



RESEARCH PAPER

The Curse of Subjugation and Need of Empowerment for African Women in the Novel *Paradise* by Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this research is to narrate the story of African American women from being slaves, down trodden and humiliated creatures towards their freedom, decisiveness and equality in the society. Toni Morrison fills African American women with new ambitions, aspirations and desires through her writings. Her fiction makes them conscious of their social status, honor and dignity. This descriptive study is based on John Bordley Rawls' Theory of justice (1971) and uses Morrison's Novel *Paradise* (1998) as primary data. Further author's interviews, websites and articles serve the purpose of secondary data. The research also presents the process of African American Women's shift from darkness and otherness to enlightenment and self consciousness. The research finds out that equality of African American women in domestic or public roles may bring transformation and revolution in their social structures

Introduction

A couple of decades in the past, the African Americans were treated as chattels and were the veterans of every newly created injustice and discrimination. Suppression and slavery have been the major sources of their daily life miseries. Till the beginning of 20th century, they were being treated inhuman like figures, were being stamped like animals and facing the bare violence of white rulers. In this group, the worst creations were the African American women. They had neither any space within the four walls of their homes nor might claim any status in the white dominated society. They were doubly marginalized by their own men on the basis of gender inequality and by the white society on the basis of their skin color. They even had no sense of their own rights because of their ignorance. Slavery and dark settings had destroyed their womanhood. They were tortured psychologically and dismantled

by the black men and white society. The gender differences in body structure ultimately lead to the social dimension of inequality and power (Terry, 2016). In this horrible process, they lost their 'Self'. But with the movement of civil war in America, they began to revolutionize and realize their creation as human beings. They began to sense their place, position and status.

In this regard, African American literature (particularly written by the African women) has presented the marginalization, dehumanization and suppression of their women in a direct or indirect manner. Toni Morrison has come forward as an apostle among the contemporary authors in this regard. She has not been only an active member of the liberation movements but also pleaded the case of African American women with her strong depictions and arguments. Toni Morrison has not only portrayed the horrible figures and condition but also made the women realized about their existence and identity.

The issues concerning the women's rights, equality, freedom and emancipation were being discussed severely in the literature of 19th century along with the feministic movements. But the sunrise of 20th century changed these grim issues from rights to status in the society. Calder (1977) traces out the causes of women suppression "*because of a terrible negativity, a lack of purpose in their lives, a lack of environment to develop personality*" (p. 136). The debate of binary opposition like the men as superior, leader and independent as compared to women as weaker, subordinate and dependant for their survival started to change in equality.

Literature review

Hussain (2016) mentions the Greek philosopher Plato and even such a wise scholar does not let the women grow to play their role in the social development by perceiving, "[...] *thanks the god for two blessings: that he had not been born a slave and that he had not been born a woman*". Further he also presents the view of Rousseau (1702-1778), the leader of freedom and equality during the French Revolution, justified the subjugated and inferior position of the women by saying that women bring forth wrong complaints against their men for inequality, "*This inequality is not of man's making, but of reason. She to whom nature has entrusted the care of children must hold herself responsible for them to their father, [...] she must be modest, devoted, retiring*" (p.200).

But the new ideology of 20th century disclaimed this sort of natural or biological differences and rejected such out dated philosophies by calling them gender biased theories. Even the studies on empathy and emotional intelligence have revealed the significant gender differences (Clarke, Marks, & Lykins, 2016). The emerging thoughts paved new ways for the development and empowerment of the women. Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), wrote '*A Doll's House*' (1879) and astonished the conservative world by setting new trends in the character of Nora, the heroine of play. She tried to establish a new mindset regarding the empowerment of woman by slamming the door against her husband and children in the quest of her self-identity.

Her husband argues by reminding her of her sacred household duties but she denies by claiming: "I have other duties equally sacred [. . .] My duties towards myself [. . .] before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are" (p. 91).

G.B. Shaw (1856-1950) was another dramatist who was not only inspired by the modern ideology of Ibsen but also believed in the practical development regarding the women empowerment. He criticized the social and family structure of the day. He became an ambassador for the right of choice for husband or life partner for herself by calling marriage a social contract and in this contract, woman as an equal partner should have right to choose by her free will. He wrote the play 'Mrs. Warren Profession' (1893) and the protagonist *Vivie* thinks and acts according to her own womanist point of view by ignoring the values set by patriarchal society. She claims boldly, "I like working and getting paid for it. When I'm tired of working, I like a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a novel with a good detective story in it" (p. 218). This sort of woman description gives a new ideology and thinking to a woman of the day.

