



## DIARY ENTRIES AS FRAGMENTS OF LIFE: PASTICHE IN THE FICTION OF WALKER, MORRISON, NAYLOR AND SHANGE

Kusumita Mukherjee

Ph. D. Research Scholar, Department of English, Rabindra Bharati University & PTT, Department of English, Kalyani Mahavidyalaya, Kalyani, Nadia.

### Abstract

Pastiche is a postmodern narrative strategy by which authors attempt to transgress the set patterns of the modernist story telling. In other words they try to undermine the grand narrative of narration in fiction. Pastiche is a literary mode in which bits and pieces are stitched together to form the text. Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange are four late African American women novelists who have used pastiche among a few other postmodern techniques in their works. These women novelists portray the marginalization that African American people face even after decades have passed since they were emancipated from the menace of slavery. More importantly they highlight the double marginalization that they face because of their gender. Pastiche serves to add a realistic tone in their fiction by the pasting letters, diary entries, folk tales, magic formulae, recipes etc in the narrative. The paper discusses the technique of pastiche from the perspective of noted Eurocentric scholars such as Frederic Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Linda Hutcheon as well as that of Afro-centric academics like Houston Baker Jr., Henry Louis Gates Jr. among others. The paper then goes to a detailed assessment of selected novels of the said authors to demonstrate their unique application of the pastiche technique.

**Keywords:** African American Fiction, Pastiche, Postmodern.

### Diary Entries as Fragments of life: Pastiche in the Fiction of Walker, Morrison, Naylor and Shange

The fragmented nature of the postmodern narrative is best displayed in the abundant use of the pastiche technique in the novels by Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor and Ntozake Shange. Refuting the established tradition of seam-less storytelling these authors in their narratives have shown preference for bits and pieces of the protagonists' lives. The fiction of the aforementioned African American authors besides containing a sprinkling of letters also have yielded place to pages of personal diaries. These diaries have opened the doors to the secret soul of the characters being portrayed on the pages. In the words of Kym Brindle they accommodate 'supplementary first-person accounts' within the fabric of the novel. The use of letters and diaries demonstrate once again that pastiche is a sum of many parts brought in together. Frederic Jameson takes it upon himself to explain pastiche that most people tend to confuse with parody since both styles involve the imitation and mimicry of other styles. Though great parody has sympathy with the writers who are being parodied yet the chief aim of parody is to ridicule the essence of these stylistic traits and their excessiveness and eccentricity with respect to the way people normally speak or write. Linguistic norms are the basis of parody as such. Jameson states that with the advent of post structuralism the very possibility of any linguistic norm in terms of which one could ridicule private languages and idiosyncratic styles has vanished. Therefore pastiche has become necessary because parody has become impossible. Jameson defines pastiche with regard to its similarity and difference to the genre of parody:

Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which what is being imitated is rather comic. Pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor...(Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 5)

Jameson clarifies his views regarding pastiche when he asserts that in a world devoid of stylistic innovation the only solution is an imitation of the 'dead styles'. Pastiche accommodates the postmodern authors 'to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum'. His idea of pastiche is based on the notion of 'incorporating' texts, not 'quoting' them. His absorptive model of postmodernism uses the 'masks' of the previous authors in order to be able to speak. He observes that the disappearance of individual subject and style has made pastiche inevitable:

[t]he disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche. (Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 25)

Linda Hutcheon not unlike Jameson has noted time and again the 'depthless' nature of postmodern fiction. The ironic stance of postmodern literature disrupts the modernist claims of rendering the faithful picture of inner self and consciousness. Hutcheon notes that such pre-modern and modern grand-narratives are being replaced by works that are 'self-conscious', 'self-contradictory' and even 'self-undermining' and are epitomized by practices of fabulation, pastiche, bricolage or aleatory disconnection. Again like Jameson who had designated pastiche as the most significant practice of postmodernism, Hutcheon



asserts that pastiche is 'considered central to postmodernism'. Hutcheon shares the critical impulse of Jameson in placing pastiche in close proximity to the notion of parody. She suggests that pastiche is a synonym for parody, and also for appropriation, which is a central aspect of pastiche:

