

A Paradise for Men or Women? The Paradox of Power in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

UN PARADIS POUR LES HOMMES OU LES FEMMES? LE PARADOXE DE PUISSANCE DANS LE *PARADIS* DE TONI MORRISON

Farid Parvaneh¹

Abstract: Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is a novel of women massacre, and the reader is informed from the very beginning that one white woman is murdered by a group of men. The immediate concept formed in the mind of the reader is a patriarchal system that is working in the novel. It seems that the black men, imitating the white system of domination, rule over the black women and thus making life a "hell out of heaven." However, this study examines how black women in *Paradise* struggle to revert the hellish situation of their lives, and to study the moments of their consciousness that help them to resist.

Key words: Patriarchal; White Ideology; Black Women Subjects; Subaltern

Résumé Le "Paradis" de Toni Morrison est un roman sur le massacre des femmes, et le lecteur est informé dès le début qu'une femme blanche est assassinée par un groupe d'hommes. Le concept immédiatement formé dans l'esprit du lecteur est un système patriarcal qui fonctionne dans le roman. Il semble que les hommes noirs, en imitant le système de domination des blancs, dominent sur les femmes noires et rendant ainsi de la vie un "enfer hors du paradis". Toutefois, cette étude examine la façon dont les femmes noires dans le *Paradis* luttent pour renverser la situation infernale de leur vie, et étudier les moments de leur conscience qui les aident à résister.

Mots clés: Patriarchal; Idéologie des Blancs; Sujets de Femmes noires; Subalterne

DOI: 10.3968/j.css.1923669720110703.003

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novels are widely known as stories of Afro-American people who were once brought as slaves to the United States. She spans her stories from 1855 (*Beloved*) to 1976 (*Jazz*). North and South are her main locations. Morrison, through time and place, endeavors to record the lives of the ex-slaves who fight for their survival in racial, colonial, and patriarchal conditions that are not only created by the white but also in some cases generated by the black men. Morrison's characters, especially females, seek to represent themselves as unique and separate subjects without denying themselves to be black. To be more specific, black female subjects struggle to prove their subjectivities including their bodies in a socio-geographical environment. This struggle for freedom as a distinct lived experience is much more tangible and visible to *Paradise*'s readers.

WHAT IS IN PARADISE?

Paradise opens with a mass murder in the Convent, which nine armed Ruby men invade to assail the five women taking shelter there. But the reader cannot find out the number of the Convent women until the "Lone" section, almost the end of the book, where the slaughter is depicted again yet with a more detailed account. The reader will find by then, if she shall remember, the arithmetic mistake in the second paragraph of the opening "Ruby" section: "[the gunmen] are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill". More nonsensically, the following sentence reads,

¹ Assistant Professor, Department of English Language and Literature, Qom Branch, Islamic Azad University, Qom, Iran.

E-mail: faridparvaneh@gmail.com

*Received 10 April 2011; accepted 30 May 2011

“they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses” to attack the five women! What do “a palm leaf cross...Mace and sunglasses” have to do with the men’s hunting mission? There are even two of the men “wearing ties” (*Paradise* 3) in the time of killing! It looks more like they are preparing for an exorcism! The seemingly omniscient narrator even depicts the total nine of the Ruby posse, for eighteen pages (i.e. the full length of the first section), in a way as if they thought and acted as one, as if God built them in one uniform, if not godly. The eccentricity or contradiction thus keeps emission from the narrative on and off as the story develops. Together with supernatural episodes such as revised biblical stories, apparition emerging in the sky or in one’s garden, “forever-fucking” lovers in the desert, women’s magic disappearance after the slaughter, etc., the narrative wavers between a self-righteous, “God-at-their-side” (18) voice and one which is finer, tentative or ambiguous. Sometimes it seems to waver between an apparently vested, immovable history and an oral, mythical story-telling.

As the literary critic Ron David comments in “Paradise: Toni Morrison Explained: a Reader’s Road Map to the Novels”, “*Paradise* is a myth about the relationship between myth and truth—or on a less lofty level, about the relationship between storytelling and reality. It is a myth about how myths are formed, changed, and deformed” (174). Indeed, *Paradise* itself is one of the appealing mythical concepts that humans construct, deconstruct and reconstruct through all ages. This concept is applicable to the paradise made in the novel as well. As Morrison remarks, “We all want safety and love and freedom.... We want a place where we can *be*. It’s just most of the paradigms are exclusionary, are defined by their borders and by those who are not there” (qtd. in Italie).

