

Migration Theories and Mental Health in Toni Morrison's *Jazz*

Leila Tafreshi Motalgh (Corresponding author)

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

Wan Roselezam Wan Yahya

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia
43400 UPM, Serdang, Selangor, Malaysia

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Abstract

This article aims to elaborate the relationship between migration and mental health problems that are evident in migrant women in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992). To this end, pre-migration, migration and post-migration stress factors are identified in the novel based on Danish Bhugra's theory of migration. It seems that pre-migration stress factors and traumas are associated with the push theory of migration, while post-migration stresses are associated with the pull theory of migration. Despite post-migration stresses, the main female characters who encounter pre-migration stress factors and traumas are more likely to develop mental health problems like Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Although there is extensive literary criticism of *Jazz* (1992), no theoretical criticism exists that simultaneously covers migration theories and the mental health problems evident in Toni Morrison's female characters. It is worth highlighting that gender is a variable that correlates positively with migration and mental health. This article attempts to fill a gap in literary criticism and contribute to the body of research on mental health problems associated with gender and migration.

Keywords: Push-Pull Theory, Great Migration, Black Studies, Gender, Trauma, PTSD

1. Introduction

This paper discusses the relationship between the poor mental health evident in Toni Morrison's female characters and migration, which is a stressful process. (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Bhugra, 2004) Consequently, stress can result in developing mental health problems. (Antonovsky, 1985; Pearlin, 1999; Scheid & Brown, 2010) Ahmed Okasha defines mental health as a state of well-being such that individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and work productively. (Okasha, 2005) Accordingly, this paper addresses the following issues in Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992). First and foremost, we examine African-American migration, or Black migration, with reference to the push-pull theory of migration. Then, we examine gender and mental health problems of the main female characters in the novel. It is important to highlight that gender is a variable in the migration process.

In *Jazz*, the main female characters, Violet and Dorcas, experience the migration process and then have severe mental health problems. Actually, these two female characters are at two points of a love triangle and involved in a crime of passion. Violet's husband, Joe Trace, shoots Dorcas, his teenage mistress. Subsequently, Violet attacks the dead body of Dorcas in church. Violet is called Violent due to her aggressive reaction. "The woman people called Violent now because she had tried to kill what lay in a coffin" (Morrison: 79). We believe that her violent reaction is open to dispute, as far as mental health and migration stress are concerned. This causative relationship between women, trauma and migration is central to our discussion of gender, migration and mental health.

2. Push-Pull Theory & Mental Health

Push-pull factors have been identified as key to migration. "Generally they consist of a compilation of economic, social, and political factors believed to force individuals to leave their native region or country and a similar list impelling them toward another." (Portes, 1987) Generally, *Jazz* is a reflection of the Great Migration. Due to the significant numbers of African-Americans who migrated, it is also known as Black Migration. During this period, from 1910 to 1970, millions of Southerners left rural areas and plantations to seek opportunities in the labour market of the industrialized areas. (Eichenlaub et al., 2010; Tolnay, 2003) Danish Bhugra believes that rural-urban migration is an outcome of economic factors (Bhugra, 2000). Whereas, Petersen identifies Jim Crow law and lynching as the major push factors of African-American migration (Petersen, 1958). In spite of this, Eichenlaub et al. highlight that the Great Migration was subject not only to the push factors of Southern life, but also to the pull factors of other states. (Eichenlaub et al., 2010)

In addition, Ritsner et al. elaborate that migration "is a major stressful life event that may increase mental health risks" (Ritsner et al., 2001). Based on the aforementioned theory and forthcoming textual evidence, we infer that *Jazz*'s migrant women, like Violet and Dorcas, are subject to migration stress factors and consequent mental health problems.

"Gender has been reported that to be strongly correlated with the emotional well-being and common mental health disorder" (Ritsner et al., 2001). Indeed, gender as a variable is key concept that plays a fundamental role in the outcome of all studies embracing migration and mental health. For instance, throughout the novel, Violet is called Violent because of her aggressive reactions to different confrontations. "Violent they call her now. No wonder" (Morrison: 75). In spite of this, Alice Manfred, Dorcas's guardian, wonders about "the hysteria, the violence" (Morrison: 76). In the next section, we elaborate these mental health problems with reference to theory.

