

Racial Identity and Feminine Vulnerability: Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract: This paper discusses the racial identity and feminine vulnerability in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The work focuses on the corrupted effects of patriarchal hegemony and racial hierarchy on black women's life, which lead to their suffering and finally death. Morrison, in her novel, sermonizes on the dangers of a violent manhood that depends on the demonization of women and the exclusion of difference for validation. Wrath and violence are steady motifs throughout *Paradise*, and Morrison also makes the violence of hunting an integral part of patriarchs' manhood. She exposes the dangers of a manhood that relies on violence and oppression.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, Feminine Vulnerability, African American Culture, Racial and Gender Discrimination

"*Paradise* returns us to the troubled relation between men and women, particularly when African-American men's sense of identity parallels that of the patriarchal structures of middle-class white culture." (Duvall 142)

"*Paradise* ... draws that black presence forward from the margins of imagination to the center of American literature and history." (Storace 64)

The final novel of Toni Morrison's Trilogy, *Paradise*, her seventh novel, was published in 1998 (the first of the trilogy, *Beloved* in 1987 and the second *Jazz* in 1992). In *Paradise*, Morrison seems to focus on the notion of patriarchy, part of the gender discrimination. The narrative of the novel is founded on sexism, false righteousness, false superiority and racial hatred. *Paradise* is primarily concerned with two contiguous communities: the town of Ruby and a decaying mansion seventeen miles north known as the Convent. Ruby is an exclusively all-black town in Oklahoma. The Convent is a kind of informal refuge for damaged women who have drifted there by a series of fortuities and who have an intimate, if tense, relationship with the town-dwellers. The women, outcasts from their families and oppressed by the sexist and racist social tensions of the early seventies, take refuge there under the protection of green-eyed, though "certainly not white," older woman, Consolata. The Convent women exist in opposition to and on the margins of the main community, and the citizens of Ruby to perceive themselves as morally pure in contrast to these outsiders. Much of the threatening difference of the Convent women is tied to their autonomy and sexuality. The women of *Paradise* test the limits of racial and gender representations. As Carole Boyce Davies writes, "Migrations of the Black female subject pursue the path of movement outside the terms of the dominant discourses" (37).

The men of Ruby impose a strict moral code that effectively controls the townswomen's sexuality, not only by compelling early marriage within the community, but also by making subjects such as gay and lesbian sexuality, abortion and taboo. Women are supervised before marriage by their families and by the community to diffuse or eliminate any evidence of aberrant behavior such as the application of any cosmetics. "The women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlots perfume" (*Paradise* 143). Neither was it perceived as acceptable for them to wear lipstick or possibly any other makeup. The pride and protectiveness the men of Ruby profess to feel toward their wives and daughters, becomes their rationale for relegating the women of Ruby to a purely domestic role, affording them no voice in their town's political or economic matters. The men of Ruby fret about women's sexuality because they want to keep the town racially "pure." These men want to keep their town exclusively black and exclude any lighter skinned people as revenge toward all the white and lighter skinned folks who excluded and abused them and their ancestors because of their darker skin. By labeling those of lighter hue the "impure," they chose to see themselves as the "pure," those who showed no visible evidence of racial tampering (*Paradise* 217). Determined to maintain the purity of their line, they quietly encouraged intermarriage among the original nine-founding families. In that case, Pat reasons, "... everything that worries them must come from women" (217). According to the submerged logic of Ruby's men, since women bear the children, women bear the responsibility for maintaining the "purity" of the race, by coupling with and thus bearing dark-skinned children. The Convent is strongly associated with nature. The women support themselves through gardening and selling their wares and even the citizens of Ruby admit that Convent peppers are the spiciest. People from the neighboring town come to buy Consolata's foodstuffs. Kokahvah Zauditue-Selassie, DA states, "Reconnections with nature allow the women to shift identity through space and time in the physical world to the mental world or ideational space and ultimately to the pneumatic or spiritual world" (54). Discussing these "mutually permeable" and interpenetrable ontological spaces, Nkiru Nzegwu asserts that these spheres constantly shift and change and permit a person to access these spirit spaces in the same way as one does objects in the physical world (Nzegwu 172).

The humiliation which the 8-rock men suffered due to the disallowing is one factor which causes them have an extreme pride in their patriarchy. They strive to dominate the women of their town as if compensating for the humiliation they suffered at the hands of the light-skinned black people and white people, because they hope to build a cozy place by standing over something. The men of Ruby pride themselves on Ruby's independence from whites and the rest of the world, and its culturally conservative values, which include the subtle subordination of women. The Convent and the lifestyle of its women threaten the men of Ruby because the women have "no male mission to control them" (*Paradise* 233), they have far more power than do the women of Ruby; their sexual powers also frighten these men. Perceived as whores, they threaten the

racial purity of Ruby. However, it is in the Convent women the men of Ruby find a true threat and scapegoat because of their absolute autonomy from men. Linda Krumholz posits that

the Convent ... exhibits the imprint of the 'master's voice' and the racist and violent history of the United States. An embezzler's house shaped like a bullet, the Convent's first incarnation represents the brutality and paranoia as well as the economic and sexual domination that characterized the European conquest of the Americas (Krumholz 23).

