

Denial of space in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison gains legendary fame as an American novelist, non-fiction writer, essayist, playwright, librettist, children's literary writer, professor, editor, copywriter, social and literary critic doing. Morrison shows the tension between black and white, especially the trauma of American black life. After winning the Nobel Prize, Morrison's *Paradise*, expresses complex themes and her hopes for reconciliation between black and white people. Race relations and minority oppression are deeply ingrained in American history, as reflected in the novel. This paper will examine the denial of space with themes of racism and oppression in the context of Ruby's death and Delia's fate from a historical standpoint in search of Morrison's ideal *Paradise*, which is inclusive and accessible to all.

Keywords: Space, human predicament, exploitation, suppression, colour discrimination

Introduction:

Morrison has nine novels to her credit. Her novels delineate the issues like racism, sexism and classism. In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison shows how black women fall victims to the American ideals of beauty that bring curse for them. Following the advice Shirley Chisholm gave in the 1960s on the need to speak truthfully and courageously about their plight as women, Morrison asserts "I write for black women. We are not addressing the men, as some white female writers do. We are not attacking each other, as both black and white men do. Black women writers look at things in an unforgiving, loving way. They are writing to repossess, rename, renown. (qtd. McKay 46)

About the sexism among blacks Alice Walker writes: "Maybe I shouldn't say this, because I don't know it, it's just a feeling I have... but few black men seem to feel secure enough as men that they can make women feel like women." (151-152) Black woman suffers not only because of her race but also because of her gender. "Just as white people have created and maintained a racist culture, so have men created and maintained a sexist culture." (Hernton 10)

As the tragedy of African American women comes from racial segregation as a result of slavery, so also stems from gender conflict. They had to live with the tortures of gender discrimination perpetrated by not only white men but also men of their own race. Toni Morrison, particularly in her novels, *Sula* and *Paradise*, seems to focus on gender discriminations. Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* (1997) was generally warmly received by critics who found that the novel lived up to Morrison's previous works. The backdrop of the story is the settling of former slaves in the western United States in the nineteenth century. Set primarily in an all-black town in the Southwest during and immediately after the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, it explores the relationships among darker and lighter skinned black people, the efforts of a group to create a sanctuary from discrimination and prejudice, and the complicated ways in which history returns to haunt those who try to make themselves immune from history and racism. A group of African American men bring their wives

and children to Oklahoma and found the town of Haven, where the inhabitants are haunted throughout the twentieth century by a past of bondage and the rejection they suffer by light-skinned members of their own race. The novel also tackles the issues of female rebellion against a patriarchal society and the search for Paradise – some sort of happiness and security – in a less than perfect world. It also explores the relationships among darker and lighter skinned black people, the efforts of a group to create a sanctuary from discrimination and prejudice, and the complicated ways in which history returns to haunt those who try to make themselves immune from history and racism.

Paradise as the title indicates, interrogates the concept of Utopian societies, playing race and gender against each other in an exploration of the constitution of oppression. Morrison bases her novels on a group of former slaves who establish a utopian community in the West. The novel focuses, respectively, on the three primary socio-cultural movements or moments in African American U.S. history: slavery/Reconstruction, the Jazz Age/Great Migration, and the Civil Rights/Black Power movement. It is a story of the tension between the men of Ruby, Oklahoma, an all-black town and a group of women who lived in a former Convent seventeen miles away. Shruti Das calls the novel as a “story where African American women of various ages and various backgrounds find freedom and happiness in isolation from a racial and sexually oppressive society in a Convent in Oklahoma . . . But unfortunately their paradise is short-lived. The dominant patriarchal society of Ruby does not allow for a ‘Herland’ to exist.”(169)

Paradise begins with the scene in which the nine men murdered the women one after another. “They shoot the white girl first” (3) The girl who was killed first is Pallas, she was the only white woman. She was shot by Steward in the hall on the first floor. Mavis, Gigi and Seneca were preparing breakfast when they heard the shooting and they tried to escape. Consolata was still sleeping in the cellar. Readers, however, have to identify the baby sleeping by Consolata, because there are two babies in the hallucination in the convent. Nevertheless it is not assured if they are Pallas’s baby or Arnette’s baby who she has been looking for, for there is a possibility that Arnette’s baby is still alive in the convent.