Although there has been impressive and informative literary criticism of *Jazz*, (Craps & Buelens, 2008; Harris, Morrison, Barbara, & P, 2005; Abel, 2012; Hua, 2012; Matus, 1998; Middleton, 2000; Peach, 1998; Tally, 2007) no criticism exists which simultaneously covers the relationship between the migration process and mental health. To illustrate this gap in the knowledge, literary criticism has been mainly concerned with ethnic studies (Peach, 1998), the Black feminism (Collines, 2008; Hua, 2012; O'Reilly, 2004), the Black diaspora (Middleton, 2000; Wyman, 2009), the Black Migration narrative (Griffin, 1996), cultural and racial trauma (Jaffe Schreiber, 2010), historical trauma (Dobbs & Grewal, 1998), the migration nexus (Barnes, 2000), the Great Migration (Richardson Amos, 2005) and post-colonial criticism (Tally, 2007), vis-à-vis Toni Morrison's *Jazz*. As aforementioned, we aim to address the gap or mental health problems with reference to migration theories.

In *Jazz*, the female characters, such as Violet Trace, Dorcas and Alice Manfred, are migrant women who deal with the difficulties and stress factors of migration. As discussed earlier, migration is perceived as a stressful process that requires appropriate coping strategies. Stress can lead to mental disease; therefore, adopting appropriate coping strategies is vital to maintaining mental health. Migrants go through different stages of migration, including pre-migration, migration and post-migration (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Bhugra, 2004). Each stage has its own stress factors (Bhugra, 2004; Kirmayer et al., 2011; Vega et al., 1987).

These findings suggest that different stress factors are associated with different stages of migration, regardless of gender or ethnicity. Indeed, the female characters deal with considerable stresses in different stages such as before migration, during migration and after migration. In order to illustrate migration theories and stress factors, we will discuss these via a textual analysis of the novel.

3. Jazz: Pre and Post-migration Traumas, PTSD & Beyond

In this section, we analyze the novel based on the following outline for female characters, Violet and Dorcas. The first part deals with the pull theory of migration. The second part explains the pre-migration stresses and psychological factors for the main female characters in *Jazz*. Pre-migration stress factors correspond to the push theory of migration. The third part analyzes migration stress factors including, resettlement and employment in the receiving society.

Despite the aforementioned push factors, we believe that the Great Migration was mainly motivated by the pull factor of employment opportunities in the labour market. According to the push-pull theory of migration, (Kumpikaite & Zickute, 2012; Petersen, 1958) *Jazz* follows the rural-urban theory of migration. As discussed earlier, Bhugra believes that rural-urban migration is mainly for economic reasons (Bhugra, 2000). In the Great Migration, due to plantation, poverty, personal and racial issues, many decided to migrate from the rural South to the urban North. Textual evidence indicates that, like many Southerners, Joe and Violet Trace migrated, according to the pull theory of migration, including the urban myth, city attractions, easier jobs, better pay and living conditions (Kumpikaite & Zickute, 2012; Petersen, 1958; Tolnay, 2003), in industrialized and urban areas. Consequently, their life adhered to the pull theory of migration and its stress factors.

People living in the City and some who'd been there and come home with tales to make Baltimore weep. [...] The money to be earned for doing light work- standing in front of a door, carrying food on a tray, even cleaning stranger's shoes- got you in a day more money than any of them had earned in one harvest. [...] there were streets where colored people owned all the stores; all block of handsome colored men and women laughing all night and making money all day." (Morrison: 106)

To some extent, the rumours about migration to urban areas, easier jobs and better pay are correct. For instance, Violet, as an unlicensed hair dresser in New York, charges "twenty-five or fifty cents" (Morrison: 15). While *Jazz* mentions that the pay, for Black peasants, like Joe and Violet, during the extraordinary cotton crop harvest, was much less than this, "rumor was the pay was ten cents for young women, a quarter for men" (Morrison: 102); push-pull factors of migration and many psychological factors remain largely unaccounted for.