[p]arody [is] often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality. (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 89)

The postmodern literary artist is not only heavily dependent upon stick pasting from the previous canons but also from all sorts of canons. The façade of the revered 'high' arts are broken down in favour of conceding space to all kinds of art that had been previously relegated to the margins of fame. The previously unbridgeable gap between 'high' and 'low' art is eventually blurred in favour of a rupturing and intermingling of any such categories and this is where pastiche comes into play. Hutcheon observes:

[t]he borders between high art and mass or popular culture and the discourses of art and the discourses of the world (especially history) are regularly crossed in postmodern theory and practice. (Hutcheon, *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 93).

In his *Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996) Terry Eagleton observes that postmodernism is 'the most widely-touted term'. The sheer span of orientations, drawn from different mores, disciplines, epochs means that postmodern writing reflects a vast assortment of concurrent influences and source materials. Since the canon promises to cover 'everything' from 'Madonna to meta-narrative,' not distinguishing between academic and popular art, Eagleton thinks that it might 'collapse into meaninglessness'. In his acceptance of the genre's incorporation of multitudinous strands of culture he places the use pastiche which incorporates almost all forms of writing into one that is itself self-reflexive. He has made the following observation on the plural nature of postmodern narrative:

[a]rbitrary, eclectic, hybrid, decentered, fluid, discontinuous, pastiche-like. (Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, 201).

He goes to observe, the way postmodern art and literature evade falling into categories specific to art. Such texts contrive to be 'depthless':

[s]purns metaphysical profanity for a kind of contrived depthlessness...its form is ironic and its epistemology relativist and skeptical. (Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*, 201).

Music has had an undeniable influence in African American literary thought. Houston A. Baker Jr. in his *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature* (1984) focuses on the blues as the key black vernacular trope. He shows how music has all along influenced the African American culture and that in turn is reflected in their writing. In his discussion of Richard Wright's fiction Baker has commented upon the way in which the Blues had influenced the fragmentary nature of Wright's narrative style:

The manifest *unevenness* of his prose, its pastiche, shards of theological, philosophical, and sociological discourse, sparse (sometimes mechanical) stichomythia are fragments of a *literature* that was---a discursive order reduced to zero in the interest of the black (w)hole's blue desire. (Baker, *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, 151)

Gates's *The Signifying Monkey* (1988) privileges signifying and pastiche as the prototypical black literary tropes. Gates' *Signifying* is considered the cornerstone of postmodern African American literature; in it he builds upon the postmodernist concept of intertextuality which he prefers stating as 'signifying'. Gates further divides 'signifying' into two categories: 'motivated' and 'unmotivated'. He clarifies the distinction between the two by demarking that 'unmotivated signifying' employs pastiche and engages in intertextuality as an act of deference, while 'motivated signifying' exercises parody proper and seeks to expunge previous texts through revision. Gates notes that pastiche proclaims through revision 'its surface content [as] the displaced content of intertextual relations' in the literary canon. Emphasizing the importance of repetition and revision, parody and pastiche in black language and literature Gates convincingly concludes:

Rhetorical naming by indirection is central to our notions of figuration, troping, and of the parody of forms, or pastiche, in evidence when one writer repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent context. (cited in Bell, *Bearing Witness to African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing Its Authority, Authenticity, and Agency*, 257).

Gates further explains the distinctions that he believes exists between the Black male (parody) and the Black female literary tradition (pastiche). In this respect he draws the example of Alice Walker who signifies upon Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God* in her novel *The Color Purple*. Walker's 'signifying according to Gates represents 'a tradition within a tradition'. For him this kind of 'signifying' is a positive one of renewal and continuance:



Whereas most older black male writers deny any influence at all---or eagerly claim a white paternity---black female authors often claim descent from other black women literary ancestors. (Gates, *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, 4).

