

## Adjustment of Diasporas through Integration: A Study of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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*Paradise* (1998) is Toni Morrison's seventh novel, which extends over a period from the late 1800s to the 1970s, and tells the story of a group of women who live together in an old house, called the Convent, outside the fictional town of Ruby, a small all-black town in Oklahoma. Its plot places together two-opposing sets of characters—the residents of Ruby and the Convent inhabitants—who inhabit a locale that is as varying as “an attempted utopia, a refuge, a home, [and] a version of an earthly paradise.” (Page 2) The two communities that Morrison contraposes in the novel, may be seen as representative of two different strands in America's construction of national identity, i.e. assimilation on the one and the integration on the other. Whereas, Ruby emerges as a proud and ‘paradisiacal’ African American town, the Convent is eventually presented as an alternative open community. Thus, Ruby functions as a mirror to American history. Seemingly isolated and self-sufficient, Ruby, “the one black town worth the pain,” (5) was to be a paradise on earth and a utopia for its people. The Convent, on the other hand, evolves towards the creation of a spiritual paradise based on the fluid hybridization of opposites.

In Ruby, the successive generations of the protagonists struggle their way through history in a quest for “home” materialized in the creation of a secure, perfect town, which they can assimilate with ‘Paradise.’ In this regard, Bill Ashcroft sums up:

The story of the town called Paradise is about people who did not know how to transform the boundaries of an adopted home, did not know how to inhabit in such a way that boundaries became something more than a recapitulation of their own marginality. The consequences of this failure—in terms of intolerance of those who are different, in terms of the capacity to develop and change, to accept, to nurture, to let live—is catastrophic, a recapitulation of all that those boundaries of habitation represent; a repetition of all they are trying to escape; a ‘fortress’ they have ‘bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out’. Their myth is a myth of identity with which they are trying to combat the myth of American society itself, and thus that identity is captured by the myth. (Ashcroft 200)

A first generation of ex-slaves sees their high hopes for a better future after the promise of the Emancipation was betrayed. They reluctantly have come to realize that the reason for their reduction to penury is due to the discrimination against their blackness on the part of whites and blacks alike. At this point, their thought becomes polarized and a group of ‘Eight-rocks,’ ‘blue-black’ (193) men decide to initiate a migration in search of a place they could call home. “For these people,” as Bill Ashcroft opines, “the discovery and nurturing of place will go hand in hand with the nurturing of history, with the inevitable struggle for authority between those who wish to claim it as their own. But the history of the discovery of their place has all the character of myth: because it explains more than the past, it defines the way the world is.” (Ashcroft 198) Led by Coffee, who had already reinvented himself by acquiring the prophetic name of Zechariah Morgan, they confront the rejection of whites, Indians, and blacks who had just settled in the

new towns that were being built. What upset them was the rejection based on their blackness on the part of other blacks. Full of pride and anger, they would remember their rejection as ‘the Disallowing.’ These descendents of a group of wandering ex-slaves who at God’s commands and after having been rejected by a string of already established pioneer communities, black as well as white, eventually succeed in establishing the perfect, all-black community of Haven in a faraway place in Oklahoma. “‘What is ours?’ and what must we protect and defend?” (18) are the questions the men in *Paradise* constantly ask themselves. What the men do, they do “for Ruby.” (18)

These nine families in Oklahoma did not preserve the ideals of the Old Fathers only but also reinforced, and even carried to the extreme, “lessons had been learned in the last three generations about how to protect a town.” (16) Haven, in the collective memory of Ruby’s inhabitants, stands as their ancestors’ temporary success in creating a dream town, but also, as a warning that the dream can come to an end if it is not protected against outside influences. The third generation, with the creation of a new town, Ruby, becomes its sole protector in the sense in which *Paradise* seems “to materialize through the enforcement of utter isolation and exclusion, through the preservation and mythologizing of the past and through the construction of new myths that situate the second-migration leaders as the elite and confer on them sacred power.” (Marcos 4)