According to the push-pull theory of migration, the labour market and employment opportunities are considered major drives of migration (Kumpikaite & Zickute, 2012; Silove et al., 1997; Snel & Staring, 2001). On the other hand, different studies demonstrate that unemployment is a critical stress factor and a source of anxiety and stress (Aja, 2012; Bhugra, 2000; Burrows, 2004; Eichenlaub et al., 2010; Hornsey, 2008; Kumpikaite & Zickute, 2012; Major & O'Brien, 2005; O'Reilly, 2004; Petersen, 1958; Snel & Staring, 2001). For instance, Cohen and Wills report that financial problems and unemployment are high on stress factor checklist (Cohen & Wills, 1985). Specifically, these stresses are crucial and controversial among migrants, because additional factors, such as gender and ethnicity, can affect employment opportunities (Bhugra, 2000; Green, 2012; Mahler, 2003; Pedraza, 1991; Ritsner et al., 2001; Tolnay, 2003). After the funeral, Violet loses her source of income in the migrant society. For instance, "since that business at Dorcas's funeral, many of her regular customers have found reasons to do their own hair" (Morrison: 13). Despite being cheated in marriage, the loss of a job and income can be identified as a great source of stress and anxiety for Violet, as a migrant woman.

As discussed earlier, employment challenges seem to be one of the major stress factors of migration. Textual analysis indicates that it was the main cause of the East St. Louis riot. In *Jazz*, the East St. Louis riot led to the slaughter of Black Migrants, including Dorcas's parents. The riot and the conflicts with the receiving society can be classified as post-migration stress factors. *Jazz* states that the rioters were "whites terrified by the waves of Southern Negroes flooding the towns, searching for work and places to live" (Morrison: 57). Toni Morrison in a book entitled *They Take Our Jobs: And 20 Other Myths about Immigration* challenges these ideas that supposedly led to the riot and slaughter of Black migrants (Chomsky, 2007).

In *Jazz*, more specifically, the East St. Louis riot images, indicate that the receiving society was unwilling to accept or employ the waves of Black migrants arriving in the Great Migration. As a result, tensions and conflicts arose between migrants and the receiving society. In *Jazz*, Toni Morrison visualizes post-migration tensions in a perfect way. For instance, Dorcas's parents were slaughtered in this riot and she was forced to live with her aunt, Alice Manfred.

Alice, however, believed that she knew the truth better than everybody. Her brother-in-law was not a veteran, and he had been living in East St. Louis since before the war. Nor did he need the Whiteman's job - he owned a pool hall. As a matter of fact, he wasn't even in the riot; he had no weapons; confronted nobody on the street. He was pulled off a streetcar and stomped to death, and Alice's sister had just got the news and had gone back home to try and forget the color of his entrails when her house was torched and she burned crispy in its flame (Morrison: 57).

In this part, we examine the pull factors, such as the labour market and employment opportunities, in the Black Migration. It seems that some migrants, such as Joe and Violet Trace, were motivated and affected by the pull factors of migration. In the next part, we discuss the push theory of migration and its relation to mental health and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). "PTSD is more likely to be a reaction to experiencing or witnessing type I traumatic events which are single, catastrophic, unanticipated experiences" (Williams & Poijula, 2013). Indeed, the push factors of migration have a psychological impact on migrant women, like Dorcas.

Dorcas, Joe Trace's mistress, adheres to the push theory of migration. She left her hometown due to her parents' slaughter in the East St. Louis race riot. Therefore, her migration is regarded as forced migration. On the other hand, lack of preparation for migration (Bhugra & Jones, 2001; Bhugra, 2000) and uncertainty about migration outcomes are critical psychological factors (Kirmayer et al., 2011). In line with Dinesh Bhugra and Jones's argument, Chou et-al's findings (Chou, Wong, & Chow, 2011) also indicate that there is a significant positive correlation between preparation and migration. Dorcas, witness to the trauma, goes through unpredictable migration with uncertainly about its outcome. Thus, she is more vulnerable to migration and its mental health problems.

In addition, Dorcas falls victim to the trauma of her parents' death. Therefore, Dorcas is not only affected by push theory but also influenced by trauma. Another key factor in assessing migration and mental health is previous exposure to trauma (Bhugra, 2004; Chu et al., 2012). Krimayer et al. report that, among migrants, survivors of trauma, are more likely to develop mental health problems such as PTSD (Kirmayer et al., 2011).

In line with Krimayer et al.'s findings (Kirmayer et al., 2011), Das-Munshi et al. (Das-Munshi et al., 2012) also report that previous exposure to trauma is one of the key factors when assessing mental health problems among forced migrants. Indeed, those affected by the push factors of migration, like Dorcas, are more likely to have experienced trauma and run a larger risk of common mental health problems, such as PTSD.