Morrison's major concern has always been the African American women in her writings throughout the career. She always introduces a dominant figure 'gazing eye' and commonly the character of a young black girl has no other choice than accepting the trauma created by 'gazing eye'. Consequently, she has to sacrifice the happiness of youth and develops into a different and special character before entering into an adult and cruel world.

Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel 'Beloved' (1987) is not only the story of a mother (Sethe) but also depicts the serious issues related to black slave women. Sethe even kills her own girl child because she believes that facing death is easier than facing the horrors of a black slave woman's life. This act of murder shows her helplessness and powerlessness.

Theoretical Frame Work

The study is qualitative and descriptive. It is based on John Bordley Rawls' Theory of justice. It provides equal rights "[...] to the most extensive basic liberty compatible with a similar liberty for others and social and economic inequalities are to be arranged" (p. 231). Rawls always focuses upon the equality for all in every aspect of the familial and social system. It does not allow any gender to subjugate the other and keep the one away from attaining the fundamental rights. It also provides opportunities to get empowered and grow equally in the society (Rawls, 1971).

Discussion

The prime objective of Toni Morrison as an author before receiving the Nobel Prize (1992) did seem only to bring women from the corner of marginalization to the center through her writings. She did not show any concern towards the male African Americans when she claimed with Davis (1994), "[...] in the beginning [of her novel

writing] I was just interested in finally placing black women at center stage in the text" (An Interview with Toni Morrison, 231).

Toni Morrison in the novel '*Paradise*' (1998) depicts the town *Ruby* as a patriarchal or male dominated society and its foundations were laid by the fifteen black families in 1949. This particular town plays the role of a '*dominant gaze*' for the place of *Convent*. It is a female dominated community and consists of only five members. Every resident of *the convent* has traumatic past influenced by their own male members or by the white social constructs. They all have left their homes because of the men and got refuge in the convent. Dr. Zia and Zoobia (2014) compare the two different entities that "*Symbolically Morrison has presented a dominant area of ruby with a weak neighbor Convent [...] a larger community in an unfriendly relationship with a smaller community*" (p.63).

The basic purpose of migrating towards *Ruby* was to protect their families and women. Their fight against the convent women is based upon the same stance. Men of *Ruby* develop this sense that these women are threat to their purity and to their survival. They justify their act of assault on the convent by developing the belief that their personal and communal problems are lying because of the convent women. Morrison portrays these attacking men as with "*wide innocent eyes*" (Morrison, *Paradise*, 1998, p.12). The word '*innocent*' looks justifying the act of massacre. But contrary to this, the cause of protecting the women was soon changed into the mastery. "*Fondling their weapons, feeling suddenly so young and good*" (p. 285). In fact, the decision of assaulting and holding the guns enhances their own sense of manliness and power. Misner makes the agenda very clear, "*They think they are protecting their wives and their children, when in fact they are maiming them*" (p.306). They impose violence against the defenseless women only to subjugate them and to prove their real manliness.

Being Female gender becomes the fundamental rationale for being excluded from the town *Ruby* or from any other patriarchal society. Women, inside and outside the town *Ruby*, are in a paradoxical situation. Their men always keep on claiming that they are fighting for the protection of their families. While practically, When *Delia* suffers with severe health complexities during her child birth, No man is convinced to bring medical aid or call the ambulance. When other women try to convince them, they refuse (p.97). It becomes a more absurd situation when the men of town consider the convent women as the cause of decay. On these grounds, the early critics of the novel reduce it to the limited theme like a gender conflict. The women seem like *victims* and the town men are like *control freaks* in the novel. But this micro theme has been refuted by the novel itself when the women of *Convent* face the men violently; deny all the set rules of the town *Ruby* by creating their own world and stand as an opposite and equal half. Actually, the women are collectively refusing to be the victim which is a necessary change for attaining their position or empowerment.

Five women Mavis, Pallas, Gigi, Seneca and Connie are total population of the convent. After escaping from the male dominated areas, these five begin to live their independent lives without their men. It is totally a male minus formula from the society. Connie becomes a leader of the convent and manages all issues regarding the convent women. Mavis leaves her violent husband behind, Seneca is not happy with a boy friend, Pallas is afraid of a domineering father and Seneca is a hitch hiker. In this way, the women talking about their rights or status outside the town (convent) seem struggling for their survival in a male dominated society.