Ruby’s geographical isolation, ninety miles away from anywhere but the Convent, which is just seventeen miles away, is enhanced by the fact that its inhabitants are cut off from national developments. They maintain the isolation by disallowing “Television [...] Disco [...] Policemen [...] Picture shows, frothy music [...] Wickedness in the streets, theft in the night, murder in the morning. Liquor for lunch and dope for dinner.” (274) Not even newspapers are popular in Ruby. The result is an almost complete isolation from the cultural, political, and economic events that affect the United States. For twenty years, nobody dared to disturb their isolation. Beginning in the 1960s, however, the young people supported by Reverend Misner, start claiming their connection to the outer world, thereby placing the dream of an alternative reality at risk.

What the rulers of Ruby refuse to see is that their emphasis on saving Ruby through isolation and exclusion is actually damming it in the most literal sense. They force endogamy, which results in potential incestuous relations, like that of K. D. and Arnette, and deformed children who die early deaths, like Save Marie. Somehow they manage to disregard incest so that the Morgan line can survive “pure,” and blame Lone, the midwife—who is not really one of them anyway—for the Fleetwood children’s deformities. To them, it is singularly important that the town’s foundational cornerstones must remain untouched.

Besides race, gender is the other category upon which exclusion is based. For the Eight-rock male leaders of Ruby, both are closely connected since their pure race depends on reproduction, and in reproduction, sex, sexuality and gender are involved. Thus, it comes to Pat as a revelation that “The generations had to be not only radically untampered with but free of adultery too. God bless the pure and holy ‘indeed,’” (217) she also comes to the conclusion that “In that case [...] everything that worries them must come from women.” (217) Indeed, women are viewed by the male elite as either outsider temptresses or potential ‘loose’ insiders. Eventually, the outsiders will be turned into witches. Like Eve in the Old Testament, the temptresses can destroy a man’s virtue, or even worse, get pregnant and consequently produce a miscegenated race, in both cases resulting in the male’s expulsion from *Paradise*. The loose insider woman, with her promiscuity can destroy the racial purity of Ruby. Hence, the control over ‘race’ becomes intrinsically linked to the control over women as the ultimate producers of generations. Like Consolata, the rest of the women who over the years had come to live in the

Convent escaped male control. They are viewed as permanent threats that can put an end to their mythic Paradise. Thus, the women in the Convent become scapegoats for all the troubles afflicting Ruby over the years.

In the third generation, the preservation and mythologizing of the past is carried out by the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan, who inherit the role of their grandfather, Zechariah Morgan. Together they form Ruby's griot, or minstrels, transforming and fixing its history and becoming its institutional memory: "Between them they remembered the details of everything that ever happened things they witnessed and things they have not." (13)

With the emergence of the fifth generation in Ruby, the third generation senses a new threat to their authority and to the values they've tried to preserve. The younger generation, which has come of age in the heyday of the Civil Rights movements and their aftermath, fights the isolation imposed upon it. Further, this new generation questions the values, behaviour and myth making of their parents and grandparents. They even assault their ethnic rooting at its very foundation by wishing to remove themselves from the past of slavery and fiercely connect their identity to Africa, a continent they have not set foot on but which allows them the opportunity of retracing their origins to a time of primeval freedom, far from colonialism, and the fetters of slavery: a past that may allow them, "to get rid of the slave mentality," (210) in Reverend Misner's words. Inspired by the historical events of the times, they wish to share in the creation of a new myth, be imbued with the sacred mission of liberating not just their own tiny community but all African Americans, and with them, the whole country.

Toni Morrison weaves the tale of Ruby with that of an alternative community, which is also laden with religious undertones: the Convent. The former house of an embezzler, later used as a Catholic school for Indian girls at the heart of a Protestant State, by 1976, the Convent has become a space where the blurring of boundaries has been made possible. The women who presently inhabit it arrived there by chance and regard it as a transitional stage in their lives. Even though they are the subjects of colonization, dispossession, and misrepresentation in the course of the novel, they are able to reject the fragmented identities imposed upon them and to replenish the ensuing void with new identities that result from the blending of constructed opposites.

