

The Turkish Reader's Reception of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif"

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"Recitatif," the only short story published by the celebrated American writer Toni Morrison, invites reflection on the implications of "the Other" and whether the entire concept needs to be rethought. As an enthusiastic reader of the story and as an instructor who has been teaching it for five years in the Turkish context, I believe that its implications stretch far beyond the American context; it is what Roland Barthes has described as a "writerly" text (4), inviting readers to compare their experiences of the text with their own cultural backgrounds. This piece will show how this process works by offering a case-study as to how it might be taught and received in the Turkish context.

"Recitatif" opens with the central character Twyla's narration of her childhood memories in St Bony's orphanage where she rooms with Roberta, "a girl from a whole other race" (Morrison, "Recitatif" 2079). Our focus is directed towards the clues concerning racial identities of Twyla and Roberta to find out who assumes the roles of "salt" and "pepper" (as the older girls nickname one another). The plot revolves around four encounters of Twyla and Roberta after their departure from the orphanage. The huge class difference between them is emphasized through references to Twyla as a waitress and fireman's wife, and Roberta as Twyla's customer and an IBM executive's wife with a limousine. The two characters' tense conversations about Maggie's racial background (Maggie looked after them in the orphanage) reveal their lost friendship.

At first glance, the issue of race may seem like a very major theme to the reader, especially in a short story told by a racist narrator. The acquired racism of young Twyla is explicit in the lines below:

The minute I walked in and the Big Bozo [the director of the orphanage] introduced us, I got sick to my stomach. It was one thing to be taken

out of your own bed early in the morning -- it was something else to be stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race. And Mary, that's my mother, she was right. Every now and then she would stop dancing long enough to tell me something important and one of the things she said was that they never washed their hair and they smelled funny. Roberta sure did. Smell funny, I mean (2079).

As Roberta's mother refuses to shake hands with Twyla's mother, we sense an alternative perspective which is further supported by Twyla's narration: "Roberta's mother looked down at me and then looked down at Mary too." (2082) However as the narration proceeds and Maggie is introduced, we understand that the racial context of the short story is actually rather insignificant. Twyla and Roberta feel more threatened by the presence of the elder "gar girls," who represent their repressed sides. Whereas Twyla and Roberta are denigrated for not having "beautiful dead parents in the sky" (2079), the gar girls are both bourgeois and well-dressed, adorning themselves with lipstick and eyeliner. Maggie's presence in the story is significant; she functions as a kind of mirror through which Twyla and Roberta can define themselves in relation to others. Maggie's "sandy colored" skin is a strong signifier of both unification and separation (2080).

The encounter in the orchard with Maggie proves significant. Twyla initially narrates that she does not know why she is so obsessed with the orchard while "[n]othing really happened there." (2080): Maggie fell down and the elder girls laughed at her. However Roberta believes that "Maggie didn't fall [...] They [the other girls] knocked her down. Those girls pushed her down and tore her clothes. In the orchard" (2086). When Twyla and Roberta meet several years later, Roberta accuses Twyla of being "[t]he same state kid who kicked a poor old black lady when she was down on the ground" (2089). Roberta's observation reveals a guilty conscience:

Listen to me. I really did think that she was black. I didn't make that up. I really thought so. But now I can't be sure. I just remember her [Maggie] as old, so old. And because she couldn't

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talk- well, you know, I thought she was crazy. She'd been brought up in an institution like my mother was and like I thought I would be too. And you were right. We didn't kick her. It was the gar girls. Only them. But well, I wanted to. I really wanted them to hurt her. I said we did it, too. You and me, but that's not true. And I don't want you to carry that around. It was just that I wanted to do it so bad that day -- wanting to is doing it (2091).

Maggie obviously stands for the Other; the figure of the oppressed, humiliated by all races and all groups in the orphanage on account of being mute and deaf, as well as being black. Trudier Harris observes: "Maggie is the ugly outcast, the rejectable blackness, the communally disconnected, the diseased, the deformed. In other words, she is the scapegoat toward whom everyone can feel superior" (112). She is a floating signifier; the means by which other characters can try to define their racial and social identities. Elizabeth Abel describes her as "a blank parenthesis" (103). Maggie may be taken as a signifier of the text itself, opening parenthesis but keeping silent, continuously signifying the signification process itself.