One of things reinforces the patriarchy is the existence of an Oven. When Haven was under construction, the building of the Oven is the first thing which the men of the town do. The Oven is the symbol of a pride for the 8-rock men because it means that the women of the town never have to cook in kitchens of white people. As in Haven, the Oven had a social function; however, in Ruby, it becomes a holy conference place for the men alone which left no room for the women to participate. In fact, the men occupy the Oven which had been the only comfortable place for women; it means that the men were determined to impose patriarchy on the women. All of the women of the Convent are dealing with past traumas of abandonment and threats of violence, but they find healing through Consolata's maternal nurturance and ministering. Consolata exemplifies a non-conforming "Pagan" gender, not simply "bi" but something perhaps beyond an easily "numbered" gender, something unspeakable and therefore threatening to the community of men controlling Ruby. She opens the Convent to the various women who arrive and requires nothing from them in return. The Convent in its openness to any in need becomes a haven for the women who arrive and also for those in Ruby who are in trouble. Consolata gives them her time, care and the Convent's resources and they willingly receive it. "This sweet, unthreatening old lady who seemed to love each one of them best; who never criticized, who shared everything but needed little or no care; required no emotional investment; who listened; who locked no doors and accepted each as she was" (*Paradise* 262).

When Deacon rejects Consolata, she is able to remove herself from all masculine authority. She removes her love from the masculine realm and recenters it in a more female-centered religion, paganism, becoming a "new and revised Reverend Mother" (*Paradise* 265), with an emphasis on *mother*. She promises the women, "I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). Her feminine paganist beliefs are a direct challenge to masculine authority. Thus, as the women arrive and are welcomed in by Connie, they in turn become those who welcome any others who arrive. Although still somewhat self-focused, haunted by their pasts and engaging in a variety of secret vices, they are welcoming to any and all other women who enter and to any Rubyite who arrives in need of aid. They mother the young women who arrive at the Convent, whose own mothers have failed them. Their lives, therefore, mirror Connie's life.

Each of these women has experienced some violence or threat of violence, and a break with her family that has left her motherless. Mavis, the first to arrive, has run away from her abusive husband to her mother's, only to leave her mother's when she overheard her calling Mavis's

husband to come get her. Mavis is also a failed mother who mistakenly kills her babies in an attempt to please and avoid being beaten by her male lover. Grace (Gigi), the next to appear, refers to her granddaddy and her father, the latter of whom is in prison, but never mentions a mother. She embodies and expresses female sexual desire and desirability. She had been looking for the rock where “a man and a woman fucking forever” (*Paradise* 63). When Connie told her, “Go, like a good girl. Cover yourself we love you just the same” (76), it might have melted her solitude. Seneca was abandoned at the age of five by a girl she thought was her sister, but who it seems likely was her young unwed mother. Abused in a string of foster homes, she mutilates herself to express her “anxiety of belonging.” When she met Connie she was told, “Seneca? Seneca? Come on, baby. We’re waiting for you” (138) and her loneliness disappeared as if she were consoled by her own mother. Morrison talking about the strength of language said, “its function is like a preacher’s: to make you stand up out of your seat, make you lose yourself and hear yourself.” (LeClair 23). She believes that the power of language can change a person’s mind and influence one’s fate for life. Pallas, the last to arrive, ran away from her father with her boyfriend to see her mother in Mexico, and ran away again when she discovered her mother and boyfriend having an affair. J. Brooks Bouson describes these women as “culturally powerful and shaming images” (206). These women are on the road, and their racial identities are also mobile, unfixed and unresolvable.

The women, Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Pallas agree to stay with Consolata and learn about “what they are hungry for” (*Paradise* 262). Consolata gradually takes them through the healing process of speaking, sharing and shouting in the Clearing space they all work to create in the basement of the Convent. Using the space adjacent to the room which had been Connie’s place of reclusion, Consolata creates a true haven for their spirits and their bodies. The women at the Convent learn to heal themselves through confronting and sharing stories of their traumatic pasts, using narration as the means of reconnecting to others and the natural world. The Convent women learn to empower themselves without needing to adhere strictly to male patriarchal control or a rigid belief system predicted on division and hierarchy. Coffee Smith (K.D.), in the beginning, regrets what he did to Arnette Fleetwood, but after the affair, K.D.’s behavior is finally beyond what his uncles, the Morgans, can control. For the young men, the words of the Oven that said “Beware the Furrow of His Brow” (*Paradise* 86) have been changed into “Be the Furrow of His Brow” (87). Although Arnette was pregnant with his baby, gradually she has notices that K.D. never loved her through his reactions and that he loves Grace. What made things even worse is that the relationships between the Fleetwoods and the Morgans became more and more hostile. Arnette begins to believe that the baby will never be accepted in Ruby and so she tries to kill the baby by beating her stomach when she is about to give birth to the baby in the Convent; a few days later, the baby finally dies. Even if she married K.D, she never satisfies her desires for a deep attachment to him and her baby. Patricia, a teacher in Ruby, is the daughter of Roger Best who got married with a woman