The sin of these women is the claim of their social status or identity but it is misconceived as the subversion of power structure. This mistaken perception by the men of Ruby town becomes the cause of disturbance. It also shows the lazy desire for ruling by the insatiable men of Ruby. So, they plan to eliminate the offensive women of the convent and Read (2005) describes the reason for attack on the Convent, "*These women have claimed [...] the power to name and identify themselves*" (p.536). They never look sensible in sharing the issues or dealing with female gender of the convent. They can make the sense of changing social circumstances and the developing political pressure of 20th century but they are unable to perceive the current worldview that patriarchal hegemony is not sustainable now.

Cecchini (2008) mentions women of the town Ruby as those "*who cannot speak for themselves*" or those cannot represent themselves (p.17). Lack of women's representation was one of the basic traits of the patriarchal society in Ruby. They were subjugated because they were considered as '*Others*' and a cause of sufferings for their society. They are in the town like, "*[...] Bitches, more like witches*" (p. 276). Their own male members become colonizers and rescuers become looters for the women. Only on the basis of this marginalization, their world becomes more chaotic, evil with shattered values and norms.

Feministic study of the novel presents a clear picture that the women residing in the convent come from the different back grounds and families but one thing is common among them, the oppression they have faced by the male members or the male dominated society. This element makes them the whole and united. This convent is totally a different place or haven for them. Their freedom and independence becomes the cause of their prosperity and unity. As Pallas mentions it, "*The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too*" (p. 177).

Morrison has also suggested the solutions by portraying what a new black woman ought to be if she wants to attain her status in the society. She has shown the dire need to empower black women and has tried to give them a sense of rights by depicting the contrary positions of women in a gynocentric state (convent) and in a traditional state (Ruby). She has tried to realize them for what change may occur in their status if they begin to live like the women in convent. The women in the town are trapped in a patriarchal society, their spirits are ignored and their bodies are abused. Connie mentions "*Those thirty years of surrender to the living God cracked like a*

pullet's egg when she met the living man" (p. 225). They all have reasons to leave their homes and live independently like the women of *Convent*. They must challenge the patriarchs and their imposed system by claiming their equal status and new identity.

Toni Morrison has selected five women living among them and assigned them daily routine life roles to make them real and life like. She compares two opposite societies or genders with the different phases of history. One is the traditional town Ruby and being governed by the stubborn men. It often remains under crisis like the town of their fathers naming *Heaven* and again none of the men advances for their rescue. Finally both the male dominated towns are fatted with the failure and no savior or *godot* arrives there. Second is the place *Convent*, newly born and governed by the polite female members, whenever there is a crisis or trouble, the leader Connie comes forward as a savior. Vansickle (2009) has paid homage, "[...] *who teaches other women how to be independent of men and free from the restrictions patriarchy imposes on women's lives*" (p. 38).

Toni Morrison has portrayed the empowered women of convent by as a true representative of the new generation or women in America after the civil war. They have reacted against the oppression and violence of the patriarchal society. They have defied the imposed decisions and claimed their equal status. They have demanded their part in education, decision making and freedom. They have preached a new set of harmonized values by challenging the traditional ones and it is the real cause of fear for their men. The success of *Convent* is because they hear the problems to resolve, they share their traumatic pasts and learn. They show care and respect for one another. They sit together to resolve the issues in a democratic way that brings harmony, prosperity and peace in their lives, "*it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning*" (p. 264). The missing of such traits in a patriarchal world is the real cause of its downfall.

In the beginning, Women of the convent seem to be doubly marginalized. Firstly, by their own families and Secondly, by their own black society that compels them to be a separatist among the separatists. Marcos (2002) establishes that the women come to the convent by chance and they are not the separatists. Though they are and seem to be subjugated and "*in a state of dispossession*" (p. 109). Later they learn how to live without their stubborn men and begin to believe in dialogues, listening and giving respect to the individuals. Connie suggests, "*No newspapers in this house. No radio either. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face-to face*" (p. 41). They learn to forget their fragmented identity and establish their own community, free and independent after tolerating the physical and mental pains. This harmony and peace of mind becomes the cause of their ultimate success.

