



# Critical Reflection on Everyday Racism in Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

Dr. Urvi Sharma,

Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Chandigarh

Set in the era of civil rights movement, this story recounts the experiences of Americans through the lives of two children who established the bond of friendship during their childhood at an orphanage. Notably, racial identity and prejudice is a prevailing theme in the story. The activities of the African American Civil Rights movements between 1955-1968 were aimed at illegalizing racism. Racism in this context is defined as the perception that one's race is superior to another based on the possession of certain characteristics (usually physical) that are specific to that race; for example, skin color. Despite the significant progress made towards abolishing racial prejudice in the modern American society, racism is still subconsciously engraved in every individual to some extent.

In his presentation, Morrison intentionally fails to state the ethnicity of each character explicitly. It is therefore up to the reader to follow his clues to ascertain characters' races. For instance, Morrison indicates that of the two orphans, Twyla and Roberta; one is black while the other is white. Another clue in the story is when the narrator says, "we look like salt and pepper, and that is what the other kids called us" (Baraka and Baraka 600). Although he does not point out the race of each girl, yet he gives clues as to which one is black and which one is white.

Further, note that there are a couple of instances that allude to the fact that Roberta is black. For example, Twyla voices her reservations in her narration on sharing a room with Roberto because of her ethnicity. She states that her mother warned, "They never washed their hair and smelt funny. Roberta sure did smell funny, I mean" (Baraka and Baraka 600). Apparently, the sentiments of Twyla's mother are about the Afro-textured hair of the African Americans. She insinuates that the black people's hair does not appear as though it is given much care as the white people's hair. Consequently, she concludes that black people do not wash their hair, and are smelly. It is a clear indication of racial prejudice.

To further test the reader's racial prejudice, Twyla has been portrayed as being racist and more insecure due to the result of her mother's influence. A case in point when Twyla expresses that she feels inferior to the other kids at the orphanage. Additionally, it is Twyla's mother who receives a cold reception from Roberta's mum during the Easter service. Furthermore, in their adult lives; it is Twyla who is offended when Roberta is not receptive to the idea that their sons should share a school. Morrison uses contradicting clues about the races of the main characters. By doing so, she manages to confuse the reader, thereby guiding them about the revelation of their own racial biases that are often based on assumptions and stereotype thinking.

There has been an emphasis upon the theme of racial prejudice in this story when the author uses different scenarios to portray racial bias based on an individual's race, or religion. She demonstrated how stereotypical thinking promotes racism. Both children are raised up with a racially biased mindset. For instance, Twyla refuses to be accommodated in the same room with Roberta due to the belief that people of her descent are unhygienic. Another incident is when Roberta's mother refuses to exchange pleasantries with the mother of her daughter's best friend during the Easter service function at the orphanage. The attitude of Roberta's mother depicts racial prejudice or her disapproval on how Twyla's mother dressed to church. The “cultural codes” in the novel reveal the stereotypical perspectives of the society the novel is based in (Khaoula 88).

The aspect of time is also used creatively in this story. The author refrains from specifying the exact time at which every event occurs. Instead, he uses a social and political event to give the reader a hint of the period he is describing. For example, the narrator describes how she felt embarrassed when her mother showed up for a church service in pants (Baraka and Baraka 601). According to history, women began wearing pants in the 1950s. However, in the beginning; wearing it to church was not widely accepted. Another instance which the author uses to inference a particular period is when Twyla and Roberta run into each other at the Howard Johnson eatery where Twyla works as a waitress (Baraka and Baraka 604). The reader is informed that Roberta is on her way to the concert of Jimmy Hendrix. Building on the fact that Jimmy Hendrix died of a drug overdose in 1970, it can be estimated that this coincidental meeting occurred in the sixties. Evidently, the theme of the story is relevant to the period in which Morrison places it.

Another notable feature in this story is that the author limits his story to a feministic point of view. Warhol and Shuman call it the most experimental work by Morrison (1009). Morrison uses the characters to make the readers reflect on the inevitable problems faced by the women of colour. The characters in this narration are mostly female, and there is an omission of male characters. Noticeably, the two ladies get married, and they have sons. However, there is no mention of the male figures in a significant role. The author chooses this approach to keep the reader focused on the issue of racial prejudice and refrain from adopting the gender bias angle.

In conclusion, “Recitatif” is an illustration of how racial influences impact the relationship between two lead characters. It successfully illustrates how individuals' racial biases are often informed by their assumptions and stereotypical notions. The writer displays her prowess in the manner in which she uses the feministic view, time and indirect clues to demonstrate her unconventional view on racism.

### References

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