

Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: A Novel Transforming the Public's Image of Colored Women

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When Toni Morrison's *Paradise* was published in 1998, the expectations of both the public and academe were great. Yet critical responses show disappointment or embarrassment at best, misunderstanding at worst. I have found that most reviews are in complete disagreement on relevant points.

According to Patricia Storage, who seems to be the most perceptive interpreter of *Paradise*, it "is a novel whose flaws lie close to its glories. The world of Ruby is created with such detail and attention that the world of the Convent suffers by comparison. The women in the Convent... blur together, perhaps because... the author seems to write of each of them with the same tone" (67). Marianne Wiggins, on the other hand, is puzzled "Why Morrison has chosen to cut the historical heart out of this story and set it in the disco years," for she regards it as "a cowardly narrative choice [sic], because we expect great writers to grapple publicly with devils and not to trivialize them..." (403). Other critics summarily brand the book as the weakest of the Nobel Prize winning author's novels, or write about it in a tone of the "evasive jocular" kind that Virginia Woolf foresaw would be a response to her *A Room of One's Own* (qtd. in Gordon 77). If a work of art generates so many diverse critical responses, it is worthwhile to look for possible underlying reasons.

The novel spans the period from the 1890s to the 1970s, narrating the exodus of the black people, the story of the creation of a paradise and its subsequent deterioration. In this counter-history Morrison tries to define a non-white paradise in terms of negatives, which can be illustrated by the following paragraph:

Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but you own home, where, if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge...—there, right where you know your own people were born and lived and died. (213)

As Greene notes, the author's thematic choice of Eden is anchored in the African-American novelistic tradition in the sense that she takes an "oppositional, revisionist stance toward Anglo-American historical and literary texts that promulgate the nation's history" (4). Another feature of the book is the subversion of the fairy-tale "Beauty and the Beast." With a characteristic twist, in Morrison's "tale" the eight-rock men of Ruby look upon the Convent women, and especially women of mixed

blood or questionable origin, as if they were monsters, or rather scapegoats. With the technique of inversion, black becomes beautiful and anything lighter than that detestable. The enigmatic opening sentences and the truly ambiguous endings are certainly meant to transform the public's preconceptions and stereotypes of race and gender. My paper is an attempt to explore the intricacies of Morrison's complex techniques, which she uses to initiate a radical change in the public's image of colored women.

In *Paradise*, like elsewhere, the interrelationship between power, race, and gender in historical perspective is the author's main concern, but at the same time a shift of emphasis can be noticed. The structure is based on the different roles that colored women allegedly play in society, including those of the mother, the loose woman, the orphan, the stray daughter, the holy woman, and even the innocent as mentioned in the Bible. The individual chapters bear the names of women who, in some sense, represent aspects that make possible the reconstruction of the integrated female individual. Instead of focusing on each of the individual life-stories for any length of time in the chapters named after the female characters, Morrison keeps up a disconcerting oscillation between the colored women's case histories and the chronicle of the black community. Furthermore, the titles of the chapters are in line with the elegiac tone of the book; it seems as if Morrison had wanted to inscribe the women's names as epitaphs on the tombstones of her fictional world which she raised to commemorate the lives of the obscure, the unaccounted for. The breaking up of the linear story-line results in a carefully constructed cyclical structure. The difficulty of interpretation lies in having to deal with an overburdened vision, since not only colored womanhood is focused upon, but (male) Negro history as well. In fact, both topics have been at the peripheries of the Western canon, which tradition Morrison defiantly challenges. The two, however, are too much to handle together. While the book is very rich in meaning and thus opens up to various interpretations, Morrison consistently follows her professed principle: what is omitted from her narrative is just as important as what is included. Female stereotypes are only gradually undermined.

As a major African-American woman writer, Morrison significantly transforms the preconceptions and stereotypical values of the public by means of writing on taboo topics in a deliberately ambiguous and complex way. In an interview the writer pointed out that "In canonical literature we have always been spoken for. Or we have been spoken to. Or we have appeared as jokes or flat figures suggesting sensuality. Today we are taking back the narrative, telling our story" (qtd. in Gates 89). This is exactly what she does in her latest novel by providing each woman with the opportunity to make her story heard.