Unlike the homogeneous history of Ruby, the Convent's history is the result of various religious discursive layers. Catholicism, Protestantism, and Paganism seem to intersect here. Geographically as isolated as Ruby the Convent emerges, nevertheless, as a meeting ground of opposites. First built as a pagan sanctuary of the body, the house had been gaudily decorated with all kinds of sexual symbols that were either partially destroyed or fully covered by the Catholic nuns who established their school here and who added their own religious symbols. If the people who built it had worshipped the body, the nuns worshipped the spirit. In due time, its later inhabitants, Consolata and the women she shelters, would painfully awake to the realization that Paradise consists of the integration and acceptance of both body and spirit, rather than in privileging one over the other. In other words, as Ruby works for a separate black American nation, Convent, on the other, asks for an integrated African American nation.

The stories of each of them unravel as a single loud dreaming shared by all, a communion and simultaneously a confession of sorts through which they purge and, eventually, purify themselves. Little by little, they cast off their former identities as they transfer their old selves to the empty silhouettes on the floor by drawing in the templates their particular natural features, and those not so natural—the scars that speak of Seneca's pain and anxiety for love, a heart locket that speaks of Gigi's, a baby and a vampire woman face that speaks of Pallas' love and hatred. In her attempts, Mavis must come to terms with her guilt over the death of the twins and

the fear of abusive men. Grace, understanding that she has not approved of herself in years, must exorcise the image of a blood-flower spreading on a young Black boy's clean white shirt, a memory from the Oakland riots. Seneca's "loud dreaming" allows her to transfer her cuts from her own body to her traced image, and to let go of the desolation she felt when she understood her sister, who has become her mother too, was never coming back. Pallas releases the hated and haunting vision of her mother and Carlos and the memory of entwining tendrils in the dark water. When Soane Morgan sees the women again, just before the attack on the Convent, she recognizes them as women who are no longer haunted. As they dance in the predawn rain of a July day in 1976, letting the clean water wash away their fears and pain, they are holy women. Hence, the women start repossessing themselves, reconstructing or recovering their unique souls, until their distress is replaced with happiness and a new acceptance of their whole selves. They also reach a stage of integration in the psychological sense within themselves and also with each other at the social/sisterhood plane.

But nine of Ruby's men believe them anything but wholesome. In their eyes, the Convent women are child murderers, lesbians, temptresses, and witches who have turned the former Convent into a Coven. What is actually more threatening is that these women have claimed out of their abuse, the power to name and identify themselves. They gather at the Oven to plot 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 Manus'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. Despite their own unspoken personal motives, all the men look for someone to blame for the changes in Ruby. 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. For these Rubyites, the Convent is not a sanctuary but a "Coven," (276) a place where abortions and lesbian carnality and other supposedly unspeakable horrors are committed, a place that is responsible for the tensions and disharmonies within Ruby. As the women dance, the men gather their weapons; "rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns," (3) prepare for battle, and engage in a ritual of eating rare steak, singed on the fire and washed down with liquor.

Four months after the raid, some of Ruby's citizens understand that God has given Ruby a second chance, a new covenant that can be successful only if they are willing to change. Having once taken refuge at the Convent, Billie Delia Cato is one of the few who befriended the Convent women and is the only character who is not puzzled by their disappearance. She believes that the women have left, only to return prepared for a battle with Ruby, with men, and with all the forces that haunted them:

[...] with blazing eyes, war paint, and huge hands to rip up and stamp down this prison calling itself a town? A town that that had tried to ruin her grandfather, succeeded in swallowing her mother and almost broken her own self. A backward noplac ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where [...] She hoped with all her heart that the women were out there biding their time [...] which is to say she hoped for a miracle. (308)

And perhaps she got it. When Ruby's Deacon Morgan does public penance for his sins, it is miraculous to observe his change of heart. The women of the Convent have changed everything

and perhaps given their lives for this miracle. Yet, they reach out from wherever they are, to bestow forgiveness and loving kindness on those who have injured them.