Dorcas lost her parents and personal property in the East St. Louis race riot. She was forced to migrate and live with her guardian, Mrs Alice Manfred. Therefore, Dorcas suffers both migration stresses and PTSD. Her parents were burned alive in the race riot. "The fire would eat away at their legs, blacken them first with its hot breath and their round eyes, with the tiny lashes and the eyebrows she painted in so very carefully, would have watched themselves disappear"(Morrison: 61). Due to trauma and unpredictable forced migration, Dorcas was more vulnerable to mental health problems.

On the other hand, Violet also has previous exposure to trauma before migration. Here, we want to investigate and accentuate Violet's stress factors before, during and after migration. Violet's pre-migration factors include: an absent father, dispossessed of property, extreme poverty, mother's suicide, unhappy marriage, quite a few abortions and barrenness. When Violet was twelve years old, her father dispossessed the family of their property and abandoned them to extreme poverty, starvation and deprivation. Violet's mother commits suicide, by jumping in a well, because she cannot tolerate her children suffering from hunger. Violet never recovers from the trauma of her mother's suicide. *Jazz* implies that "...the children of suicides are hard to please" (Morrison: 4). Therefore, the two main female characters, Violet and Dorcas, have previous exposure to trauma. They were witness to the traumatic deaths of their mothers.

This article addresses certain instances of the novel in which female characters suffer from a variety of stress factors at different stages of migration. Difficulties arise when individuals do not apply appropriate coping strategies. (Krohne, 2002; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Roth & Cohen, 1986; Snel & Staring, 2001) Usually, the scale of the stress is too much to be handled by the female characters. On the other hand, inappropriate or maladaptive coping strategies not only do not solve the source of the problem but also intensify the stressors, in the long run. (Roth & Cohen, 1986)

Dorcas makes active conscious efforts to avoid the triggers of trauma. Gradually, the trauma turns to PTSD. The stress factors of pre-migration, migration and post-migration also add to this. She does not find any release from them. When Dorcas meets Joe in their love nest, she opens the old wound and reveals the trauma. Dorcas ends their relationship when different episodes of the trauma come to their end. Disclosing trauma could be more helpful and effective in the

presence of a therapist (Lanyado, 2004). But, Joe Trace is not a trauma therapist. He is also another African-American migrant with previous exposure to trauma. Therefore, when Dorcas leaves him, he decides to kill her.

Dorcas employs a maladaptive coping strategy for her migration stresses and the trauma of her parents' death. Because the only time that Dorcas discloses trauma is during the love affair; with Violet's husband, Joe Trace, this leads to a tragic end and a crime of passion. As a result, her trauma and PTSD are not resolved. When Violet finds out about the crime of passion, she too employs a maladaptive coping strategy by attacking Dorcas's body in church. Unfortunately, their maladaptive coping strategies cannot diminish the migration stresses or the trauma pain (Tafreshi Motlagh & Wan Yahya, 2014)

4. Conclusion

The present paper has examined the process of migration with reference to gender issues in *Jazz*, by Toni Morrison. As far as the push-pull theory of migration is concerned, the PTSD evident in the female characters can be associated with pre-migration stress factors and traumas. The textual evidence presented in this article shows that pre-migration stress factors and previous exposure to trauma are great sources of anxiety for the female characters. One the other hand, lack of preparation before migration and uncertainty about its outcome can cause distress and have negative effects on the mental health of female characters, like Violet and Dorcas. Dorcas's migration was unexpected. Her introduction to migration occurred suddenly and she had neither planned nor prepared. Trauma, migration stress factors and inappropriate coping strategies lead to a crime of passion in the African-American migrant community. Hence, it makes the migration process yet more stressful.

The findings elaborated in this paper accentuate the stress factors, at different stages of migration. Different stresses demand appropriate coping strategies. Inappropriate and maladaptive coping strategies lead to mental health problems. In *Jazz*, migrant women confront many sever stresses. As a matter of fact, the size of the problem and the stressors are not the only issue, there are also the inadequacies of solutions and the maladaptive coping strategies that aggravate their mental health problems.

Since the migrant women in *Jazz*, are haunted by their pasts and pre-migration stress factors, according to push-push theory, they are less successful in dealing with post-migration stress factors. In as much as unprocessed past traumas are carried into the present time, the migrant characters will remain blighted by their poor mental health.

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