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## Adaptation and Escapism in Morrison's *Paradise*

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### **Abstract:**

*Paradise* (1998) is the first novel by Tony Morrison after winning the Nobel Prize in literature (1997). It is a part of trilogy (including *Beloved* and *Jazz*) about love which sets in the history of African-American people. It is also sharply about racism and other troubles that African-Americans had to face. Analyzing the novel *Paradise* from feminism viewpoint gives this opportunity to observe the lives of many women all around the world especially among black communities. The main purpose which is manifested behind this expression is the adversity of women especially black women in their lives as a mother, a wife or a beloved in the patriarchal societies. Morrison uses themes of racism, fear, guilt, religion, feminism, ageism, and mysticism to make the reader to view how much reality exists in the midst of madness. With each new girl and women the picture of an oppressed woman is painted. Women run both from Ruby and other locations in the country from death of children, rape, pregnancy, abuse, to the Convent (which is considered as Utopia, where they can live together freely and without any adversities and harshness). The present article sheds light on how living under patriarchy can result in extreme conflicts which may be ameliorated to some extent by adaptation or escapism.

**Keywords:** *Paradise*, *Tony Morrison*, Feminism, adaptation, escapism

### **Introduction**

Since many years, people have been discussing about the equal rights between men and women, but they witness many issues and harshness which many women all around the world are dealing with. Although after feminist movements women were considered more seriously and entered their societies in different fields, the rights of women as mothers, wives or beloveds are still taken for granted, and are ignored. Moreover, such issues can make lots of problems for them in their lives which can ruin their lives.

In Morrison's novel *Paradise*, she refers to the lives of the mentioned women with the same situation. Morrison begins her novel by murdering a group of women who live in the isolated society which is called "the Convent" by nine men. She portrays the condition of a couple of black women who have difficulties in their lives. This convent is situated in suburb of

the town which is called Ruby, a town which was established just for black people. The people there have problems not only with white-skinned people, but also with even light black-skinned people. Morrison chronicles the creation and development of the all-Black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the serendipitous assembling of a collection of lonely social misfits, all women, in a mansion seventeen miles away.

From beginning of the novel, the hard situation which men impose on the women can be seen. By each new girl and woman the picture of an oppressed woman is painted. Women run both from Ruby and other locations in the country and from death of children, rape, pregnancy, and abuse to the Convent. Therefore, choosing this novel and analyzing it can help to clarify the hard condition of the lives of these women.

In this article, some social feminist issues such as inferiority and superiority, power, dependency and freedom, the role of religion, unequal rights would be pointed out and discussed in both communities of Ruby and the convent. This may show differences and the standing point of each community toward women and the social phenomenon related to women. "In this article, Morrison's novels *Paradise* will also be analyzed from one side the resistance of female characters to social stereotypes: the image of black womanhood, and the gender inequality, the social oppression. It is argued that although the female characters of the novel come from different backgrounds, they share a common characteristic, the search for identity, which triggers their individual revolts against the respective social stereotypes. This article also demonstrates that the revolt and the subsequent exposure of an individual have far-reaching effects not only on the exposed but also on her family and the community she becomes isolated from" (Noskova 6-7).

"The issue of women's victimization has seriously been raised recently in African-American Literary works by both female and male writers/critics. As for gender, the concept itself appeared in the seventies. It refers to a socially acquired behavior and aspirations which distinguish femininity from masculinity. In fact, the difference between gender and sex is in terms of social and biological categories. Gender stands for a sexual difference in terms of social and cultural construction in a community. Thus gender victimhood stems from patriarchal social hierarchy and results in the depreciation of the females' real value" (Mbadji 2-3). Further, for Pam Morris "female" is used as "designating biological sex", feminine "as referring to cultural conceptions of gender" and feminist as "involving political perceptions and aims" (2).

However, the choice of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* is made because the theme of female victimhood is so powerfully portrayed in them. Indeed, the female characters are victims of physical and spiritual harassment.

## **Review of the Literature**

Toni Morrison is one of the most celebrated authors of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and her work has been translated into a number of languages. In 1970, Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, and seventeen years later, her fifth novel, *Beloved*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize. In 1993, she was presented with the Nobel Prize in Literature, which is awarded to an author for his/her life achievement.

