
“Parody of the World Wars through the use of Historiographic Metafiction in the Novels of Walker, Morrison and Naylor”

**Kusumita Mukherjee, Ph. D. Research Scholar,
Department of English, Rabindra Bharati University and
PTT, Department of English, Kalyani, Mahavidyalaya
Abstract**

The World Wars were and will remain forever a deep blot on human civilization. These Wars have frequently come under scrutiny by academicians, artists and humanists alike. Numerous questions have been asked on the rationale of the Wars. But the answers have been hardly able to suffice for the tremendous devastation that had resulted from them. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Gloria Naylor are contemporary African American women authors whose work began in the 1970s and have achieved tremendous success since. Their fiction is centered on the lives of American Negroes through the different periods of history. The following study proposes to diagnose the way in which these three women novelists have dealt with the turbulent period of the World Wars in their novels. Historiographic metafiction revisits the textual past but clearly (and sometimes playfully) communicates an awareness of its inevitable difference from the past. The same thing has been done by the aforementioned authors in their novels through use of the devices of irony, intertextuality and black humour. In her 1989 novel, “The Temple of my Familiar” Alice Walker has revisited many an event in history including the World Wars. By using the worldly wise Miss Lissie who has the memory of many lifetimes the author voices her own views about the rationale of the World Wars and also the grim conditions during the period of the Great depression. The reliance of the white people on the black skinned Americans at the war front was a matter of dire necessity. A step taken in adversity. Of course they could not let it continue outside the narrow bounds of the army. After the conclusion of World War II the black soldiers who had become used to being treated as peers in the army were under the strictest scrutiny by those same Eurocentric people who had treated them as colleagues during the crisis of the war. The image of the abused soldier has also received a sympathetic portrayal in Toni Morrison’s “Sula”. The novelist presents us with the character of a shell-shocked soldier of the First World War, Shadrack. The mangled bodies of his compatriots in the blast that he had managed to survive made him suspicious of his own body thinking--- ‘anything could be anywhere’. It is through the depiction of Shadrack’s mental instability that Morrison is able to comment upon the injustice faced by the black people in fighting the ‘capitalist’ war. The questioning of the rationale of the Second World War is again noted in Naylor’s 1992 novel “Bailey’s Café”. The incidents of the pearl harbour that triggered the black day of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are recounted to sensitize the reader of the unnecessary spillage of blood that led to both the events in America and Japan. Neither side is spared for the leaders on both side indulged in bloodshed that led to even more loss of lives. Through parody of the nationalist tone of the Wars the authors establish the heinous side of such combats that prove to be the weapons of doom for the common citizens.

Key Words

African American Literature, Historiographic Metafiction, Parody, Postmodernism, World War I and World War II.

“Parody of the World Wars through the use of Historiographic Metafiction in the Novels of Walker, Morrison and Naylor”

The need for the World Wars has been continually challenged by both European and non-European scholars and critics alike. There are varied opinions as to what caused these wars. But one conclusion is certain among the myriad of causes cited. A few world leaders wanted power for themselves. They wanted dominion over the entire global economy. The commoners were never thought about while devising these wars. They were the mere agents of the leaders who were leading them by their noses. As a result the masses suffered the worse in this struggle for supremacy. In their fiction, Walker, Morrison, Naylor and Shange parody the charade of heroism upheld by the World Wars. The intent of this parody is to heighten the callous way in which African Americans were hurtled headlong into battle being mesmerized by the grand narrative of patriotism. Although these novels bear historical accounts of the World Wars they deserve not to be confused with the novels classified as historical fiction.

Recent critics distinguish between historical novels and historiographic metafiction. Although the authors of historiographic metafiction imitate to some extent the traditional historical novel written even before the eighteenth century, they question notions of truth and objectivity and their relation to history. Susana Onega argues that there is a basic difference between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction:

historiographic metafiction differs from traditional historical novels in that the former do not seek historical accuracy and realistic verisimilitude but, on the contrary, challenge the reparability of the two discourses. (Jaen, 1999 pg 1)

Parody is a contradictory mode of writing. It can be seen as both conservative and revolutionary as it revisits the previous established code that it wants to parody and since it parodies the former hence it is revolutionary. It is this dual nature of parody that has made it suitable both for postmodern fiction and historiographic metafiction. Parody puts to question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction. It mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality.

