CHAPTER FIVE

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND STYLISTIC STRATEGIES

The aim of this study so far has been to examine the factors that contribute to women's power and powerlessness. But the scope of this chapter is to discuss at length the narrative techniques and stylistic strategies of the authors chosen for research. Toni Morrison, Margaret Atwood and Shashi Deshpande inherit different cultural and traditional beliefs, and one can discern marked similarities as well as divergences in their approach to the complex and continuing problem of man-woman relationship in the contemporary world.

Growing up in Lorain, Ohio, Toni Morrison imbibed the tradition of storytelling. When she finally decided to take up storytelling as her profession, she decided to become a literary griot because of her conviction that in this way she might succeed in realising through the written word, what the oral story tellers did for their listeners- providing them with a kind of cultural "life support system" (Carmean 11).

Morrison admits that she wants her language to do "what music used to do" for black people in America. Music provided the means to sustain a unique culture. But this culture unfortunately with the advent of popular fashions is slowly dying away. New generations of blacks are progressively more educated but at the same time are ignorant of their unique traditions. This is where Morrison wishes to "step in" (8). As she says, she cannot perhaps save black music but she certainly can and does aspire to keep this tradition alive and kicking by making room for it in her narratives, and by employing it’s principles as an integrating feature of her style.

For this reason, Morrison deliberately accompanies her narratives with what might be called "a sound track of black music" (9). When faced
with intense experiences of happiness and pain, her characters often break into folk songs, gospel numbers, the blues or simply whistle or hum. In *Sula*, Nel's wail at the end of the narrative, a howl that has stuck in her throat since she has lost both husband and friend years before, wordlessly expresses the sadness of the community of Bottom and the inequities of the world itself. It is, appropriately, boundless, with "no bottom and it had no top, just circles and circles of sorrow" (S 149). Pilate's love for her granddaughter Hagar in *Song of Solomon* is finally more destructive and more tragic than Hagar's love for Milkman Dead (Rigney 20). Pilate's howl like Nel's is not only a statement of loss of Hagar but also of universal loss, a cry for "Mercy!" that resonates from the consciousness, from the "jungle" part of Pilate's mind:

Suddenly, like an elephant that has just found his anger and lifts his trunk over the heads of the little men who want his teeth or his hide or his flesh or his amazing strength. Pilate trumpeted for the sky itself to hear, "And she was loved!"

It startled one of the sympathetic winos in the vestibule and he dropped his bottle, spurtling emerald glass and jungle-red wine everywhere. (S 323)

These interludes are inspirations black music was designed to express. "Elevating the text" as a whole is the special sound of Morrison's language. Morrison affirms that the reason why she repeatedly attempts to write in a "black style" is because expressive range, rhythmic patterns, spontaneity and intimacy mark black jazz. These are the qualities that Morrison too adapts in her writing, along with other specific features that are "jazz-like" (Carmean 9). Thus, her novels are generally said to be open with a sounded motif, which is then repeated and re-sounded in a circular and reverberating way. In order to complicate the emerging patterns Morrison
employs the techniques of inversion, juxtaposition, dissonance and surprising variations (9).

One other special feature found in black jazz that Morrison emulates is its elliptical, open-ended nature. Unlike classical music, jazz does not attempt to provide a formally enclosed kind of satisfaction. Instead it suggests something purposefully left out. This kind of music agitates the soul but offers emotional, responsive freedom. There is certainly a form and structure but there is no final chord clearly defined. Morrison also wishes to write her novels in a similar fashion. She wants to create "that feeling of something held in reserve and the sense that there is more- that you can't have it all right now" (McKay 429). It is for this feature that Morrison has been criticized. Pecola Breedlove "step[s] over into madness" and isolation; Sula dies misunderstood; Beloved's ontological status is unclear from the outset of the novel; and the narrator concludes by telling us that she is "disremembered and unaccounted for," at last (275).

While applying this strategy in all her novels, Morrison still claims that she frets over finding and developing a sound that would seem more natural and spontaneous. Because of a wonderful ear for language, she successfully employs the right sound for her characters. Other than this, she knows a stylistic trick or two that she works towards her advantage. She deliberately avoids using adverbs, particularly when describing how somebody says something in the context of a dialogue (Carmean 10). She consciously pares the dialogue down, first to the essential words, then to their appropriate textual sounds "so that the reader has to hear it" (LeClair 27-28).

As a result, reader's participation becomes very important. When there is a responsive relationship as Morrison hopes for, then there is the approving, disapproving, interjecting or otherwise echoing the words of the
In Morrison's words, they will have a sense "that it is not I who do it, it is they who do" (McKay 421).

This is the reason why Morrison is not so experimental in style. She is trying to go back to the tradition that seems new but it has almost died out in the culture of black Americans. What she intends is to "re-create something out of an old form...the something that defines what makes a book 'black' " (427). As a result, her narratives are apparently without a definite structure. They unfold and meander in various directions all at once. On the surface this may appear very chaotic, but holding everything together is a guiding voice. This voice although heard is not easily identifiable because Morrison avoids using a simple and authoritative point-of-view. She makes it appear as though the point-of-view belongs to multiple characters. Although the voice does not have enough character, it can certainly be trusted. Karen Carmean notes: "In a directly technical sense, Morrison is obviously the narrator, and it is her personal voice that slides 'in' and 'out' of her various characters. When she is 'out,' however, the reader doesn't suddenly discover a narrative authority commenting on or pointing to the text. The story continues as if it were just told by no one in particular" ("Memory, Creation, and Writing" 121).