In the structuring of *Paradise* Herstory is juxtaposed with history, the two being held together by the fatal dependence of the women on the community of all-black Ruby. On the one hand, Herstory can be read as a sweeping narrative made up of the fragmented case histories of psychologically injured female subjects, and also as the retelling of the unacknowledged heroic past of the black founding fathers. But the women's life-stories are more than just a few personal tragedies; they add up to a history of oppression, not from the outside but from within. By introducing so many different kinds of colored women (of full and mixed blood) into her characterization, the author gives prominence to diversity among them, an aspect so often ignored in the American mainstream literary canon. Variety and difference then are the

key concepts that are highlighted in the undermining of western stereotypes. Morrison's project is much the same as that of Patricia Best in the novel: she wants to explore who these women were "whose identities rested on the men they married—if marriage was applicable" (187). If one attaches labels to any of these female characters for the sake of convenience (which will not do them justice altogether), it facilitates in recalling their personalities. At the same time we can speak not so much of different women with particular roles, but rather constellations of women: women with ancient historicity and supernatural power (Mother Superior and Connie, Fairy and Lone), or destructive or nurturing mothers (Mavis Albright and Patricia Best contrasted with self-sacrificing Ruby and Sweetie).

New roles, however, are added to the traditional ones as a result of the changes in colored women's lives. These include the role of the self-educated amateur historian represented by Patricia Best, aptly described as a woman "with a callus on her middle finger" (201), who also sets her heart on the teaching of Negro history classes; and that of the painter, represented by DeeDee, who, unlike her unfulfilled fictional predecessors, such as Sula and Pauline Breedlove, has found channels for her creativity. It is certainly a step forward in contrast with the "battle of gardens" (89), which seems to be the only possibility in *Paradise* for most women as an outlet for their impulses to achieve beauty and self-expression. They do not always find gratification in womanly arts and crafts, and Soane's activity evokes Penelope's myth, since, as we learn, she "worked thread like a prisoner... producing more lace than ever would be practical" (53). Through the characters of the full blood black ladies, Soane and Dovey, the list of the non-stereotypical features of the colored women is further enriched by means of granting them elegance and gentleness, feminine traits that have been denied their predecessors in the literary canon until recently. Apart from the fact that with one exception all the Convent women are colored, what connects them in the novel is the stigmatization to which each is condemned, to use Gloria Wade-Gayles's terms, in the "narrow space of race" and "dark enclosure of sex" (4), which in Consolata's case is already reduced to "a space tight enough for a coffin" (221).

Whatever grounds particular critics may have for their disappointment with *Paradise*, this novel is another work with a multiple structure and "layered rhythms" (Christian 483). The interplay between the metaphorical and literal meanings so characteristic of Morrison's writing is exemplified by memorable utterances, such as "Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside" (39, emphasis added). This sentence is the controlling metaphor of the whole novel. On one level it expresses Morrison's reason for writing the novel, her explicit interest in the all-black community of Ruby and the fates of its women, yet on another level it refers to Ruby's racist and sexist attitude toward colored womanhood, and the individual subject's subconscious strategies in trying to fight off unwanted (repressed) memories by blaming problems on the environment. In a similar vein, when Gigi gets off the bus in Ruby, she "was at the edge at the same time that she had reached its center" (67, emphasis added). In a metaphorical sense this description fits the position occupied by colored women in Ruby, that is why "Everything that worries them [men] must come from women" (217).

The title *Paradise* has several meanings. The different utopian communities that finally end in failure are the embezzler's paradise, the school for native girls, and the Convent as a safe harbor for drifting women. Haven and then Ruby are both con-

ceived of as utopian communities where ultimately something goes irrevocably wrong. One of the novel's endings suggests the establishment of a utopian society of Amazons in opposition to the oppressive male-directed society and patriarchal hierarchy. Strangely enough, the writer, who usually thinks in terms of trinities (*Sula*, *Beloved*), seems to be obsessed with dualities and twins in this work. There are Zecharias and his twin brother Tea; the twin leaders and protagonists Deacon and Steward Morgan Smith; and Mavis's babies, Merle and Pearl. Also Billie Delia is described as being "helplessly in love with a pair of brothers" (149), and her grandfather operates a van which functions both as hearse and ambulance. Furthermore, most characters have a counterpart who makes them complete. The characters and their complementary counterparts are as follows: Mother Superior and Connie, Fairy and Lone, Arnette and Billie Delia, Pat and Anna, Che and Save-Marie. Doubling seems to be a device by which the writer renders historical continuity, just as she does by trebling. The latter device, however, serves to point to a kind of degeneration and decline embodied in the last generation. In her treatment of duality, Morrison always prefers both/and to the exclusive either/or dichotomy. But doubling can have a negative connotation, too, which is implied in Anna Flood's thoughts, when she is wondering about the resistance of Ruby men to change of any kind, and "why there were no stories to tell of themselves. About their own lives they shut up. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates" (161, emphasis added).