Hutcheon goes on to say that, in addition to pulling together discursively situated textual antecedents, historiographic metafiction engages in a “parodic reworking” of the past (124). In other words, historiographic metafiction revisits the textual past but clearly (and sometimes playfully) communicates an awareness of its inevitable difference from the past. The notion underlying this sort of postmodern parody is that readers in the present can only know the past from its textual remnants. Hutcheon also describes how postmodern parodies of conventional story forms and canonical works can serve to destabilize myths about American culture in this case the call to participate in the World Wars, highlight racial difference, and call attention to the idea that we can only access the past through discursive representations of the past.

The use of the voice of ancestors like Miss Lissie, Mr. Hal, Uncle Rafe and Fanny's mother in *The Temple of my Familiar* serve as a bridge to communicate their first hand experience of history. Unlike traditional textual history the narration of these characters reek with authenticity. There is little ground to doubt the passionate outpour of people who have suffered much. The Latin American critic Silvia Del Pilar Castro Borrego notes in this context:

The fictional remembrance the characters undergo in contemporary African-American women's novels stand as a textual acknowledgement of the spiritual history that African American women writers attempt to recover and re-integrate from what has been lost in the African American collective historical past. (Borrego, 2003 pg 11)

The critics', writers', and readers' attitudes toward history and truth changed especially after World War II insofar as history is not regarded as a reliable domain that renders the past accurately. In her 1989 novel, *The Temple of my Familiar* Alice Walker has revisited many an event in history including the World Wars. By using the worldly wise Miss Lissie who has the memory of many lifetimes the author voices her own views about the rationale of the World Wars and also the grim conditions during the period of the Great depression:

In the wide world there was war. These white people here, trying to rule over everybody in America and the ones in Europe, trying to rule over everybody else in the world. The Depression came. (Walker, 1989 pg 93)

The discussion that Suwelo, the teacher of American history has with two veterans of the World War II his Uncle Rafe and his friend Mr. Hal leads him to ponder over the politicized history that he has been teaching till then. The words like 'servant' and 'fodder' are bitter pills of truth regarding the attitude of the whites towards the African American 'able-bodied' men. The glossed over facts of heroism are ripped apart by the first-hand experiences of the retired soldiers who had been sent to war as 'fodder':

So the white folks wanted all us boys, your uncle Rafe, too, for the army, to fight in the Great War, or so they said. The truth was, they wanted us to be servants for the white men who fought....But I was black and able-bodied, the white folks wanted me for fodder in their war....Well, not to fight 'em, just to serve our won white masters, you might say, while *they* fought 'em. (Walker, 1989 pg 97)

The reliance of the white people on the black skinned Americans at the war front was a matter of dire necessity. A step taken in adversity. Of course they could not let it continue outside the narrow bounds of the army. After the conclusion of World War II the black soldiers who had become used to being treated as peers in the army were under the strictest scrutiny by those same Eurocentric people who had treated them as colleagues during the crisis of the war. The same is recollected in the words of Fanny's mother:

[I]t was right at the end of World War II. Black soldiers were coming home and refusing to be segregated at restaurants and on buses, and the white men were steadily accusing them of raping white women, looking at white women....many a black man found himself in jail on this charge! (Walker, 1989 pg 168)

It is interesting to note here that instead of using a single source of first-hand information Alice Walker uses three different people for the purpose of narrating the events of the World War. Miss Lissie, is the chosen spokesperson of Walker for narrating the plethora of historical events since the beginning of time itself. Yet alongside her commentary are placed the dialogue of the men who had served in that war, Uncle Rafe and Mr. Hal. Also there is the voice of Fanny's mother who recollects those events as an observer. This technique of fragmentary narration of one momentous historical event has been considered by Borrego as the questioning of history:

Through the use of postmodern techniques such as temporal fragmentation, intertextuality, parody, and repetition, Walker subverts institutionalized history. The textual fragmentation of *Temple* in which many stories unravel simultaneously, fusing past and present, and involving a multitude of characters and voices, points out to the value of history because of its discontinuities, its concerns with blanks and ruptures and interruptions. By exploring the values and limits of fragmentation not only in the narrative but also in its content, Walker includes the notion of fragmentation as a condition of history and as a strategy of representation. (Borrego, 2003 pg 12)

The utter sense of loss felt by those who received back the shadows of the very people they had sent to war is explicitly denoted in the lament of Magdalena. She had hardly expected to get back her beloved as a piece of patchwork. The anger at the authorities is not concealed in any fashion. The honour of the medal is rebuked as being 'cheap'. The treatment of these soldiers who had staked their lives has been pathetic. They have been literally disowned. Magdalena remembers her lover and contrasts it to the person that the war has created:

His long, mostly straight, slightly wavy hair. His honest eyes. Sweet nose. White teeth. This...country had blown all of that up, I thought. Then stuck it back together with a couple of cheap medals and kicked it out into the street. (Walker, 1998 pg 122)

The image of the abused soldier has also received a sympathetic portrayal in Toni Morrison's *Sula*. The novelist presents us with the character of a shell-shocked soldier of the First World War, Shadrack. The mangled bodies of his compatriots in the blast that he had managed to survive made him suspicious of his own body thinking----'anything could be anywhere'. It is through the depiction of Shadrack's mental instability that Morrison is able to comment upon the injustice faced by the black people in fighting the 'capitalist' war. Morrison tells the readers why she had chosen to narrate the madness of Shadrack in the foreword to *Sula*:

It would have called greater attention to the traumatic displacement this most wasteful capitalist war had on black people, thrown into relief their desperate and desperately creative strategies of survival. (Morrison, 1973 pg xiv)

The first reaction of Shadrack after being released from the hospital where he had been recuperating from a bomb blast is being scared of his own hands. The solidity of his own body had become questionable to him after the drastic events of the war. The apparently violent nature that Shadrack displays is an outcome of the fear that he has cultivated regarding his anatomy:

With extreme care he lifted one arm and was relieved to find his hand attached to his wrist. (Morrison, 1973 pg 9)

Life itself had become uncertain for the man who had witnessed death at close quarters. He is so perturbed with unnecessary deaths concurred during the First World War that he chooses to celebrate a fixed day as the day for committing suicide in order to diminish the fear of unannounced death. The interesting thing to note here is that though Shadrack is 'ravaged' and rather insane he infuses the normal people of Bottom with a sense of unexpected nature of death.

Except for the World War II, nothing ever interfered with the celebration of National Suicide Day. It had taken place every January third since 1920, although Shadrack its founder, was for many years the only celebrant. Blasted and permanently astonished by the events of 1917, he had returned to Medallion handsome but ravaged...(Morrison, 1973 pg 7)

The rationale offered by Shadrack regarding the celebration of the national suicide day was to end the endless speculation about death. But Shadrack is not the only eccentric survivor of the First World War. Plum, the last child of Eva is also portrayed as a battered soldier of the same 'capitalist' war who has undergone tremendous mental agony. Even after the he is released from his duties in 1919 he does not return home. When he does, his mother is shocked to note his blandness. The use of not one but two such characters certainly clarifies the intention of the author which is to parody the World Wars. It had turned a promising young man a drug addict and another maniac:

Eva's last child, Plum, to whom she hoped to bequeath everything...until 1917 when he went to war. He returned to the States in 1919 but did not get back to Medallion until 1920....finally some two or three days after Christmas, he arrived with just the shadow of his old dip-down walk. His hair had been neither cut nor combed in months, his clothes were pointless and he had no socks. (Morrison, 1973 pg 45)

In *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Paradise* (1997) Morrison has not directly dealt with the effects of war on individual soldiers. In these novels she has chosen to focus upon the fate of African American ex-soldiers in the after War years. They have risked a lot for the defense of America yet they know that they would be discriminated against in society. A reverend who had faced such injustice at the hands of his white compatriots recollects the vehement attack in *Song of Solomon*. The ex-soldiers in *Paradise* who were the citizens of Haven, having witnessed the discriminatory attitude against them take precautions by moving out of their locality as soon as the war is concluded.