Paul Gilroy advocates that writing about the black experience of exploitation and torture had been difficult for most authors. Pastiche and parody had to be employed by authors in order to depict the unspeakable history of slavery. Citing the example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* which in the author's words was, "outside most of the formal constricts of the novel," Gilroy contends that these kinds of novels in dealing with slavery and remembrance portray experiments within the genre:

[t]he clutch of recent African American novels which deal explicitly with history, historiography, slavery and remembrance all exhibit an intense and ambivalent negotiation of the novel form that is associated with their various critiques of modernity and enlightenment. (Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, 218).

A. Yemisi Jimoh, a relatively newer critic, has once again propounded the strong bond between music and African American literature much in the strain of Baker before him. In his book *Spiritual Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox* (2002), A. Yemisi Jimoh notes how the technique of pastiche was not an alien to the African American culture. He advocates that the long tradition of Blues, Jazz and even Church music in the lives of the people of colour, teemed with the use of pastiche, this was later adopted by their literary artists:

In Blues, Jazz and Spiritual Gospel aesthetics among African Americans, music is a palimpsest that uses techniques such as pastiche (satirically and for expansion of an idea), montage and mélange separately and at one with pleasing results; this music has been turned toward its literary uses by African American writers. Both the music and the fiction resist fixation, and both value the insights of the incongruent voices. (Jimoh, *Spiritual Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction: Living in Paradox*, 38).

Indeed as we have seen till now and shall see further the fiction of Walker, Morrison, Naylor and Shange 'resist fixation'. They are interdependent upon the genre of black female literary canon in the terms of Gates and yet are separate entities spinning out their individual styles that reflect the postmodern ethos. The following sections will be a detailed discussion of the ways in which these authors have demonstrated 'hybridization'---to borrow Ihab Hassan's term---in their fiction. This they have achieved by their use of diverse elements like letters, poetry, songs, conversations, diary entries, recipes, magic formulas and so on that disrupt the narrative flow and make way for multiple mini narratives. Pastiche in being disruptive becomes accommodating. The historical experience of that era could not have been authentically included were it not for the first person account of the diary. The diary is read by the great granddaughter of Eleanora, Mary Jane, a white woman sympathetic towards the people of colour. Eleanora's conversation with her tutor as placed in her diary is a crucial reminder that life is equally difficult for poor whites and women in a society that privileges the high class white males alone:

I [Eleanora] was lamenting that I had no freedom, as a woman, to paint. I could not go to Italy, for instance, as he had done, and he [Eleanora's tutor] was poor!...You are a woman, but you are rich. People may laugh but they will not harm you if you paint....He [tutor] had worked for my family, for me, while his own dreams of growth and development as an artist faded....This, then, was the power of people like us had. The power to enslave others and to frustrate their dreams. (Walker, *The Temple of my Familiar*, 230).

The diary entries inserted in the text of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Walker's 1992 novel are grim pictures of reality regarding the circumcision of Tashi. The whole novel is a quest for identity of the Olinkan woman Tashi. The following quotation is her personal reflection of the situation she has led herself into. It is a candid avowal of her faulty decision that has given as much pain to her as to Adam:

And I can see as he looks at me that he does not know whether to laugh or cry. I feel the same....It is as if myself is hiding behind an iron door. I am like chicken bound for market. The scars on my face are nearly healed, but I must fan the flies away. The flies that are attracted by the odor coming from my blood, eager to eat at the feast provided by my wounds. (Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, 44).

The heart of the matter can be revealed through the excerpts taken from dairies. Since they are supposed to be 'personal' documents they are supposed to remain unseen and hence bear unequivocal truths about the person writing it. In an interview with Jody Hoy, Alice Walker has noted the importance of maintaining a diary. She says:

I think that people who keep journals are a lot more lucid and a lot more clear about who they are and what is the essential me. That's what I think is really revealed in a diary or a journal. (Walker, *The World has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*, pg-138).