“Whose baby was in there? That crib is new.”

“I don’t know, but it sure wasn’t Arnette’s.”

He said it again, “Right,” with the same level of doubt.” (304)

It has not made clear whether the first child of Arnette died in the convent. However positive proof is denied by this conversation. It’s a question whether the children living in the convent were real or just hallucinations. Connie finally noticed that something had happened in the convent when Mavis, Gigi and Seneca were escaping into the garden and she found Pallas lying on the hall. When Connie was about to use “stepping-in” on her, she saw the men shooting at the women running away into the garden. When Connie tried to stop the shooting, she was killed by Steward. The moment she saw Deek, she said, “You’re back,” (289) These words indicate that she has been living as not a nun but as a woman. Her feeling is equal to the feeling of Mary Magna when she accepted Consolata who had been abandoned by Deek and she said, “At last” (240). They were living as not as sorcerers, but just women who were trying to get happiness and love. In the end, the rest of the convent women, Mavis, Gigi and Seneca were shot by the men. Especially the end of Connie summons up the figure of a miserable woman just like the pitiful death of Charlotte Temple because of her unrequited love. Their bodies, however, disappeared before Roger Best could pick them up. Morrison left unidentified the races of the Convent

women because, to her knowing about a person's race is the least amount of information an individual has when confronting another.

The primary setting of *Paradise* is the town, Ruby (population of 360 in 1976) which is an all-Black town in Oklahoma with no need for a jail, bus stop, café, or gas station. The drugstore looks like a regular house and, on either end of the town, the pavement stops just past the last of Ruby's buildings. Ruby is a closed community, suspicious of "outsiders". Ruby was founded in 1951 by the "fifteen families": Deacon and Steward Morgan, William Cato, Ace Flood, Aaron Poole, Nathan and Moss DuPres, Arnold Fleetwood, Ossie Beauchamp, Harper and Menus Jury, Sergeant Person, John Seawright, Edward Sands, and Roger Best, the descendants of the "nine families" (Blackhorse, Morgan, Poole, Fleetwood, Beauchamp, Cato, Flood, and two DuPres) who had established the all-Black town of Haven, Oklahoma, in 1890.

Except for a few people, all of the original citizens of Ruby are coal black, a shade designated "8-rock" by Patricia Best Cato, the unofficial town historian. The original nine families of Haven were also "8-rock," and it was their dark skin color that not only prevented them from finding jobs in the South after the overthrow of Reconstruction governments but also caused them to be rejected by the all-Black but light-skinned town of Fairly, Oklahoma, as an act of 'Disallowing'. Consequently, a reverse hierarchy of skin color—from dark to light—governs within the city limits. The Convent women, unhampered by patriarchal convention, not bound by the laws and traditions of Ruby, are the ultimate outsiders, and thus a threat to the community the men have worked their entire adult lives to build. These women presumably try to appear as holy women, but in reality do not to the men. The nine of Ruby's men believe them anything and gather at the Oven to lay their plans: Sergeant Person, looking to control more of the Convent land he now has to lease; Arnold and Jeff Fleetwood, wanting someone to blame for the sick Fleetwood children and Arnette's never-seen baby; Wisdom Poole, hating the women for their connection with Billie Delia, who was loved by two Poole brothers; Harper and Menus Jury, needing to eliminate the witnesses to Menus's drying out; K.D. (Coffee) Smith, taking revenge on the women who had thrown him out; and, leading the pack, Deek and Steward Morgan, one looking for explanation and absolution from his guilt, and the other not needing either. The slaughter at the Convent is both the end of this covenant and the beginning of a new one. Despite its geographic and moral separation from the patriarchal Ruby, the lives of the convent women are deeply intertwined, and it is their relationship that becomes the focus of the novel. The novel closes with an image of Consolata, sitting at the ocean's edge with her head in Piedade's lap.