Morrison’s interest for and imagination for writing *Paradise*, like *Beloved* and *Jazz*, was a historically grounded piece of information prior to the founding of Ruby, where a group of ex-slaves had long travelled. They first had moved from Mississippi to Louisiana, and finally to Oklahoma. There, they had expected to turn their experience out of slavery into a life of safety and freedom. Before setting Ruby, however, they had intended to join other ex-slaves in their newly established towns and lives. But they had been rejected, humiliated, and disillusioned. Turned down everywhere, the group of ex-slaves had finally decided to found a town of their own, which they had named “Haven.” It is in this town that they recall their aching journey. The reader reads in *Paradise*:

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built. (13)

As seen here, the ex-slaves encountered a white/black domination system at the very time of their arrival. The white system of domination is first experienced by the black men and the constant refusals by this system made them “stiffer, prouder with each misfortune.” The feelings of shame that had accompanied the rejections and refusals by the white system, stimulated *anger* on the one hand and on the other it created *pride*. These two forms of feelings, especially anger which is regarded as a manly feeling, was transmitted to the younger generations and thus created a sense of *violence* which is evident from the very beginning of the novel. However, this violence is not used against the white male system. The first sentence reads “They shoot the white girl first.” This first sentence ignites violence that Morrison expects the reader to touch. She invites the reader to a ceaseless active “reconstruction of a world.”

Paradise is a novel of interwoven representations. It is about black men and women who are essentially looking for *pride* in their community, and during this search, they feel shame and disappointment. However, the portraits are of striving and conflict. The apparently omniscient narrator of *Paradise* takes the reader into the liminal space between life and death. Thus both the lived experience of the black characters and their deaths are of great concern in the novel to portray the lives and existences of the black. Morrison as an ethnic writer feels the need to write about racial oppression. She also insists on the necessity to live with the memory, not only of the living, but of the dead as well. The men in *Paradise* have broken the injunctions for not killing women. Hence, the first sentence generates the violent atmosphere against women, both alive and dead. Ruby, once a catholic home for rebellious girls, has become now an unofficial haven for these wayward women. This haven is safe before men’s decision to murder them: “Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary, they are like panicked does leaping toward a sun that has finished burning off the mist and now pours its holy oil over the hides of game. God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby” (18). Thus, the novel can be divided into three parts: one part is related to the act of men toward women; the second part can be the way women are perceived by men; and in the third part the act of women to prove their very existence will be considered.

BLACK MEN AGAINST BLACK WOMEN: UPRIGHT OR UNSCRUPULOUS?

Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1985) suggests that it is impossible for the colonized women or colonial subjects to be recovered. She concludes that it is the intellectual who must “represent” the subaltern: “The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with ‘women’ as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female

character has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish" (1985: 128). The town of Ruby is mainly governed by black men, and is considered as a site for the exertion of violence on women, creating a marginalized atmosphere for the females. On the surface, the town seems to be a paradise for men because they do not wish their women to speak. This town as an all-black town was formed after emancipation in 1890. After World War II, as stated in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* edited by Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (2003), the citizens of Haven or Ruby decided to relocate deeper into prairie after their men were allowed to fight a war for their country but were not respected or honored for their service (260). The title of the novel, *Paradise*, suggests this new all-black town might be a paradise for the black on earth made by black men. Since the men have fought for this city, they think women must be excluded from the happiness on their paradise. The women are excluded from the very first line of the novel: "They shoot the white girl first." The real issue that Morrison deals with in the novel is male/female relationships. The relationship is profoundly polarized. The "they" of the first line is immediately recognized as a male pronoun. Two of them wear ties and the readers are informed that "armed men search rooms" (3-4). It is evident that this paradise is an exclusive one and the men's attitude toward women is not of peace and calmness. The readers later in the novel discover that the girl has been an adult one. Morrison writes that the men were "obliged to stampede or kill." Readers cannot figure out why or for whom these men feel "obliged" to massacre these unnamed women. The narrator also notes that the men are "alert to the female malice that hides here." Julie C. Nerad in *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia* (2003) states that the returning from World War II, Haven's men find the town failing financially and, in their eyes, morally (107). In other words, the men of Ruby feel that the moral corruption is partly due to women, and partly due to the post-war effects. The men seek to obliterate the women and their presence, but to no avail. Since even women's odor is spread throughout the novel. Morrison writes: "yeast-and-butter smell" (5) that reminds these men perhaps of an infected vagina ("female malice"). The womanhood in men's eyes is gone. A few lines later, the odor is replaced with an image of one of their victims, blood-smeared. Again for the men, this is symbolic of monthly bleeding of the women or the time of their childbirth. Another image that the men find in their minds is the image of a hen "her puffed and bloody hind parts cherished...for delivering freaks" (5). By covering these images, Morrison effectively communicates the males' hatred and disgust of all the things feminine. Phenomenologically speaking, Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* states: "whatever, under the name 'world' has sense and validity for me" (124). This means that violence and its application by the "lived body" demands another "lived body". In other words, violence as an intended violation of the embodied claims posed by embodied subjects is used as a means of definition and the violated objects are defined by their lack of action or being a site for action. Added to this is the reminder of feminine presence.

