is nationalistic as well since it was published during the Black Aesthetic Movement and the Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960s and 1970s. The Black Aesthetic Movement was a revolt against the discrimination on the basis of colour of the skin. It was a revolt against the indiscreet and disparaging treatment of blacks as slaves despite the abolition of slavery. In its most radical form the Black Aesthetic Movement aimed at the total destruction of “the white thing” (Neal 29), including white ideas and white ways of looking at the world which had undermined the existence of the blacks for so long. Claudia thus rejects the white ways of life evident by her destruction of the “white baby dolls” (95) that were presented to her as a gift.

The events of Pecola’s story culminate in the nationalistic climate of 1941. The bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941 and the participation of the U. S. in the World War II echoes the nationalistic ethics. Many Black Americans fought for the nation in the war and helped to ensure America’s victory. The people who fought for the country had to face discrimination. They were rejected and reviled from their homeland. In *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia recollects the events of the fateful year of 1941 and says “Quiet as it’s kept, there were no marigolds in the fall of 1941” (4). Claudia gives a touching description of the effect of racial tensions on her and on other people who were fighting in the Civil Rights Movement of 1960s and 1970s.

Claudia’s focus is not the war abroad but the war at home. She pinpoints the attitude of the adults towards their children. Parents hardly cared for their children. As Claudia remarks: “Adults do not talk to us – they give us directions.... Our illness is treated with contempt” (5-6). This highlights the influence of war on the psyche of black people. The repercussions of the war and the Civil Rights Movement are also evident in the songs sung by Claudia’s mother. She sang about the “hard times, bad times, and somebody-done-gone-and-left-me times” (18). Hence, *The Bluest Eye* exposes the aftermaths of the racial strife that had so deeply affected the psyche of the black people.

The narrative in Morrison’s fiction also unfolds at various levels apart from the diegetic levels. The layers at which the narration takes place is feminist, intertextual, psychological

and historical. The narrators consistently adopt a system of values appropriate to African-American experience. As Catherine Rainwater points out:

Morrison's novels certainly do seem to vacillate on an array of important social and moral issues, including the question of whether Christianity and formal education help or hinder black people and of whether the problems of family violence and incest stem from pathological hatred of pathological love. (Rainwater 96)

The female protagonists in Morrison's novels are positioned within the black culture. They are marginalized, exploited and subjugated by the racist white culture and also from within their own black community. The female protagonists come to terms with all forms of oppression: racial, sexual and discrimination within their history, culture and their lives for forging identities. They are aware of their victimization and this consciousness enables the protagonists to foster their search for selfhood by resisting and refuting the racist and sexist dictates.

The Bluest Eye is a portrayal of the child protagonist, Pecola Breedlove. She falls prey to the dominant white standards of the Western society. Pecola believes that she has to be beautiful in order to be loved. Through Pecola's story, Morrison probes the damage done to the black psyche by the dominant white values of female beauty. Morrison says: "... I felt I was doing so unique that I don't think a man could possibly understand what the little girl ... was feeling. I don't think a white person could describe it. So I thought I was telling a tale untold" (quoted by Evans 74). This explains the need to analyze the forces that destroy the lives of black female children.

Morrison explores the horror of blacks falling prey to the white culture in delineating Pecola's pursuit for an identity, her consequent failure and her madness. She attacks the dominant white race that has continued to debase black sexuality. Morrison also explores the artistic potential of a black woman through Pecola's mother, Pauline Breedlove. Pauline fails to fulfil her artistic dreams and, as a result, she shifts her focus to the white people by being their servant. But she too falls prey to the white culture and destroys her family and children. Thus a black woman's failed creative impulse leads to the devastation of black lives.

Feminism is therefore one significant narrative level at which the narrative unfolds in Morrison's fiction. Morrison's female consciousness consistently explores the creative potential of all the woman characters in her novels. Another level at which the story is revealed is through recourse to Biblical allusions. In her fiction, Morrison "appropriates and resists the Bible through the use of allegory, reversal and literalization, signifying or covert citation" (Stave 116).

The analysis of the levels of narration in *The Bluest Eye* is further foregrounded in intertextuality rooted in myth and folklore. The use of epigraph, for instance, signals intertextuality in a direct way. Morrison introduces *The Bluest Eye* from the American 'Dick and Jane' primer. In *The Bluest Eye*, the epigraph summarizes the main concern of the novel in the fewest possible words. The picture that the 'Dick and Jane' primer presents is a perfect white family that lives happily in pretty green-and-white house. This description is in sharp

contrast with the world of the Breedloves and the MacTeers, the world of poor blacks. The fundamental query of the primer – “who will play with Jane?” – is rejected by nearly all the characters except the two sisters, Claudia and Frieda MacTeer, and the three prostitutes. Pecola is rejected by the society and by her family too. Her father, Cholly Breedlove, at once embraces and rejects her by raping and impregnating her. Pecola Breedlove’s rejection and victimization resembles that of Philomela, an ancient mythical figure. Philomela was raped by her sister’s husband and her tongue was severed so that she could not tell what happened. Likewise, Pecola is raped by her father and she suffers insanity.