Paradise is clearly one of the author's most overtly feminist novels. It is revealed in the case histories of the individual characters that colored women are victims of the male-dominated racist/sexist society of Ruby. The women who arrive from elsewhere (Mavis from the East) fare no better. They are abused and battered (Mavis is a mere "life-sized Raggedy Ann" [26] for her husband), slapped (Arnette), rejected (Connie), misunderstood (Billie Delia), ignored (Dovey), and the list of abuses could run on end. What else is it, if not an outcry against black male sexism? I am inclined to hold the view that Ruby is a racist and sexist society uninhabitable for women, where racial purity and exclusion are strictly observed, and no "racial tampering" (197) is allowed. This racism, however, is a response to and a consequence of the historic event of Disallowing, when the light-skinned population of Fairly turned down the eight-rock people on the sole ground of skin color. The colored woman, though, enjoys a kind of freedom in Ruby (the second settlement founded by the eight-rocks): "A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl round her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and down the road. No lamp and no fear" (8), but this freedom is largely limited to the boundaries of the town. With the alignment of a cast of some fourteen women characters the writer's intention to render polyvocality and great variation among colored women is unambiguous. Much in the same spirit as the opening lines of *Beloved*, it is stated in the book that Consolata's "voice was one among the many that packed the cellar from rafter to stone floor" (221). The term "colored women" equally includes the eight-rocks and the descendants of those who have violated the blood rule, but different criteria of moral judgment apply to the latter, so in addition to the proverbial "double jeopardy" (Wade-Gayles 229), there is a double standard of judgment at the same time. Although the stereotypes imposed on colored women seem to be strengthened at

first, they are gradually undermined as many of the women find shelter at the Convent.

The interiorization of the unfavorable evaluation and judgment of one by the others (by racist or sexist male citizens this time)—a thematic concern of *The Bluest Eye*—evaporates, once the heroines reach the space of the Convent. In the second chapter of the book Mavis thinks of herself in terms of her husband's opinion: "From the beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet" (37). As soon as she arrives at the Convent, Connie assures her of the beauty and usefulness of her "pecan hands" (42), after which Mavis starts slowly to re-discover her own values and even devise some short-term plans. Dovey can share her thoughts with her shadow friend, who is the only person to listen to every word she says attentively. She is dominated by Steward to such an extent that after a while she "tended to agree with whomever she was listening to" (89), which is clearly the sign of the loss of identity. Arnette gets married to KD even though she knows that he is still in love with "the girl with the screaming tits" (55). The colored women are constantly deprived of some urgent need: the metaphor of hunger and the domestic activities related to soothing it stand for a lack, and that is deprivation in love. Several female characters are repeatedly described as ravenous. Mavis "wolfed down" the food she got; Gigi "was gobbling, piling more food on her plate even while she scooped from it..." (70).

Suspicion, misogyny, and scapegoating permeate the atmosphere of Ruby. The question is asked, "the men [were] looking for what? Evidence?... A little toe, maybe, left in a white calfskin shoe?" (8) Men's castration anxiety and their fear of being swallowed by greedy females, or getting under the spell of vampires actually lead to Connie and Deek's break-up. When Connie bites Deek's lip causing it to bleed, it serves as evidence for the latter that his lover has become possessed by evil and wants to possess him in turn. The self-sufficient commune of women is an eyesore for men who suspect them of "revolting sex, deceit, and the sly torture of children" (8). The space earlier defined by the men, all of a sudden becomes a "wide-open space" at the Convent, and Deek "managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew..." (8). In men's paradise women are "bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary." They can only seek self-redemption, and occupy "the space where there used to be Jesus" (12).

