

Literature and Culture Workshop II: Summary of Discussion

SASAME KIYOMI

TOKYO WOMAN'S CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

As the presenter of our session, Professor Sugiyama Naoko stated in her paper, religion may be a “risky” topic. It is indeed delicate and complicated to deal with the religious attitudes of African-American women writers who have a complex relationship with Christianity. In our session, however, we were brave enough to delve into this matter and exchanged our views on religious representation in the works by African-American women writers.

Professor Sugiyama discussed religious symbols and biblical images Toni Morrison uses in her works, focusing on *Paradise*. She not only analyzed Morrison's other works but also some literary works by other African-American writers and clearly brought out the uniqueness of Morrison's writing in terms of religious and gender issues.

Professor Udono Erika mostly endorsed Professor Sugiyama's argument and complemented some more examples from *The Bluest Eye* as evidence that “Christianity is the backbone of Toni Morrison's writing.” In her own precise analysis of *Paradise*, Professor Udono agreed with Professor Sugiyama but in some points she presented different views and raised some questions to which Professor Sugiyama later responded.

Following the presentations of Professor Sugiyama and Professor Udono, Professor Hortense J. Spillers made a brief comment on both of their papers and highly valued them. Especially she maintained Professor Sugiyama's argument on spirituality in African-American women writers and said that it was accurate to call their religious posture in their work spiritual, or in some cases, even mystical. Then, she also analyzed Toni Cade Bambara's *Salt Eaters* as an example of stories of women who attempt to heal themselves through various spiritual practices. She also pointed out the stylistic importance of Toni Cade Bambara's works. Particularly she called our attention to the fact that Toni Cade Bambara captured the sound of colloquial black voices and aptly presented them in her novel and short stories. Another impressive point Professor Spillers made was that she called Baby Suggs' sermon in the clearing in *Beloved* “almost a pagan ceremony.”

Before a free discussion Professor Sugiyama responded to the questions posed by Professor Udono. First, Professor Sugiyama made some terminology clear, such as “Christian tradition” or “American Christianity.” She explained that she

included both white and African-American when she used these terms. Probably the biggest difference between Professor Sugiyama and Professor Uono is in their interpretation of the ending of *Paradise*. In response to Professor Uono's statement that "the ending of the novel was dominated by hopelessness," Professor Sugiyama rather paid attention to "a small dead radio" which "plays the quiet surf" in the last page and emphasized the importance of radio or radio music in black culture.

The following is the summary of discussion which was provoked by these stimulating presentations.

1. Such citations by Professor Sugiyama as Sojourner Truth's, Shug's and Baby Suggs' speeches seem to be private or individual. What is the relationship between the personal and collective? Professor Sugiyama commented that in African-American tradition the personal testimony is read as collective, a kind of evidence of religious belief as we can see in old spirituals.

2. The topic of African-American feminist theology was repeatedly raised. With regard to this topic, Professor Sugiyama explained in comparison between Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Walker endorses a kind of pantheism and has Emerson-like theology—"God is everywhere." On the other hand, Morrison uses biblical words and images to give you strength and will to survive.

3. A question about Toni Morrison's religious background was asked. Morrison is Catholic, or at least at one point in her interview she says so.

4. A question about a syncretism of various worships and religions was posed, such as whether it was unique to Toni Morrison. Professor Sugiyama answered as follows: The way she puts it is unique and everything she writes is unique. Of course, feminist-conscious women writers, whether they are black, white or Asian, often draw on non-Christian tradition, New Age spiritualism. In Morrison's novels, supernatural, pagan or surrealistic things happen just as a matter of fact. It is unique to her but at the same time it is affected by counter-culture in the 1960s.

5. The last two questions can be summarized as one that asks the significance and comparative methodology of reading African-American women writers or ethnic writers as a Japanese woman. Professor Sugiyama confessed that she read Toni Morrison simply because she loved Morrison although English was not even her own language and she was not Christian. She did not have any particular frame for ethnic writers or methodology but she was hoping to create her own way and a meaningful way of reading literature by people from different cultures. For all the participants from abroad and Japan who are scholars of "Literature and Culture" this question must be a challenge, and we must create our own way of reading as Professor Sugiyama suggests.

In this session rather big issues were discussed among the participants. Since Professor Sugiyama and Professor Uono presented detailed analyses of literary works by African-American women writers (Toni Morrison's *Paradise* in

particular) and Professor Spillers also complemented some literary characteristics of those writers, it was regrettable that we did not have enough time to go into detail and discuss this splendid novel, *Paradise*, outside the context of religious representation.