In *Jazz* (1992) Morrison adopts a slightly different tone with respect to the World War. In this novel she wants to show the aftermath of the War on ordinary people who had believed in its fake heroism. As well as of those who had succumbed to death because of the riots aimed against the African American war veterans. Morrison explicates her purpose in the foreword to the book where she states that she had chosen to depict that period of history that gave rise to the American dream. The protagonists Joe and Violet are lured by this ultimately futile promise of a good life in the North much circulated in the post war years:

[A]n older couple born in South; the impact on them of a new urban liberty; the emotional unmanageableness of redical change from the menace of post-Reconstruction South to the promise of post-WWI North. (Morrison, 1992 pg xvi)

The race riots that were an aftershock of the World War I have been narrated by a character named Alice who had lost her sister and brother-in-law in those riots. The commentary upon this horrifying incident of history amply serves the purpose of parody as it explicitly describes the ill-treatment of the black veterans and ordinary black Americans at the hands of the whites:

Some said the rioters were disgruntled veterans who had fought in all-coloured units, were refused the services of the YMCA, over there and over here, and came home to white violence more intense than when they enlisted and, unlike the battles they fought in Europe, stateside fighting was pitiless and totally without honour. Others said they were whites terrified by the wave of southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live. (Morrison, 1992 pg 57)

The reward that African Americans received after having bravely defended their country split Joe's 'heart in two'. Joe's feelings are justified. For even more spine chilling commentary is offered on behalf of Alice whose sister was burnt alive and brother-in-law stomped to death in the riots even though they were ordinary citizens in not in any way obstructing the life of whites:

Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East St. Louis since before the War. Nor did he need a whiteman's job....he wasn't even in the riot....He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and Alice's sister...her house was torched and she burned crispy in its flame. (Morrison, 1992 pg 57)

The author's latest novel does not deal with the inversion of the glorious history of the World Wars and yet is a deft commentary on the futility of the Korean War. The United States sent its own soldiers to claim a part of Korea from the Chinese and the Russians. The firsthand account of the Korean veteran, 24 year old Frank Money is sure to raise many eyebrows with its gruesome and vivid descriptions of the rampant destruction that was resultant of this combat. The world leaders engaged a huge population in a mindless hunting game that benefitted none but the leaders themselves. In a way Frank Money is

Morrison's reworking of the shell-shocked Shadrack in 1973 *Sula*. Both these War veterans suffer from hallucinations ensuing from their morbid experiences of the War. The very opening pages successfully horrify the reader regarding the brutal face of war with the images of violence that are remembered by Frank:

[W]hen he (Frank) was alone and sober, whatever the surroundings, he saw a boy pushing his entrails back in, holding them in his palms like a fortune-teller's globe shattering with bad news; or he heard a boy with only the bottom half of his face intact, the lips calling mama. And he was stepping over them, around them, to stay alive, to keep his own face from dissolving, his own colorful guts under that oh-so-thin sheet of flesh. (Morrison, 2012 pg 23)

Not only has the dreadfulness of war been unraveled but also the irrelevance of God in such dire conditions has been hinted at. Frank coolly recollects, "Bible stuff works every time every place--- except the fire zone." The eleven year old boy, Thomas, whose father offers shelter to the discharged Frank is the first one who questions his own role in the killing fields. It is ironic that a young child is made the vehicle of the society's questioning of the justification of war. It is all the better since it is only the innocent who can question the false heroic ideals of war. Thomas candidly asks Frank:

Did you kill anybody?

Had to.

How did it feel?

Bad. Real Bad.

That's good....