Although this is a feminist novel (with remote echoes from Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* written from a black woman's perspective), the issues of race surfacing are of equal significance. To regard *Paradise* as a feminist novel might rouse controversy; nevertheless such a reading of the novel is justifiable: it is about the colonization of the body, soul and mind of the colored woman, her lack of freedom to experiment and even to experience. Just like *Beloved*, which can be read either as a slave narrative or as a ghost story, *Paradise* can be read in two ways: either as a black feminist novel or as a fictional chronicle of unrecorded and erased African-American history. From the women's point of view the Convent is a paradise where: "The house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters, but exciting, too. As though she [Pallas] might meet herself here—an unbridled, authentic self, but which she thought of as a 'cool' self" (177). The text of the novel contains several clues and codes that underpin a feminist reading. It is no accident that Anna Flood's reinterpretation of the inscription on the Oven reads like this: "Be the Furrow of Her Brow" (159). I must add, however, that

the possibility of women's empowerment is raised only half-heartedly as an ironical afterthought. Women are invisible in Ruby, for men take for granted "the tippy-tap step of the women who were nowhere in sight" (54).

When racial issues emerge, the multicolored pictures of the novel tend to turn into black and white, or the white and black ones into red or yellow: a transformation of colors can be perceived in descriptive passages, such as the posing of the nineteen black ladies for a photograph, the traumatic experience of Coffee and Tea's humiliation, the violent act against the black prostitute by a white man, or the Christmas school show and the injury of a black boy in the Oklahoma race riot. One of the perpetrators of the murder at the Convent is shocked because: "He never before dreamed in colors such as these: imperial black sporting a wild swipe of red. Then thick, feverish yellow" (4). There are so many grievances troubling the colored women that it would be impossible to name each of them. The Vietnam war takes its toll in many colored families, including the death of Mavis's brothers, Soane's sons, and the birth of Jeff and Sweetie's four silent defective children, but black male participation in military activities shatters women's lives above all, in much the same way as it did during the Civil War and the two world wars.

In the oppressive community of Ruby men decide women's fates, often above their heads. As Arnold Fleetwood proudly announces, "I'm her [Arnette's] father. I'll arrange her mind" (54). Bonding and the utopian idea of sisterhood is realized at the Convent to some extent; in the sense that regardless of skin tone, the women manage to find common understanding, tolerance and acceptance of one another's eccentricities and differences, even though there are tensions between them from time to time. Outside the Convent female bonding is not supported: for instance, Mavis "had always wanted to know her [neighbor] better, but Frank found ways to prevent acquaintance from becoming friendship" (75). When Connie hugs her as a sister in the paradise of the convent Mavis is overjoyed as she "feels the thump of the woman's heart against her own" (75).

There is only one white girl among the Convent women (except for Mother Superior, whose death occurs early in the story), and her identity is never revealed. In fact the term "white girl" may refer to someone who has lighter skin than the others, one who might pass for a white. By keeping this ambiguity, Morrison reverses the usual technique of the (white) American literary canon; the colored women are pushed into the foreground, and the white girl, or the tragic mulatta, becomes the Other. By means of this subversive inversion whites become invisible or mere shadows, always with sinister implications. There has been much speculation on which of the Convent women is the white girl. When asked about it in an interview, Morrison said, "I made it possible to ask the question: who is the white girl? And then hope that I could write well enough that either it wouldn't matter, you knew all you need to know about those girls, or it mattered so much you might ask yourself why you are worrying" (qtd. in Viner 2). Another point of key importance for the interpretation of the novel is made elsewhere. According to the writer: "Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. It's real information, but it tells next to nothing" (qtd. in Gray 66).

The dominant narrative technique of *Paradise* is a device that Morrison experimented with in her only published short story "Recitatif." There she describes the shifts in the long-term relationship between a white woman and an African-American woman without overtly defining the racial identity of either. The reader

has to guess and decode the clues that the writer intersperses in the narrative, but as the narrative process is resumed, some of the clues are erased, enforcing the reader to revise his/her own stereotypical images of colored women and habitual ways of thinking by this means.

In *Paradise* this de- and re-constructing narrative technique reaches perfection where only blackness is signified. Sometimes, however, the technique is overused; e.g. when one of the twin brothers gets involved in a love affair with Connie, his name is not once mentioned in the chapter; instead, synecdoche is amply applied to somewhat orientate the reader. It is only possible to identify which of the twins is Connie's lover through the objects and outfits associated with him or his twin brother. (Steward always wears a Stetson hat and cowboy boots.)