The first novel of Toni Morrison *The Bluest Eye* (1970) bears a complicated narrative mode comprising of third person narrative interspersed with pages of dairies, nursery rhymes, narratives offered by various characters in the novel, and even



letters. Among all of this one of the most breathtaking narrative perspectives is offered by the diary-like narration of Claudia Mcteer that opens the novel with the ominous line 'Quiet as it's kept' that ends with a speculation on 'why' and 'how':

Quiet as it is 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....We had dropped our seeds in our own little plot of black dirt just as Pecola's father had dropped his seeds in his own plot of black dirt. Our innocence and faith were no more productive than his lust or despair. What is clear now is that of all that hope, fear, lust, love and grief, nothing remains but Pecola and the unyielding earth. Cholly Breedlove is dead; our innocence too. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 3).

Apart from the diary like narration of Claudia, sections of detailed narration of the first years of Pauline's marriage are given in the first person amid the third person account of the same. Pauline's diary is a more viable and vivid version than the omniscient narrator with her limited perspective. The exactness of sights, sounds and feelings leap up to life from the pages of her diary:

So when Cholly come up and tickled my foot, it was like them berries, that lemonade, them streaks of green the june bugs made, all come together. Cholly was thin then, with real light eyes. He used to whistle, and when I heard him, shivers came on my skin. (Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, 90).

In the final pages of Morrison's *God Help the Child* the innermost thoughts of Booker are laid bare in the form of the poetry journal that he kept with his aunt Queen. The insertion of these poetic deliberations within the narrative serves as a bridge for the readers to appreciate the creative spirit of the protagonist as he expresses his love for Bride:

Her imagination is impeccable the way it cuts and scrapes the bone never touching the marrow where that dirty feeling is thrumming like a fiddle for fear its strings will break and screech the loss of its tune since for her permanent ignorance is so much better than the quick of life. (Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 149).

The final section of the poetry journal inserted by Morrison in the novel is a candid confession of Booker. He assesses his own possessive nature with reference to his beloved. He likens it to the attitude of slave owners. Here the pastiche technique at once challenges the discourse of the often romanticized love and also that of slavery:

I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slaveowner could have done it better. (Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 161).

Gloria Naylor has incorporated diary entries in her *Linden Hills* (1985) but in a slightly dramatic mode. She has chosen to unfold the miserable lives of generations of Mrs. Nedeeds through their life histories recorded in Bibles, cook-books and photo albums. It is as if these women talk of their persecution to the forsaken fifth generation Mrs. Nedeed whose son has just been murdered by his own father. Through the use of the pastiche technique Naylor has facilitated firsthand accounts of personal histories that bear testimony to the torture that married women have faced for over generations.

The first in the series of such encounters is with the Bible of Luwana Packerville. She had been a Mrs. Nedeed way back in the 1830s and who had been deprived of her basic rights to her son. In fear of being discovered by her husband, Luwana had recorded the moments of her sorrow in the gold-edged tissue paper that separated one book of the Bible from another:

Luther told me today that I have no rights to my son. He owns the child as he owns me. He grew terribly enraged when I ventured a mild protest, and showed me the papers that were signed over to his agent in Tupelo....O Blessed Saviour, can it be that I have only exchanged one master for another? Can it be that the innocent scribbles I sought only to hide from a husband's amused contempt are now the diary of a slave....This week a new house keeper came to cook for us and do the washing....Yesterday I baked some molasses cakes. They were always my son's favourites; but he refused to touch them, though I saw he was sorely tempted. And when I labored to press them on him, the look he finally cast me chilled my blood. (Naylor, *Linden Hills*, 117-119).

The substance of Luwana's diary entries was her slavery to her husband and son but the opening page of Naylor's 1988 novel *Mama Day* is the document of sale of Sapphira Wade a slave sold to a white master. The document looks much like a diary entry in having detailed account of the date and the amount of transaction of a human being:

Tuesday, 3<sup>rd</sup> day of August, 1819 Sold to Mister Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs, one negress answering to the name Sapphira. Age 20. Pure African stock. Limbs and teeth sound...Sapphira is half prime, inflicted with sullenness and entertains a bilious nature....not without extreme mischief and suspicions of delving in witchcraft. Conditions of sale One-half gold tender, one-half goods in kind. Final. (Naylor, *Mama Day*, 2)