It means you're not a liar. (Morrison, 2012 pg 39)

It is through Frank's reflections that Morrison once again comments upon the devastation left in the wake of the World War II. Hearing musicians play scat and bebop, Frank summarizes that the world has suffered so many blows on humanity that soothing melodious songs are no longer possible. It is only disgruntled music that may be best suit the mood of total loss:

After Hiroshima, the musicians understood as early as anyone that Truman's bomb changed everything and only scat and bebop could say how. (Morrison, 2012 pg 139)

Home (2012) is about Frank's coming to terms with his own guilt for having given in to the sexual pleasures offered by a mere child. Frank is so disconcerted by his own reaction to the overtures made by the child that he initially relates this grave incident through the third person perspective shrouding his role in the process. Frank gets the guise of 'my relief guard' in order to narrate the horrendous incident. This guise acts as the 'relief guard' of Frank's troubled conscience. He also provides the rationale behind the crime but abstains from naming the real culprit:

She wasn't picky. Anything not metal, glass, or paper was food to her. ...My relief guard comes sees her hand and shakes his head smiling...She smiles, reaches for the soldier's crotch, touches it. It surprises him...see two missing teeth, the fall of black hair above eager eyes, he blows her away.....I think he felt tempted and that is what he had to kill. (Morrison, 2012 pg 121-123)

It is almost near the end of the novel that Frank manages to finally identify himself as the 'relief guard' he had been talking about. In an argumentative tone with the omniscient narrator of the story Frank reveals his fatal act:

I shot the Korean girl in her face.

I am the one she touched...

I am the one she aroused.

A child. A wee little girl...

How could I let her live after she took me down to a place I didn't know was in me? (Morrison, 2012 pg 173)

Both Frank Money, the American soldier and the Korean girl are victims of the extremities imposed by war. Morrison has chosen to depict the worst in humans that is brought to the fore when pushed to adopt radical measures in the face of warfare. The Korean child 'isn't picky' about food because she has got none. Morals or scruples have no place in her ill fed person. She only knows the pain of bottomless hunger and has adapted herself to the means fair and foul to fend for herself. Frank is disgusted at his own desire yet shoots the girl who has aroused him.

The questioning of the rationale of the Second World War is again noted in Naylor's 1992 novel *Bailey's Café*. It is a conglomeration of different African American voices venting out their individual angst against the dominant order that had displaced their lives. One particular portion of this multilingual narrative is spoken by a disembodied voice that has become the spokesman of the American army that had been sent to ransack Japan during World War II. The incidents of the pearl harbour that triggered the black day of Hiroshima and Nagasaki are recounted to sensitize the reader of the unnecessary spillage of blood that led to both the events in America and Japan. Neither side is spared for the leaders on both side indulged in bloodshed that led to even more loss of lives. The attack on the American army is countered by indiscriminate bombing of schools and hospitals and is met with similar violence on the part of the Japanese. When the American army enters the Japanese cities they are left to fight 'the very young' and 'the old'. The tortured conscience of the American army forced to slay such beings is tempered by the nuclear bombings. This showdown of power politics is parodied by Naylor through the disembodied voice signifying the conscience of the American army:

I follow orders. I spray napalm from the air to send rivers of fire running through the streets. I burn ammunition factories. I burn shipyards. I burn schools. I burn hospitals. I burn homes. And they will keep coming....The very young, the deformed, and the old were waiting for me in Tokyo....I was saved. Hiroshima in exchange for my soul. Count the bodies. I'd left more dead in the streets of Manila. On the hillsides of Okinawa. Pika-don. Just count the bodies. But then Nagasaki----where it turned to claim our children. The unborn children. (Naylor, Bailey's Café, 25-26)

The grand patriotism of World War I has also been questioned in the course of this novel. The national feeling that catapulted people to war also let into motion the program of closing down red light areas. Only the marginalized prostitutes comprehend clearly the blatant hypocrisy of the whole thing. They know that the laws pertain only to the powerless while the powerful will keep finding their pleasure when and where they want to:

A righteous wind had up and started blowing through the country. And with the first World War in full gear, the fancy whorehouses were falling like dominoes all over the big cities. (Naylor, 1992 pg 50)

The colour discourse was shattered albeit in a miniscule way after the bombing of the pearl harbour. Stanley notes with undisguised gall the sudden acceptance into the army of coloured soldiers who had been rejected earlier as 'mentally deficient'. The glory of the war having become a lost cause, the coloured population was maneuvered to the unchartered warfront as sacrificial lambs. The charade of America participating in World War II for the establishment of democracies around the world is unmasked as Stanley observes that America itself is not prepared for allowing democratic rights to its coloured citizens :

By 1942 the armed services found themselves so in love with Negro soldiers that all of those mentally deficient volunteers who had been turned away by the thousands when the war first broke out were now considered more than able to figure out one end of a rifle from another...I found out that they weren't taking Negro blood at banks...the hypocrisy of it sickened me, I thought the three hundred thousand colored men who finally went into the armed forces were fools. The handful of white Stanford students...were commissioned as officers. They told me I was fit only to die....I was all for the world embracing democracy; I just didn't see any way for the Americans to bring it to them. (Naylor, 1992 pg 188)

The racial segregation in the awarding of army ranks is a bone of contention for Stanley and he refuses to take part in such a hypocritical venture of patriotism. He is therefore sent to jail on charges of anti-Americanism. He relates with gall the same attitude displayed in prison premises towards the black prisoners. The other non-white prisoners too are castigated as 'honorary negroes' in order to be discriminated against:

Yes, it was unforgivable that we lived as second-class citizens in a segregated society and I was being asked to defend it all in a segregated army, but I should remember that refusal to go also meant a segregated jail. (Naylor, 1992 pg 189)

The tone of black humour is unmistakable in the harangue of Stanley regarding the marginalizing of coloured prisoners in the jail. He ridicules the state of American law that treats non-whites as 'scum' even though most are well educated and belong to good families; their only crime being not joining the American forces in World War II.

Mexicans, Yumas, Hopis, and Chinese were all honorary negroes and in our group, while the various strains of Europeans, designated as white, went in the other group. (Naylor, 1992 pg 190)

The aim of the authors in recalling through their various characters the incidents of the World Wars and the Korean War is to bring to fore the 'truth untold'. The mini-narratives of hopelessness and pain are brought to the fore through the likes of Miss Lissie, Uncle Rafe, Mr. Hal, Fanny's mother, Magdalena, Shadrack, Plum, Frank Money, Stanley and the like the untold story of the suffering of the masses is scripted. Like Owen's "Futility" and "Strange Meeting" the above mentioned novels question war but unlike the poems they are not satisfied with blatant answers they are rather interested in fragments of discord. Through parody of the nationalist tone of the Wars the authors establish the heinous side of such combats that prove to be the weapons of doom for the common citizens.

References

- [1] Borrego, S. P. C. (2003) "There is More to it than Meets the Eye: Alice Walker's *The Temple of my Familiar*, a narrative of the diaspora", *Revista de Estudios Nortamericanos*. n. 9 (2003), 11-12
- [2] Hutcheon, L. (1988) *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 3-22
- [3] Jaen, S. O. (1999) *Metafiction and Myth in the Novels of Peter Ackroyd*, Columbia, U. S. A.: Camden House, 1
- [4] Morrison, T. (1973) *Sula*, U. S. A.: Alfred A. Knopf, xiv, 7, 45
- [5] Morrison, T. (1992) *Jazz*. U. S. A.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., xvi, 57
- [6] Morrison, T. (2012) *Home*. U. S. A.: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 23, 39, 122-123, 139, 173
- [7] Naylor, G. (1992) *Bailey's Café*. New York: Vintage Books, 25-26, 50, 188-190
- [8] Walker, A. (1989) *The Temple of my Familiar*, New York: Mariner Books, 93, 97, 168
- [9] Walker, A. (1998) *By the Light of my Father's Smile*, New York: Ballantine Books, 122