The Collapse of *Paradise* is caused by prejudices. When the convent women had their heads shaved as if they were striving to compensate for their formerly untidy appearance and behavior, the 8-rock men gradually were becoming increasingly scared of their behavior and strength. The men regard these women as 'witches'. All good deeds which the convent women did for the people of Ruby were regarded as evil deeds which would bring about the collapse of Ruby. For instance, in the case of Deek, when Connie used 'stepping in' on his son to save him, Deek was scared that she was practicing witchcraft. "Just as Lone steps in to a dying person's body and soul, so Connie teaches the four women to step into each other's." (8)

Nevertheless, there is the possibility that 'stepping-in' in itself enters the imaginary realm which the men of the 8-rock created, because they were gradually becoming increasingly afraid of people who practiced witchcraft such as Connie did. In fact, she taught the escaped women of the convent not 'stepping in' but how to love

or allow themselves to be used as she had been taught by Mary Magna. These are prejudices against women which transform the personalities of these men into brutes. Finally, nine men gathered around the Oven to make a plan to butcher the convent women and finally that plan was carried out.

There are a lot of reasons why the men regard the women as witches and thus they feel they have the right to kill them. For example, kissing each other in the Cadillac at the wedding of K.D. and concerning Arnette, helping to kill Arnette's baby, the unusual healing practices including Connie's "stepping-in", Billie Delia's act of pushing her mother down the stairs, the appearance of buzzards, the death of Soane's sons and her miscarriages, Dovey's sterility, their having no religion and the absence of men and so on. Their prejudices against women being lesbian, being untidy, being overly cosmopolitan and independent make the men blame their family tragedies on them.

Reverend Misner rages at Reverend Pulliam and the 8-rock men who try to distort the word of God. He preaches to them having the rage of Augustinus against heretics by reading the passage out. His rage is the same as the feelings of the angel in the passage. The angel is warning and scolding those who worship not God but the messenger in the passage. One should not forget one's gratitude to God. Reverend Pulliam and the 8-rock men try to distort and transform the words of the "walking man" into an egotistical belief for their own convenience, although it is equivalent to heresy. If the 8-rock men had obeyed his warning, the tragic incident of the Convent women would not have happened. "They think they have out-foxed the whitemen when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause." (306) This is part of the speech which Reverend Misner gave at the funeral for Save-Marie. It is exactly these types of expressions of rage which Morrison insists on the reader of *Paradise* acknowledging and understanding. Through the terrible mistakes of the 8-rock, she proves that revenge spurred by hatred will bring about new tragedies and that hatred and egoism will distort a splendid faith in justice. In the chapter on Save-Marie, the reader witnesses the illusion that the convent women appear as if the tragic incident did not happen. Gigi meets her father, the condemned criminal, Manly Gibson and she innocently talks with him. Pallas appears in the garden nearby her mother, Divine Truelove although she never notices her mother as if she had overcome the suffering she had received at the hands of her mother and she looks so happy holding her baby. Mavis meets her daughter, Sal who she used to be scared of, however she talks with her as her mother without being scared of her. Seneca meets her mother, Jean, but she does not recognize who the woman is and the self-inflicted knife cuts on her wrist are gone. The Piedade which Connie sings is no longer a song for Deek like the song of Charlotte Temple but it is for herself to heal herself like merciful spirit of Pieta. One is not able to solve whether really the convent women appear? The reader may be forced to think the women were saved by "stepping-in" or that they had already died and are floating on as ghosts. Death is only safe place for women as for Margaret Garner and her daughter. The Convent women overcome their tragedy by transcending death. Through their drifting around in this world, Morrison makes her readers afraid of repeating the same tragedies.

Conclusion:

To conclude, *Paradise* provides a strong critique of gender-based violence. It explores a black patriarchal culture in which female voices are suppressed. Their words are silence, forgiveness, and forgiveness. Morrison reveals the frustration of an

African-American man who loaded a shotgun and attempted to slaughter the family of a woman who was her former lover. The monastery threatens Ruby's basic power structure and challenges her rule. Therefore, this kind of concept of freedom is devoted to clearing paradise before it pollutes its hegemony. Morrison emphasizes women's solidarity and unity as a solution to sexism.

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