With a gun in one hand (a phallic symbol) and a feminine glass of milk (perhaps another domestic image for feminine) in the other, one of Ruby's protectors sees no clash in protecting the women of his community by eradicating the women of another. Perhaps this is because in spite of their protestations, the men are actually not defending their women for the sake of their women; they are murdering in self-interest, to keep alive the inheritance of an all-black community controlled exclusively by men. Although Morrison uses some references to God and the Bible, and mentions that "God" was "on their [men's] side, the men of Ruby are not taking aim at Ruby. However, they are aiming at the black females who refuse to live up to the Biblical scripture: "Who can find a virtuous woman? For her price is far above Rubies" (Proverb 31). Because the women of the Convent or "the bodacious black Eves" refuse to surrender to masculine authority and forget their God given roles as good, submissive wives, "they manage to call into question the value of almost every woman" (8) and therefore decide to kill them.

The patriarchal system is evident from the very outset of the novel. Morrison, always setting her stories in black communities (*Beloved* and *Jazz*, for instance), writes about racial clashes—not only black against white, what one might expect from a black writer, --- but more often black against black. Thus, Morrison cautiously asks the reader to be attentive to the effects of these systems upon the individuals especially the black women as subjects in her novels. In an interview to Zia Jaffrey in *Salon Interview*, Morrison states that she is "not casting blame" or demonizing anyone in her novels; rather, she is "just trying to look at something without blinking, to see what it was like." The patriarchal point of view is further lit by the men's memories of their battle days in the war and of how the "Old Fathers" and "new fathers" had attempted to stake their claim in the territory that was later to become Ruby by moving the oven from their old community, Haven. The men view themselves as protectors of the oven, ironically a symbol of feminine vagina "round as heap, deep as desire," which had nourished them and monumentalized what they had done" (7). The men decide to take apart the oven that their forefathers had forged and to take it with them on their long journey in search of a new home. The oven becomes a central figure in the novel, representing what the men have done to women of the Community. The men of Ruby have unsympathetically limited and controlled the lives of the women by idealizing womanhood and by creating a situation of protection for the women. It is under this hard condition that the women of Ruby should form their subjectivities and come to consciousness about them. Apparently, turning Ruby to a safe place is done for the protection of women, but they do so to protect their own interests in these women:

A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because whatever it was that made the sound, it

wasn't something creeping on her. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, think of food preparations, war, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of nothing at all. (8)

In other words, as long as the women of the town hold on to the men's idealized definitions of what good mothers and daughters should be, chaste, nurturing and obedient, they were "protected," "free" to attend domestic concerns, and hopefully, they would be thoughtful enough to make sure that their marital responsibilities—their crying babies, for example—did not invade on the sleep and lives of their men.

By generating the notion of feminine susceptibility in their girls and convincing them that they are flimsy, frail and weak creatures in anxious need of male protection, the parents of Ruby concurrently elevate and restrict their daughters' potential. The females like the oven, become a "utility," supplying nurturing and offspring to the men; however, as in the case of the oven, they, too, by the very process of being preserved are in so doing weakened. Therefore, the preservation actually causes the females to require the protection imposed upon them by the men, and, as Morrison notes, it is a process which destroys what is thought to protect. The reader sees this hazard when the men of Ruby rush to defend their own by slaughtering innocent women. Gina Wisker in *Post-colonial and African American Women's Writing: a Critical Introduction* writes that "That even initially powerful, free-thinking Black communities can lose energy and momentum, turn to oppression and hypocrisy, lose their way, is one warning message of the novel" (74). From a phenomenological perspective, the black Community of women in this novel not only "lose" their energy, but also they gain more power especially under the practice of violence. It is under these circumstances that the black women come to consciousness, even if it is a painful one. They realize that they are living in a painful condition and this realization helps them to resist black men's exercise of power and violence on them. This condition of their lived experience aids them to speak as a 'speaking subaltern', contrary to what Spivak states about colonized women. One of Morrison's goals in this novel is to empower women by making them realize their communal/cultural gender divisions practiced by the black men. Her novel is a description of the embodied consciousness of women in the form of resistance to black patriarchal system. In this manner, the black men's violence toward black women is used as a means to encourage the women to gain power, rather than to be disempowered. The black women's consciousness is twofold: consciousness of victimization and violence which is thereby used against the black men. It is the men who cannot free themselves from the constant presence of women in spite of creating unjust system of social power. Thus, the black women consciousness is both consciousness of weakness and strength. The Ruby is no longer men's paradise, but women's.

REFERENCES

- Beaulieu, Elizabeth Ann (ed.). (2003). *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. New York: Greenwood press.
- David, Ron. (2000). *Paradise: Toni Morrison Explained: a Reader's Road Map to Novels* (153-192). New York: Random.
- Italie, Hillel. (1998). Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'. *The Standard-Times, NewStandard*. Feb. 1.
<http://www.s-t.com/daily/02-98/02-01-98/e07ae211.htm>
- Jaffrey, Zia. (1998, Feb.). The Salon Interview: Toni Morrison. Salon.com.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2002). *Phenomenology of Perception* (Trans. Colin Smith). New York: Routledge.
- Morrison, Toni. (1999). *Paradise*. New York: Plume Press.
- Spivak, G. C. (1985, Winter/Spring). *Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow-Sacrific* (pp. 120-130). Wedge.
- Wisker, Gina. (2000). *Post-colonial and African American Women's Writing: a Critical Introduction*. New York: Mackmillan Press Ltd.