Margaret Atwood too like Morrison claims a confident aesthetic freedom in her writing. While both are stylists of the highest calibre, the crucial mark of their writing lies in the way they accept the lessons of modernism without sacrificing either coherence or popular readership. They work through the fantastic strategies of myth, folklore, fable and allegory.

Atwood like Morrison takes up the position of the storyteller. But unlike Morrison, Atwood works as a moral teacher. Just as Morrison strives hard to uphold the tradition of the black Americans, Atwood is a true Canadian determined to keep alive the national heritage through her
writing. The idea of boundary however gains additional resonance. That is not to say that she does not consider values beyond national ones. Nobody owns the air; we all breathe it avers Atwood.

Writing for Atwood is not "'some kind of magic, madness, trickery or evasive disguise for a Message,' but a professional activity in which the writer concentrates on reporting life 'not as it ought to be, but as it is', as the writer feels it, experiences it. Writers are eye witnesses, I-witnesses" ("On Being a Woman Writer" 203). Just as Morrison goes back to her formative memories for her initial inspiration, Atwood too uses realistic accounts to present her ideas. But the success in creating their communities is often brilliant in the specificity of place. The "details are all present, down to such specifics as the colors and numbers of the houses, the finest shades and shadows of daily existence" (Carmean 12). This is possible for them because their "special sense of place comes from a dramatic and imaginative gift for visualizing, in a specific and at the same time metaphorical way" (12).

Like Morrison, Atwood also has a poet's control of symbol and structure. This is because of her literary orientation as a poet. She is well known for her capacity for capturing the precise nuances of the atmosphere. In this respect, Atwood shares a great similarity with Morrison who also has an eye for detail and an ear for dialogue.

Unlike Morrison's heroines, Atwood's heroines are typically from the newly educated lower middle class. But almost all of her protagonists are victims either of man or of authority, or of a particular set-up. In fact, Morrison, Atwood's and Shashi Deshpande's concerns are with the treatment of woman as normal human being- and therefore they must be allowed their imperfections. They want their protagonists not to be "solitary weepers" but to make decisions, perform actions, be ready to face the consequences, whatever they are, and to be ambitious.
Deshpande's heroines like those of Morrison and Atwood are shown to be in a state of confusion at the beginning. Slowly as the novel unfolds, they go through a process of introspection, self-analysis and self-realization. At the end, they emerge more confident, more in control of themselves and significantly more hopeful. As Jaya in *That Long Silence* concludes: "...there is always hope." Similarly in *The Edible Woman*, it is in the final escape that Marian McAlpin realises that "acknowledging the truth of your situation is preferable to concealing it" (*Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Studies* 61). For Marian, ultimately naming the awful truth of her position becomes necessary and she reacts to the knowledge by baking a cake. There is a slight difference in the endings of Morrison though. Her endings seem to suggest that the loss of the belief in human innocence is a necessary step towards redemption, and that suffering precedes the essential knowledge that must be required.

Self-discovery therefore turns out to be an overriding theme in all the three novelists. But the manner of presentation differs to a large extent. Morrison's work clearly indicates that she is perceived to be one of the most elusive of our contemporary writers. Deshpande on the other hand accounts for simple reading. The details of the physical and social reality in the novels of Shashi Deshpande make them extremely realistic and they do not suffer from any narrowness of vision. Many of her stories are in the form of a first person narrative. And it is usually the protagonist who is narrating. Therefore it is through her point of view that we are watching the action. When the aim of the novel is to pursue the protagonist's personality development, the first person narrative suits well. But at times, Deshpande uses the flashback and free association technique that enables the protagonists to arrive at the proper knowledge of the self and the "other," and of the nature of life as well. In *That Long Silence*, Jaya's unfolding of the story in bits and pieces, "moving back and forth with
remarkable felicity, borders on the incoherent," necessitating the stream of consciousness technique (Rajeshwar 58). The technique has been used very effectively by the author to reveal the "psychic being" of Jaya. In this process of dramatizing her consciousness, Jaya's "essential nature gets verbalised and lends itself for examination." As a result, the character is presented "more accurately and more realistically" (Humphrey 258). The Binding Vine is also another good example of this technique. But on the other hand, Morrison's preference for omniscient narrators seems puzzling.

But how is the theme elaborated? Since a predominant theme in Morrison's work concerns the absence of reliable authority, the theme is elaborated in a variety of ways- through character interactions as well as through numerous formal mechanisms, especially the mask motif that appears throughout Morrison's fiction. Deshpande starts with characters and then goes on the weave the stories. The social background and the point of view are discussed in detail since these reflect the character of the person. Since the similarity of background between the novelist and the protagonists is so striking, readers are tempted to trace the autobiographical elements in the novels. As K.S.Ramamurthi has pointed out..."the strands of personal and autobiographical elements running through these novels are so pronounced that it is difficult to measure the gap between the 'I' of the narrator and the real self of the writer" (qtd. in "Shashi Deshpande As A Feminist and Novelist" 116).