Connie advises all the women never to split into two but remain one in the process of healing. At the time of therapy, Connie paints the silhouettes as desired or the women describe it themselves. At that moment, they represent themselves by these symbols or templates. In this way, they pull out their destructive ego from their

bodies and begin to see their own real selves. The interpretations of their inner selves make them peaceful at the individual level. This process of curing and attaining harmony at the individual level further brings harmony at the communal level. It is the final message by Morrison and is needed severely for establishing paradise on the earth.

Morrison shows the worth of empowered women by introducing an alternative of the faulty patriarchal system. For this purpose, Connie steps forward to teach other women that how they can see the world and what is the worth of their own 'self'? They all begin to negate the system which endeavors to suppress them. They get their own way of thinking, living and even a new philosophy. They unnoticed the issues as invited by the male dominated society and develop different ways of loving and sharing which a real society needs for their survival. As the story develops, the women in convent become more loving, caring and accommodating rather than gaining power or winning over one another. Their concern remains on their survival and introducing a new justice based alternative system (Vansickle, 2009).

The planned description of women empowerment is the only reason that Morrison assigns names to all the chapters of this novel with the names of female characters. Even the name of their town 'Ruby' is also after the name of Morgan's sister Ruby. Morrison suggests that it is inevitable now to keep the women out of the main tent. Morrison also presents the concept of 'Womanist care'. This element of offering respect, rights and status was missing in the male constructed world (Ruby) and is fatted with the downfall. She does not want to prove the superiority of the women at any level but she wants to bring them in the center and play their active role in the social development. The purpose of establishing the caring and loving society in the form of *Convent* is to provide guarantee for the peaceful future for its habitants. "[...] of speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home to be at home – the ease of coming back to love begun" (p. 318). Again it is suggested that their women are given space to grow in the society and secondly, only experiencing of such social norms may change African- Americans' towns into a heaven on the Earth.

Morrison also presents possibilities for better future of the African- American women and it is vital and purely 'Realistic'. Billie Delia becomes an embodiment of this realistic possible solution. Her visit to *convent* has greater impact upon her ideology. She has found the reality and this reality has "changed her forever" (p. 152). She leaves the town and settles 90 Miles away after getting a job. She changes and connects her name with her light- skinned black father and becomes Billie Cato. It is not just the change of name but the negation of her whole past life. She is accepting the name free from the race or skin color and it is also the acceptance of light- skinned color people. This is the message Morrison wants to convey that African- Americans should not be into black or light skinned people but it is the time to unite under the flag of black race. Further their women will have to work together with their men without observing any discrimination on the basis of race or gender.

With the portrayal of convent, Morrison presents her practical womanist view. The women of *Convent* overcome all the issues by challenging patriarchs of the day whereas the male dominated phallogocentric institutions *Ruby or Heaven* get the downfall. She also dismantles the rules, social values and practical solutions to carve a niche for them. She proves that the gender free attitudes can break over the patriarchal norms and equate male and female gender. The growth of independent women unruffled by the threats of patriarchy is essential for developing a *paradise* on the Earth.

Conclusion

Morrison demands the modern global village world based on equality in all the affairs of life through her novel '*Paradise*'. Paradise is the place where everyone has the opportunity to grow and attain equality at every level. She also acclaims the world free from gender discrimination, economic instability, racism and social conflicts at the macro level but its micro state is connected only with the issues of African-Americans. It provides an insight regarding the possibilities of change in the African-Americans social dogmas; their dealings with race and gender and their relationships with the world outside and within their community. She demands for the community where every individual can grow without observing any *dominant gaze* based on religion, class, gender or the color of their skin.

Morrison wants to generate the worth of '*individual self*' through this process which further leads them towards the '*communal selves*'. It is because the healing at individual level can further lead towards healing at the communal level. She suggests if the African Americans want a paradise on the earth; then they have to give importance to every individual and to accept the freedom of their women with equal status. As Lone demands "*You need what we need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from his elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance his world*" (p. 244). It is the solution and final message by Morrison for every individual of this world.

Morrison also portrays the possibility of Paradise on this very Earth by rejecting the idea of subjugation and violence being applied by the men of *Ruby*. The fruitful results of this negation become apparent when Morrison starts integrating the women of *convent* belonging to the different sects or religions, communities or societies but fuse into one. This oneness is the only cause of bringing cheerfulness, calmness and plenitude and these all joys are connected to the paradise directly.

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