*Paradise* is her seventh novel. "Morrison's novel takes place during another significant historical period for African American people. Set primarily in Oklahoma during and immediately after the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s, *Paradise*, as the title indicates, interrogates the concept of utopian societies, playing race and gender against each other in an exploration of the constitution of oppression" (Tally 66). *Paradise* is about the relationship between two communities\_ the town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and a very small but largely self-sufficient group of women who live in what has come to be known as the convent, located on the outskirt of Ruby. There are 9 chapters. The novel begins by description of searching the convent by 9 armed men. They have already shot one white girl and are seeking the others as if they are hunting. The women who currently live in the convent are not nuns.

"*Paradise* is like thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle and includes about seventy names and characters" (Esfehani NP).

"Morrison depicts the all-black patriarchal community of the town of Ruby in contrast to the liberal female community of the Convent. She establishes the point of view right at the beginning of the novel, when she stresses the color and, more significantly, the gender of the person killed" (Naskova 36): "They shot the white *girl* first. With the rest they can take their time" (Morrison 3). "These are the first two sentences of the novel and they make it clear that the killing is related to racism and misogyny. The men of Ruby are used to controlling their women; therefore they feel threatened by the self-sufficiency of the female community, mainly because they have no means of controlling them" (Naskova 36-37).

"The tragedy of African-American women comes from racial segregation which is one result of the fact of long term slavery. Also it stems from gender discrimination. They had to live with the tortures of gender discrimination perpetrated by not only white men but also men of same race. Toni Morrison, particularly in *Paradise*, seems to focus on the notion of patriarchy, part of the gender discriminations. The existence of "8-rock" (Morrison, 193) described in the novel must be the exact symbol of typical patriarchy as imagined by Toni Morrison" (Okuwaki 142).

Our history as Black women, 'writes Morrison', is the history of women who could build a house and have some children and there was no problem... What we have known is how to be complete human beings . . . you don't have to choose anything. You choose your responsibilities. Morrison argues that the "ancient properties" of traditional black womanhood, carried along the mother-line and assumed by each generation of women are at the core of black women's empowerment. Morrison explains: If women are to become mothers, complete the answer may not be in the future, but the answer may be back there. And that does interest me more than the fully liberated woman, the woman who understands her past, not the woman who merely has her way" (Koeneny, 81-82).

"The community of Ruby in Morrisoñ s novel *Paradise* follows the patriarchal model which is deeply embedded in the American society. This model is based upon the dominance of men and submissiveness of women who are both materially and emotionally dependent on their husbands. "Most men in a patriarchal society fear and resent women who do not assume traditional passive roles" (Hooks 79). Consequently, Hooks notes, "in patriarchal homes men are likely to feel threatened even if women have a babysitting job that provides them extra grocery money" (79). Men in wholly black communities, like Ruby in *Paradise*, are no different in their perception of their roles in the community, which survives from the past. As Hooks points out,

“the patriarchal social structure gave the enslaved male higher status than the enslaved female” (88). Reilly has stated that,

The second section of this chapter considers the theme of failed maternal nurturance. The women in *Paradise* all display problematic, in the case of Margaret, abusive maternal behavior. Ineffectual or failed mothering signifies in Morrison’s fiction, an act of resistance against patriarchy and in particular the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Mothers in Morrison, as they confront racism on behalf of their children, also challenge their own oppression in the patriarchal institution of motherhood. Patriarchal motherhood is oppressive to both white and black mothers but it is particularly harmful to black women because it prevents black women from fulfilling their essential cultural bearing function. Resistance to patriarchal motherhood is conveyed in the many instances of failed maternal roles and fractured relationships in the novel *Paradise*, Ruth’s “deviant” maternal practices, in particular the “late” nursing of her son, and Margaret’s abuse of her son Michael (118).

The method for analysis of this thesis is descriptive and analytic. The books, articles and related websites are used for gathering information for preparing this thesis. Therefore, the following research questions were posed in this study.

1. How can the characters of the novel *Paradise* be the symbols of feminist viewpoint?
2. What is Morrison’s purpose of creating and posing “The Convent”?
3. What does the author want to state about the women who demand freedom in the society?
4. What is Morrison’s intention of beginning her novel by scene of murdering the women in “the Convent”?
6. What is the moral conclusion of the novel?