with light skin like the white people. Since then, the people of the 8-rock are beginning to avoid him. Patricia strives to be accepted in Ruby by adopting herself to life there and living under the patriarchy. Her suffering is directly related to her father, marrying an outsider. When she throws an iron at her daughter's face it is in part due to fear of isolation coming from her daughter's behavior and also from rage over such isolation. In a Morrison interview about Patricia she stated, "She's the daughter of someone whom she felt they despised, so she has an ax to grind. So she's reevaluating everything, and has come to learn some terrible things, she thinks, about this town" (Jaffrey 5). Because Consolata's community of women rejects the beliefs of Ruby's male citizens; they break the codes the men of Ruby have created, by living in a mixed-race community of single women and embracing their sexual autonomy, the men can only view them as either a threat to their way of life or a loss of power and attempt to drive them away. Ruby's men are convinced that making a space for female authority must necessarily threaten to destroy masculine authority and the community built upon it. Because the women of the Convent, the "bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" refuse to submit to masculine authority and play out their God-given roles as good, obedient wives, "they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman" (*Paradise* 8); therefore, the men of Ruby take arms and slaughter the innocent. Creating an argument against the women with the insubstantial evidence of rumors, hearsay and myth the men readily convince themselves that Ruby was a "peaceable kingdom" before the arrival of those women "drawing folks out there like flies to shit" (*Paradise* 276). They develop a cause to attack defenseless women. When the men of Ruby set out to destroy the women of the Convent, it is done with a sense of moral imperative, and united by a fear and loathing of women outside the social norm, which characterizes all witch-hunts.

A group of nine upright, god-fearing black men reach a position where they could gun down in cold blood a group of defenseless damaged women *because they were women*. Missy Dehn Kubitschek states, "*Paradise* confronts one of African-American culture's most sacred cows, the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved of white oppression" (179). Although Deek Morgan remains silent during the others' harangues, he has one motive for action against the Convent: the erasure of "his personal shame" and of "the kind of woman he believed was its source" (*Paradise* 279). Solidifying their fury into destructive bullets of violence the men converge on the unsuspecting women of the Convent and Steward blasts his weapon into "a door that has never been locked" (285). "They shoot the white girl first" (*Paradise* 3). Mavis' fatal wounding energizes the others in their hunt for innocent female victims. Consolata sees the men's slaughter of Grace, Seneca and Pallas. When Deek looks at her, his narrative rationales all melt away. But as he "lifts his hand to halt his brother's ... he discovers who, between them, is the stronger man. The bullet enters her forehead" (289).

Opening line of the novel—they shoot the white girl first—does not emphasize the word "white"—but on "first." This suggests that while the men do indeed distinguish the women by color, it is not color which is

their true animus—since “first” implies that they are going on to shoot other women who are not white. Rather, it is that they are all *women*. Morrison has said about this line: “I did that on purpose... I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of those girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter” (Gray 1998). The women's bodies, however, disappeared before Roger Best could pick them up. “She left unidentified the races of the Convent women because “knowing about a person's race is the least amount of information an individual has when confronting another ... In leaving open the question of the Convent women's deaths, Morrison again wants to require readers' full engagement” stated reviewer (Page 2). Lone, the old midwife and wise woman, visits regularly, and it is she, on the night before the fatal events of July 1976, who goes there to warn the women of the Ruby men's plot. Lone's reflections establish the point:

It was women who walked this road. Only women. Never men... Back and front, back and forth: crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost. Out here ... women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the pedestrians... But the men never walked the road; they drove it, although sometimes their destination was the same as the women's. (*Paradise* 270)

After the attacking, Deek Morgan was full of remorse for he had done and he visited not Reverend Pulliam, but Reverend Misner to confess. “He wore his hat, business suit, vest and a clean white hose. No shoes. No socks” (*Paradise* 300). This is a quotation from the scene in *Paradise*, when Deek is about to visit Reverend Misner. His appearance is extremely like the figure of the “walking man”. In other words, he understood and acknowledged the original, true meaning of the pride and justice that the “walking man” had left and he returned to where he should have been. It means that the failure of patriarchy in Ruby and the collapse of the town is caused by hatred and prejudices against people from outside of the town and women. In fact, the novel tells us that the ruling man of Ruby have ironically imitated the white world. They have “invented and imposed abstract ideas about class, race, criminality and human deficiency on real people ... as a means to deny their human and civil rights and ... to justify killing them” (O'Rourke 8).

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