Myth and folklore, as employed by Morrison in her fiction, illustrate and explain “why things are the way they are – why the world is as it is and why things happen the way they do” (Beaulieu 230). *The Bluest Eye* opens with the description of a trauma. This is followed by a promise to explain how and why the trauma occurred. Claudia’s voice reveals the novel’s secret that Pecola Breedlove was carrying her father’s baby. Claudia also declares that “There is really nothing more to say – except why. But since why is difficult to handle, one must take refuge in how” (4). Morrison thus takes recourse to the mythic cycle of the seasons to organize and account for the sequence of events in *The Bluest Eye*. Beginning with the autumn and the new school year, the novel progresses through winter, spring and finally to summer. In the introductory statement, Claudia, the narrator, relates the failure of the marigolds to sprout with the death of Pecola’s baby. “The seeds shrivelled and died, her baby too” (1). This use of seasons can be related to Northrop Frye’s view that “the plot of a novel as recurrences of basic mythic formulas and associates elemental forms of myth with seasonal cycles of spring, summer, autumn and winter” (Frye 67).

The structure of the novel is replete with Nature images. At the centre of this nature construct are the physical and psychological events that lead to the rape of Pecola and to her ill-fated pregnancy. The change in seasons provides an ironic and brutal comment on Pecola’s descent into madness. The secondary chapters of every section focus primarily on Pecola’s family and her plight. ‘Autumn’ describes the Breedloves’ house as an abandoned store. The members of the family are hostile towards Pecola. As a result Pecola turns to her friends, the three whores, at end of this segment. ‘Winter’ describes Geraldine’s hatred and disgust for Pecola. In the segment of ‘Spring,’ Cholly and Pauline’s life is traced from childhood. This segment also relates to Pecola’s rape by Cholly Breedlove and Soaphead Church’s fake help of Pecola. The final segment ‘Summer’ highlights Pecola’s insanity. It presents a dialogue between Pecola and her imaginary friend concerning Pecola’s blue eyes.

It may thus be concluded that the narrative in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* unfolds at various levels and involves several narrative voices. The primary or the matrix narrative is interspersed with several embedded stories which orchestrate the thematic interests of her narrative and also imparts a polyphonic structure to it. Each narrator in the text represents a different narratorial stance. The narrative level/voice in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* is variously feminist, Biblical and nationalistic. She repeatedly refers to history in her novels and focuses on its importance in the lives of the black people. Racism and oppression remain significant narrative parameters of her fiction and enable the articulation of her narratives on

several 'diegetic' and 'extradiegetic' levels. Morrison frequently takes recourse to myth and folklore as well to establish a relationship between individual identity and community.

Notes:

¹ See Genette, Gerard. "Voice." *Narrative Discourse*. Trans. Jane E. Lewin. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986, for detailed description of narrative levels. According to Gerard Genette, diegetic level is the level at which an event or existent in a narrative is related to a given diegesis (space in which narrated event occur). Metadiegetic narrative also known as hypodiegetic narrative is a narrative embedded within another narrative. Extradiegetic level is the outermost narrative level and the extradiegetic narrator is an imaginary agent constructed by the reader from textual clues. A homodiegetic narrative is one in which the narrator is a character in the events recounted. A heterodiegetic narrative in which the narrator is not a part of the events recounted.

² An overt narrator is one who refers to him/herself in the first person, one who directly or indirectly addresses the narratee, one who offers reader-friendly exposition whenever it is needed, one who exhibits a 'discoursal stance' or 'slant' towards characters and events, especially in his/her use of rhetorical figures, imagery, evaluative phrases and emotive or subjective expressions, one who 'intrudes' into the story in order to pass philosophical 'metanarrative' comments, one who has a distinctive voice.

³ Manfred Jahn 43-44. Covert narrator is one whose discourse fulfills no obvious connotative, phatic, appellative or expressive functions. Covert narration can be achieved by letting the action to be seen through the eyes of an internal focalizer.

⁴ A griot is a West African storyteller. The griot delivers history as a poet, praise singer, and wandering musician. The griot is a repository of oral tradition. As such, they are sometimes also called bards.

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