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

“As a matter of fact, woman's political, social, cultural and economic victimhood have inspired many theoreticians. They have tried to liberate her not only from the framework of knowledge and history but also in the social and cultural fields. Consequently, the rejection of roles such as wives, mothers, and housekeepers has been progressive” (Mbadji 40).

“Nevertheless, the first theories reflected the aspirations and claims of definite social groups. Hence, other scholars have either invented totally new theories or else adjusted the previous ones to their realities. Definitely, it has not been without serious conflicts sometimes” (*ibid*).

The theoretical orientation which is chosen for this study is “feminism”, because its principles agree with the gender situations in *Paradise* and because there are different female characters and different dimensions of their lives, this orientation focused mostly on those parts of feminism which are related to women victimhood and black feminism. Therefore, it is essential to get familiar with the definitions and history of feminism, feminist theory, feminist literary criticism, black feminism, and so on.

“In general, feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies aimed at defining, establishing, and defending a state of equal political, economic, cultural, and social rights for

women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment. A feminist advocates or supports the rights and equality of women" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford English Dictionary).

"Feminist theory, which emerged from feminist movements, aims to understand the nature of gender inequality by examining women's social roles and lived experience; it has developed theories in a variety of disciplines in order to respond to issues such as the social construction of sex and gender" (Chodorow NP, Gilligan 481-517).

"Paradise opens with the murder of an unarmed cluster of women who live in a commune several miles on the outskirts of a predominantly African-American town named Ruby. Subsequent chapters reveal individual stories of each of the women who were killed. The readers also learn the stories of the patriarchs and of the women of the town whose allegiances are torn between the two groups. The women of the commune are viewed as dangerous by the town-dwellers not because they are violent or actively planning a dismantling of the power structures upheld in Ruby, but because of the potential they hold to change the attitudes of the wives of the patriarchs. Their influence is strong because they are staunchly independent free-thinkers. Each of the women who find her way to the commune by accident or by poetry has reached a point of dramatic transition in her life. Each has arrived at the last jumping-off point, a tiny space carved out in a terrifying landscape that has rejected, abused, and disregarded her" (Pernal 101).

"Morrison makes each of her characters significant in Paradise. They are subjects and individuals. No one subject is meant to be representative of black experience, white experience, or female experience. Each character has a particular story and history. The difficulty a reader may face in trying to "place" each character is instructive. It is a novel about humanity and it addresses African-American experience. Race is present but not definable in its meanings and implications. Each character must first be taken for who she is rather than what she represents. This is perhaps in response to the way critics have read her novels as specifically African American rather than broadly human. She grants her characters the same neutral status granted to white characters in mainstream fiction. She has also created a novel that emphasizes the importance of being a woman and the communication, interaction, and compassion that women can share across many boundaries" (101).

## Masculinity and Oppression

"In representing the struggles of African American men to articulate to their masculinity under extreme pressure, the novel also enacts Morrison's own struggle to articulate black masculinity in ways that reveal problems of patriarchal concepts of manhood without reproducing racist stereotypes. By depicting black men committing brutal violence against defenseless women, *Paradise* inevitably enters into current controversies over cultural representations of African American men. However *Paradise* engages many of the stereotypes of black masculinity that are central to this controversy, regarding criminality, misogyny, and violence and locating these men in an overwhelmingly patriarchal community" (Read 527). Tong has stated that:

Feminist theory has examined men, patriarchy, and masculine characteristics predominantly as sources of power, domination, inequality, and subordination. Feminist theory has explored the social construction of masculinity and its implications for the goal of gender equality. The social construct of masculinity is seen by feminists as problematic because it associates males with aggression and competition. Moreover, it reinforces patriarchal and unequal gender relations. (70)

"However, as Marcellus Blount and George P. Cunningham observe in their introduction to *Representing Black Men*, giving the example of a 1993 *Newsweek* article that traced the problems of African American society to the failure of black fathers to fulfill conventional patriarchal roles, this report's "normative premises and prescriptions have insinuated themselves in contemporary racial discourse" (xi). Morrison subverts these premises and prescriptions by representing her town's official history as dominated by individuals with names like "Big Papa" and "Big Daddy," and by two entire generations of men known as the "Old Fathers" and the "New Fathers." Almost every family in her mythical Ruby is controlled by a powerful father figure, and these men also possess hegemonic authority in the public sphere" (Read 527).