Bearing this in mind, the concept of fixed racial identities ("blackness," "whiteness") might be seen as a starting-point for readers to make their own minds up as to how different identities can be constructed. Morrison has emphasized this point in her reference to "Recitatif" in *Playing in the Dark*: "[It represents] "an experiment in the removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial" (*Playing* xiii). Abel offers a reader-centered reading of "Recitatif" by contrasting her readings of the text with those of her black colleague, Lula Fraggd (103). Abel is sure that Twyla is white, while Fraggd remains convinced that she is black. Trudier Harris, a black American scholar, reflects upon her reading process of "Recitatif" in the following lines: "The cultural/racial stereotypes keep coming at us, and we keep reading, watching, and working hard to uncover the real racial identities" (111)

To support this view, I would like to share our culture-specific reading experiences in my Critical Reading classes, with Boğaziçi University undergraduate learners in İstanbul who come from various regions of the

Republic of Turkey. A great majority of the class, including myself, began by not coming to any definite conclusion about Twyla and Roberta's skin colors. This is possibly because certain clues in the text meant different things to all of us. Only a small number of learners from the west of the Turkish Republic imagined Twyla as thoroughly white, while a very small number of those coming from distinctly eastern regions associated Twyla with black racial identity. Such judgments have a lot to do with learner preconceptions, as they either responded to or repudiated Morrison's characters. "Black" in this context represents an othering strategy, a means by which learners can differentiate themselves from the characters they are studying.

I subsequently asked all learners to look at "Recitatif" in detail, offering definitions of race as put forward in the introduction to the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Their responses were discussed in class and subsequently set down in reflection-papers. The class reading experience shared in this paper is based on class observations which are supported by the findings of a questionnaire conducted with 80 learners enrolled in my sections during the 2012-13 academic year. All learners who completed the questionnaire had read the text twice.

Class discussions inevitably focused on Twyla and Roberta's racial identities. We imagined ourselves as amateur detectives desperately searching for clues and reminding ourselves of every single detail for any possible common reading. One of the details we focused on was young Twyla's learned racist remark, from her mother, directed to her roommate Roberta as "they never washed their hair and they smelled funny" (2079). Unwashed hair was deemed a black trait by more than half of the class, which might be related to the Turkish stereotypical associations of certain types of hair with Arabs [cf. the Turkish idiom *arap saç*]. The funny smell similarly reminded learners of a heavy Arabic fragrance called *esans*. Less than one quarter of class associated blonde hair with a greasy condition and the smell of sweat with blonde women, drawing on a cultural preconditioning characteristic of south-east Anatolia. Large hoop-earrings were commonly considered as a signifier of blackness, which might be related to learner memories of an Arab female wearing them on the cover pack of a particular brand of chewing-gum. Big eyes were also taken as signifiers of blackness, implying an orientalist conception of black beauty, attributed to Arabic women (Said 2). When references to Twyla and Roberta's mothers were

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considered, the image of a person with a huge cross was associated with blackness by more than half of the class, possibly as an example of the Other in the Turkish reader's mind. The cooking mother was also treated as black by more than half of the class, which might be related to its reminiscence of a Turkish stereotype of an Arabic homeworker *arap bacı kalfa*, dating back to the popular genre of movies known as Yeşilçam and reworked in the television series *Uğurlugiller* (1988-91). Although the recalls the American tradition of blackface minstrelsy, the two representations are thoroughly opposite. The blackface minstrel mask (which dates back to the 1830s) signifies the white stereotypical representation of black race on stage by either wearing a blackface minstrel mask or by polishing their faces into black. Representing the black as foolish and amusing, the tradition of the minstrel mask is usually read as a sign of racial stratification. However, the Turkish *arap bacı kalfa* signifies a motherly, trustworthy image of domesticity; the woman considered a member of the family and hence called *bacı* (which means sister in Turkish). She is a very dominant figure and she even challenges the landlady's decisions. Her status in the house is denoted as a *kalfa*, identifying her as socially superior to the servants.

It is significant to note that Roberta's mother conveyed such positive connotations to the Turkish reader -- as Twyla puts it forth at the very beginning of her narration: "My mother danced all night and Roberta's was sick. That's why we were taken to St. Bonny's" (2078). Roberta's mother was considered justified in her decision to leave her child in an orphanage; when she refused to shake hands with Twyla's, the learners believed that it was related to their lifestyles rather than their racial backgrounds. The image of Twyla's dancing mother was commonly associated with the white race, also reinforced by another signifier, her lady esther powder smell. "Lady Esther" sounded very much like a European name to more than half of the class, implying a white reference. Since powder is usually used by fair skinned women, lady esther powder was mostly taken as a white signifier. Likewise the fast food that Twyla's mother brought was considered as symbolic of the white race, preconditioned by the knowledge that westerners initiated the concept of fast food tradition and prejudged by the notion that white working mothers do not cook. On the other hand the homemade food that Roberta's mother brought was identified with the black worker: Twyla's observation that "The wrong food is always with the wrong people" (2082) reinforced the idea of white hegemony with the

black worker identified as inferior. Twyla's reference to her mother by her first name, Mary, was also interpreted as a sign of white American cultures.