Genealogy, historiography, and the recovery of an erased history gain great importance in the novel: it is Patricia Best, the amateur historian, who tries to reconstruct the lineage of the founding families of Ruby. What she finds is the shocking revelation that certain sections of the past and certain people from it have been arbitrarily deleted. When she attempts to gather information about certain names of relatives of the families from the children at school, she is accused of prying. In a symbolic act she burns all the material she has collected—which suggests a dubious attitude toward the authenticity and interpretability of written historical materials and documents in favor of the definitive impact of oral histories in the resurrection of the past. Personal documents are not to be trusted either. In the novel, letters are left unopened (by Soane and KD) or hidden in attics and shoes, no snapshot of the trusting faces of the twin babies is taken, even though they were “the only ones who enjoyed her [Mavis's] company, and weren't a trial”(27). The tragedy of Mavis is very much similar to that of Sethe in *Beloved*, save for the difference in historical period. Mavis's act is also perhaps more of a deliberate act than an accident, for she does not want her babies to be subjected to the same abuse that she is compelled to experience and put up with at the hands of Frank day after day.

The utopian commune at the Convent is an ideal place where, as Connie tells newcomers, “Lies [are] not allowed... In this place every true thing is okay.” She also adds that there is “No telephone out here” (38). “No newspapers in this house. No radio either. Any news we get have to be from somebody telling it face-to-face” (41). This is apparently an act of resistance in the face of the hegemonic patriarchal discourse. Instead of chasing real adventures, the drifting women, who run from failed marriages, brutal husbands and unwanted pregnancies, have to make do with mere mock-quests. The destination of these quests is the Convent that only temporarily provides a shelter and an opportunity of bonding with peers, because upon returning home they have to face the fact that nothing has changed.

The stereotypical colored woman is deemed to be very fertile and her highest achievement in life is bearing children. In Ruby “most families boasted nine, ten, eleven children. The freakishness of being an only child” (151) is an ordeal to those affected, especially to Arnette and Billie Delia. Ironically, the myth of the reproductive colored woman is believed in not only by whites, but also by the residents of Ruby. The writer demythologizes this stereotype as well: there are several colored women who cannot or would not have children in *Paradise* (Dovey, Soane, and Arnette), while at the same time they find other useful functions in community life. The consistency of Morrison's vision can be traced back as far as *Sula*, where the

heroine does not want to make somebody else, which means she does not want to have a husband and a child.

Morrison obsessively comes back to the trope of writing in the novel. When deserted, Connie "felt like a curl of paper—nothing written on it—lying in the corner of the empty closet" (248). Although the "I-give-women" (73) scribble only in lipstick, ink their names in capital letters, or write their names with their toes in the dirt only to erase them later, the reality of colored women's contribution to the arts and letters is underscored in intricate ways. Not all of the female characters are close in perfection to Saint Catherine of Sienna, but neither do they strengthen the myth of the easy availability of colored women. Among the hitchhikers who stop Mavis, "The white ones were the friendliest; the colored girls slow to melt" (39). Also the latter would stick to their own culture: "Bennie was always searching for colored neighborhoods, where they could eat 'healthy' she said" (35).

There is a parallel drawn between the civilizing impact of whites and that of colored women. Morrison explicitly condemns the white colonizers who seized every opportunity to change native American girls by means of giving them Catholic education "to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither, to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile..." (227). In *Ruby*, the women are expected to exercise a similarly restraining and civilizing impact on men, but, ironically, they are required to do so while they are muted themselves.

The last volume of Morrison's trilogy contributes greatly to the public's rethinking of the untenable stereotypes of the image of colored women which are still dominant in contemporary society, as well as to radically transforming other related views. In this novel the writer has found a way "to say and not to say, to inscribe and erase, to escape and engage, to act out and act on, to historicize and render timeless" (Morrison, *Playing 7*). And like all of her novels it encourages further rereadings. Morrison has once again created an inalienably black novel that can be best characterized by the presence of an irresistible rhythm and oscillation. In her parable:

The women sleep, wake and sleep again with images of parrots, crystal seashells and a singing woman who never spoke. At four in the morning they prepare for the day. One mixes dough while another lights the stove. Others gather vegetables for the noon meal, then set out the breakfast things. The bread, kneaded into mounds, is placed in baking tins to rise. (285)

Until the men arrive...

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