In her 1992 novel *Bailey's Café* Naylor has once again introduced portions that read like personal diaries. Especially poignant are Bailey's horrifying recollections of the World War II. Naylor has painted a life like portrait of the devastation caused by the War by incorporating the personal notes of Bailey who participated in it. History is revisited in these diary



entries and evaluated from the previously unexplored perspective of an African American soldier. The loathsome task of a soldier sans the heroism is laid bare for all to see. The self hatred resulting from the massacre of Hiroshima and Nagasaki is expressed vividly in the following lines:

*It set the sky on fire as its typhoon winds swallowed the puny kamikaze. 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, 26)*

In her *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* not only does Ntozake Shange include minute first person accounts of any given incident but also she specifically mentions the words "JOURNAL ENTRY" in capital letters over each of these sections to make their purpose inescapable to the readers. The journal is maintained by Cypress. Shange informs the readers that "With her journal, she talked to herself". The journal entries are haphazard for the most part with the first entry numbered at 48 and the next at 151 while the final entry is numbered as 692. The first of these entries reads thus:

JOURNAL ENTRY # 48 everybody i know has lost they mindsometimes i wish i was crazy too/ then i cd get some sleep.... (Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, 125-126).

The final journal entry of Cypress is the longest of all. It is the poetic outburst of a sensitive heart that depicts vividly all the hues of heartache in the life of a woman of colour. Concretized as a commentary on the dance of the black people this journal entry talks about how these people use dance as a medium of expressing their angst in the face of a hostile world that had tried to tell them that they were not worthy enough to dance:

JOURNAL ENTRY #692, *what does it mean that blk folks cd sing n dance?... that's what it means that black folks cd dance/ itdon't mean we got rhythm... its how we remember what cannot be said/that's why the white folks say it aint got no form/what was the formof slavery...* (Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo*, 151-153).

The sections quoted above show us that the incorporation of these fragments of diaries is actually the window to the secret soul of these persecuted individuals. Wrecked at the hands of society or family these tormented beings vent out their grief in the pages of diaries. Most of these diary entries are by women. And so is the feminist agenda unmistakable in the diary entries of Eleanora, Evelyn-Tashi, Claudia Macteer, Pauline Breedlove, Luwana Packerville and Cypress. Relegated to the margins of society for being black and in the margins of the family for being women, these people drain their Taut emotions in the journal entries. The use of pastiche lends a feeling of authenticity in the mode of the first-hand narrative used in the diary form. The accounts of tormented women in their personal diaries become all the more harrowing since they are recorded vividly without omissions resulting from guilt or shame.

## References

1. Baker, H. A. Jr.(1984), *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
2. Bell, W. B.(2012), *Bearing Witness to African American Literature: Validating and Valorizing Its Authority, Authenticity, and Agency*, Wayne State University, Press, Detroit.
3. Eagleton, T, (1996), *The Illusions of Postmodernism*, Blackwell Publishing, U. S. A.
4. Gates, H. L. (1990), *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, Meridian Books, U. S. A.
5. . Gilroy, P. (1993), *The Black Atlantic*, Harvard University Press, Massachusetts.
6. Hutcheon, L. (1989), *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Routledge, London.
7. Jameson, F.(1998), *The Cultural Turn*, Verso, London.
8. Jimoh, A. Y. (2002), *Spiritual Blues, and Jazz People in African American Fiction*, University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.
9. Morrison, T. (1970), *The Bluest Eye*, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., U. S. A.  
2015), *God Help the Child*, Chatto & Windus, London.
10. Naylor, G  
---- (1985), *Linden Hills*, Ticknor & Fields, New York.  
---- (1988), *Mama Day*, Vintage Books, New York.
11. Shange, N. ---- (1982) *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, St. Martin's Griffin, New York.
12. Walker, A. ---- (1989), *The Temple of My Familiar*, Mariner Books, New York  
.....(1992), *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, Vintage Books, New York.  
.....(2013), *The World has Changed: Conversations with Alice Walker*, The New York Press, New York.