
REVIEWS

Gurleen Grewal. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998. 154p.

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In *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*, Gurleen Grewal applies the lens of a postcolonial critic to the first six novels of Toni Morrison. The analyses that result are fresh, insightful and compelling; *Circles of Sorrow* adds to our understanding of Morrison's texts as well as to our appreciation for postcolonial theory.

In a short preface and introduction, Grewal clarifies that "postcolonial" should not be read as that which follows after the end of the colonial, but rather, as "the legacy of colonialism that is carried and continued into the present" (x). She argues, along with black historians of the 1970s, that black Americans have been subjected to an internal (or domestic) colonization: colonization "maintained in the 'home' country in close proximity to the dominant racial group" (Harold Cruse, qtd. in Grewal 7). Reading Morrison's novels within this framework, Grewal highlights the ways these texts "revise dominant historiography, reconsidering the scene of colonial violation from the inside, from subaltern perspectives hitherto ignored" (8). She also calls our attention to the movement, in each novel, from individuals to communities, from specific characters to sociopolitical histories and economies in which the characters exist. Like Morrison, Grewal shows us that the boundaries of the self are "permeated by the collective struggle of historical agents who live the long sentence of history by succumbing to (repeating), contesting, and remaking it" (14).

Grewal devotes a chapter each to Morrison's first six novels (*Paradise* appeared too late for inclusion in Grewal's study). Common to each chapter is an examination of Morrison's representation of traumatic losses within a colonized black community and of the necessity of remembering those losses, re-experiencing those traumas, in order to move into a future. Also common to each chapter is an interpretation of intersections between Morrison's texts and various pre-texts, both written and oral. Rather than describe major insights of all six chapters, here I focus on two which for me illustrate both the strengths and weaknesses of Grewal's approach.

In chapter one, “The Decolonizing Vision: *The Bluest Eye*,” Grewal argues that the power of Morrison’s first novel “lies in its demystification of hegemonic social processes — in its keen grasp of the way power works, the way individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing a dominant culture’s values in the face of great material contradictions” (21). Grewal effectively substantiates her argument by offering us a new way to read the three versions of the “Dick and Jane” narrative that open and structure *The Bluest Eye*. Grewal sees these three slightly different versions of Dick and Jane (versions progressively less “standard”) as “an allegory of class formations and of the first world’s authorizing of third world identities” (23). Versions two and three “mimic” version one, repeating it, with a difference; so too, black characters are encouraged to mimic/repeat the values and desires of white characters (to be Shirley Temple, for example) but this repetition always produces difference (Pecola Breedlove is not and cannot be Shirley Temple). Grewal shows how most of the black characters in *The Bluest Eye* succumb to this colonization, but also points to Claudia MacTeer and the three whores as characters embodying the possibility of dissent. They resist the allure of Shirley Temple (white culture) and in so doing, may write stories other than those offered by the Dick and Jane reader. *The Bluest Eye* itself, narrated by Claudia, represents a remembering of loss (not just of Pecola, but also of Cholly, Pauline, the black community). Having engaged in re-remembering, the community may work against such losses in the future. Grewal’s postcolonial analysis of *The Bluest Eye* succeeds in opening up this text.

Slightly less successful, I would argue, is Grewal’s reading of Toni Morrison’s second novel, *Sula*. In chapter two of *Circles of Sorrow*, Grewal positions *Sula* as a text depicting, once again, loss: of Sula, of various black men, of a black community known as “The Bottom.” Grewal argues that the novel stages contradictions between black nationalism and feminism as it presents us with a black community willing to open its arms to victims of various sorts, but not to women who assert their “independence from the communal codes of conduct” (44). These observations seem on target, but somewhat more obvious than those in *The Bluest Eye* chapter. When Grewal brings Victor Turner’s social drama theory to bear on the relationship between Sula and Nel, she genuinely helps us understand the closeness and then distance between these two women. But the chapter’s concluding discussion of *Mrs. Dalloway* and “The Wasteland” as pre-texts to Morrison’s novel seems forced, labored; Grewal notes that all three texts address “time, death, memory, madness” (56) — so do numerous other texts. Perhaps because I found Grewal’s thorough consideration of “Dick and Jane” as pre-text to *The Bluest Eye*

compelling, I was somewhat disappointed by her almost off-the-cuff remarks about *Sula's* pre-texts.

If chapter two is not quite so strong as chapter one, succeeding chapters of *Circles of Sorrow* — on *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz* — live up to Grewal's early promise. Chapter three charts Morrison's manipulation, in *Song of Solomon*, of African American folktales about slaves flying home. This novel, focusing on a black middle-class character, tallies up the costs of both assimilation (which requires self-loathing) and of black nationalism (which requires loathing of the other). Chapter four, which I rate as one of the most interesting in Grewal's text, shows how *Tar Baby* plays with Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, folktales of the tar baby, and the nineteenth-century novel, *Iola Leroy*, in its juxtaposition of Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American characters Jadine Childs and Son Green (exemplars of first and third worlds). Chapter five, on *Beloved*, highlights this novel's merging of "the physical and the psychical, the literal and the metaphorical" (107) in its presentation of the effects of slavery on mothers and daughters. Finally, chapter six opens our eyes to the ways *Jazz* gives us a new take on the Jazz Age and "The New Negro" by focusing on working-class blacks. Attending to issues of colonial politics, history, class, race, and gender, Grewal taps into the remarkable richness of Morrison's work. Grewal highlights ways in which Morrison's characters function within very complicated matrixes of race, class, and gender — matrixes that at times work for, and at other times work against, the establishment of liberatory (rather than colonized) communities. *Circles of Sorrow* is well worth reading. ✨