In our class discussions Maggie was inevitably read as hybrid; neither totally black nor totally white, occupying the "third space," as described by Homi K. Bhabha (238). Most Turkish readers focus on the crossroads between the east and the west, feeling both Middle Eastern and European at different times; they might be likened to Maggie, "not pitch-black" from the Western perspective and white in a Middle Eastern context and thus located in a similar third space. The Turkish readers' interpretive processes coincide with the "writerly" structure of the text itself: 90% of the class failed to make a consistent argument defining Twyla and Roberta's races. A great majority of those who were convinced that Twyla was white (based on the narrations in the tale about childhood) noted that the second encounter at the café implied the opposite. Similarly, most of the learners who at the beginning thought that Roberta was white later argued that she was black, drawing on the part where Roberta accused Twyla of "kick[ing] a black lady." Those who had a consistent argument during the three encounters finally accepted that they had become confused during the strife at school. As far as empathizing with the characters was concerned, an equal percentage of the learners noted that they felt close to either both or neither of them. Turkish readers' racial assumptions of themselves are thereby revealed as double-sided, reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois's conception of "double consciousness," a term which he used to explain the African American experience and further related to the "sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of the other." (2)

The text resists any possibilities of a fixed reading which in turn reinforces its "writerly" characteristics. "Recite" the dictionary definition of which is "to repeat words from memory," implies the rehearsal of established codes and stereotypes, all accustomed associations, and hence reflects on the reading process. The title "Recitatif" supports this view by ironically referring to the racial codes and stereotypes that ordinarily prejudice our judgments, which have been subverted in Morrison's tale. The term "recitatif" is simultaneously reminiscent of the term "re-cit(e)-ative;" "re-" in this respect functioning as a prefix, which connotes "might be cited again." In other words the title, "Recitatif," encourages an ontological questioning of established textual and social stereotypes, while

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offering alternative perspectives on the story's racial content. By dwelling on the hybrid and the deconstructive, "Recitatif" not only celebrates the liberated signifiers but also the free signification process itself.

Morrison herself asserts that "writing and reading are not all that distinct" (*Playing* xii) in the sense that both are involved in interpretive processes. Marie Knoflikova supports this judgment: "Because the author herself is African American, the readers will at first assume that the narrator is African American, too [...] because it is usually so" (25). Yet such assumptions are consciously refuted in a "writerly" text which invites its readers to participate in an open-ended interpretive process encouraging hybrid, often contradictory readings. This kind of opportunity appeals to Turkish learners, many of whom are involved in similar contradictory processes during their daily lives, as they live in a culture symbolically bridging east and west. Reading "Recitatif" helps them to discover their hybrid selves, as well as prompting reflection on their cultural identities.¹

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1 This aspect of the short story has also been explored in relation to Asian American identities by Heike Berner ("Home is Where the Heart Is? Identity and Belonging in Asian-American Literature." Diss. Bochum U., 2003, 25-35).

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Appendix: Questionnaire

The first question focuses on the relationship between regional variations amongst learners in terms of their background, and the reading process of "Recitatif."

1. I come from:
 - a) Marmara Region
 - b) Aegean Region
 - c) Central Anatolia
 - d) Black Sea Region
 - e) Mediterranean Region
 - f) East Anatolia
 - g) South East Anatolia

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2. I have read "Recitatif"
 - a) Once
 - b) Twice
 - c) I haven't read the text yet

3. In both of my readings:
 - a) I imagined Twyla as white and Roberta as black
 - b) I imagined Twyla as black and Roberta as white
 - c) I could not make an overall decision about Twyla and Roberta's races

4. In my first reading:
 - a) I imagined Twyla as white and Roberta as black
 - b) I imagined Tyler as black and Roberta as white
 - c) I could not make an overall decision about Twyla and Roberta's races

5. I thought Twyla was white and Roberta was black especially because ...

6. I thought Roberta was white and Twyla was black especially because ...

7. During the preschool section of the story, I thought:
 - a) Roberta was white
 - b) Twyla was white

8. I imagined Roberta's mother as
 - a) Black
 - b) White

9. The encounter at Howard Johnson's made me think:
- a) Roberta was white
 - b) Twyla was white
10. The encounter at the hypermarket made me think
- a) Roberta was white
 - b) Twyla was white
11. The conflicts at school implied
- a) Roberta was white
 - b) Twyla was white
12. The encounter at Christmas Eve made me think that Twyla was
- a) White
 - b) Black
13. I think that Maggie, the kitchen woman is
- a) White
 - b) Black
 - c) Hybrid
14. During my reading felt closer to
- a) Twyla
 - b) Roberta
 - c) Both
 - d) Maggie
 - e) All
 - f) None