The women appear again at the end of the novel. Mavis has a brief, somewhat surreal encounter with her now grown daughter, Sally, in a country inn restaurant before disappearing into the crowd. Grace, dressed in a black T-Shirt and camouflage pants and packing a gun, appears first at a lake, visiting her father, who has received a permanent stay of execution, and again helping Seneca clean her bleeding hands in a stadium parking lot. Seneca's sister/mother Jean approaches her, misremembers their old address, and does not know for certain that the woman is Seneca until they are separated once again. Pallas appears again at her mother's, dressed in a long, flowing rose madder and umber skirt, sword in hand, baby carried on her chest, and looking for a pair of shoes she had left behind. She rides off in a car full of women. The novel closes with an image of Consolata, sitting at the ocean's edge with her head in Piedade's lap, in Paradise.

By evoking such images of paradise on or just beyond the horizon of the earth, Morrison moves well beyond *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. In *Song of Solomon*, the characters go back so that they can belong to a particular community. In *Beloved*, the characters have to remember the past, albeit carefully lest the memories overwhelm them, in order to be free of it. The novel is "not a story to pass on" (Morrison, *Beloved* 274) in the double sense that it cannot be avoided or passed on, but also that, once acknowledged, it need not be obsessed over—or, passed on. In *Paradise*, the characters must replace their dogmatic reverence for a monologic interpretation of the past with a more balanced and flexible combination of respect for the past and the wisdom to grow beyond that past. She says that one must avoid the mistakes of the men of Ruby, the mistakes of accepting one authoritarian viewpoint, of rigidly holding onto one view of history, and one dogmatic interpretation. She asks everyone to join each other in "shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise." (318) In her acknowledging the possibility of a second chance for Ruby, Morrison might be asking the African Americans not to remain in exceptionalist tradition. But she also, in the voice of Misner, asks them to stay in America. Her rejection of her community's exceptionalism notwithstanding, in the final instance Morrison chooses African America as her focus of identification:

Suddenly Misner knew he would stay. Not only because Anna wanted him to [...] but also because there was no better battle to fight, no better place to be than among these outrageously beautiful flawed and proud people. (306)

Morrison accepts America's exceptional tradition in the Ruby people, but she does not affirm the Ruby leaders' dream of an alternate superior community. Rather, she makes her covenant with the Ruby people, with all their flaws and imperfections. One could hardly expect an exceptionalist to share Misner's rationale for choosing Ruby: that the community will soon be "like any other country town." (306) Like Misner, Morrison chooses Africa America not because it is perfect or superior to other communities, but because it is the community that she has come to know and to love.

The enigmatic ending of the novel, depicting a rejuvenated Consolata who has rejoined Piedade in a flawed paradise, serves to re-emphasise "the possibility of re-imagining Paradise" by displacing it from 'up there' in heaven to 'down here' on earth. This paradise is not a static condition already achieved, but something that must be endlessly worked up on, to paraphrase the last sentence of the novel, through the continuous free interplay of race, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and whatever other categories are used in the construction of hybrid individual and social identities.

To conclude, *Paradise* draws from American cultural and literary traditions, which were overpowering the African Americans in their longing for a participation in the American Dream. The novel expands such a tradition by offering a harsh critique on the exalted African American nationalism grounded on religious and cultural exceptionalism. Morrison seems to approve, along with Misner, of continuously striving for the impossible but creative dream of creating an ideal community identifiable with an earthly paradise. The possibility of attaining paradise lies, as the novel suggests in the form of Convent community, in the integration of opposites. The fusion of different creeds undertaken by the women in the Convent represents a dialogue interchange among the nationalists. As the women evolve toward the acceptance and integration of their own polarities, they are rewarded by achieving that state of plenitude, happiness, and serenity, which is associated with paradise. Morrison finally shuns “religious as well as ethnic and nationalistic essentialisms by means of the open ending of the novel,” (Marcos114) which implies that paradise—as well as ethnic construction—is neither closed nor fixed, but a constantly evolving situation.

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