### **Inferiority and "the otherness"**

"In ruby, women are inferior. Their responsibility is to cook and please their husbands in bed" (Morrison 82). "This is an innate duty and a social responsibility that each woman should take. And they do with no complaint about it. The society has made them passive and they are submissive. In Ruby, everything is related to the past, back to the foundation of Ruby and Haven. Tradition roots in an opinionated ideology, which is patriarchal and avoids any change or conformation. If anything is to be introduced, it should be (or should change to be) fitted to past ideology. They would never give up their past, as ruby rulers know well that means the power and if they lose it, they would lose their statue, and their leadership" (Hassanian Esfehani NP).

The convent women have suffered from the same patriarchy as well. They are mostly escaped or dismissed from their past lives, and started a new life at the convent. Mavis's past life was filled with fear of pleasing her husband who is so ignorant that he is never pleased. The most private moment of their relationship, which should be most mutually enjoyable and pleasurable, would only bring this question to her mind that whether their sex would "be quick like most always or long, wandering, collapsing or wordless fatigue?" (Morrison 26) And she finds that "it was neither. [As] he didn't penetrate-just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face" (Morrison 26). "This happens in reality, while Mavis feels worse and thinks that her husband mumbles to their children to plan to kill her. In the patriarchal relationship, even between a husband and wife, there is no emotion, no caring or loving. Sex is a duty, which should offer, even if she is not involved in it" (Hassanian Esfehani NP).

"Mavis and the other women escaped to the convent, in seek of freedom, love, peace, parental care and attention. They escape from a traditional patriarchal society to find themselves, their Haven. In the convent, they are all free. They escape anyone, black or white, man or woman, and would help each other to live in peace. They are even free to leave. The convent woman decide to live their lives there, they are not in jail. And as long as they are in the convent, they are not responsible of their husbands or boyfriends' pleasure, neither for patriarchal morality of the whole male-dominated society" ( Hassanian Esfehani NP).

## **Power**

“The other issue is the notion of power, which patriarchal society limits it to men. In a male dominant ideology, a man is respectful because of his power. If there is no power, he would be a woman; the inessential part of society. On the other hand, women are far away from power. They cannot act or decide, and they cannot think or speak by their own. As Robbins explains, patriarchal society reserves the right to speak for men and women are derived from it. By ignoring their words and their subjectivity, society ignores their existence and their identity. The power is not just to rule, but to speak” (Hassanian Esfehani NP).

## **Dependency and Freedom**

“Another fault of the convent women is their independency from Ruby men. If it is not that Ruby is dependent on some of their products, like medicine and herbs, pepper and hot spices, women in convent are free and they can live their own life” (Hassanian Esfehani NP).

## **Religion**

In Ruby, we have two related images, which are the Oven and the church. Oven, which is a sign of unity and landmark of the town should always be respected, and may not be changed in any way. It is also a sign of protecting women from unrestrained sexuality of whites; with the help of this oven, no black woman has ever needed to work in a kitchen belonging to whites (which is potentially dangerous in Ruby point of view).

“Ruby women had once used the Oven and cooked on it, but through these years, its practical function has changed to patriarchal one. “It is [now] the men, not the women, who meet about the Oven” (Taylor 167). Oven is no more an oven, it is now a symbol that represents Ruby’s primal goals, and is interpreted to justify Ruby’s reversed racism and patriarchy. “What was needed back in Haven’s early days had never been needed in Ruby...A good thing, as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shrine”. This holiness of the Oven, represent Ruby’s dogmatism toward their ideology, women, and their situation. They cannot bear any change in their ideologies, or any freedom for women” (Hassanian Esfehani NP).

## **Women of the Town of Ruby and their adaptability under patriarchy**

What a Ruby man was excommunicated from the member of the 8-rock makes the Ruby women was gradually closer on the adaptability way under patriarchy. The New Fathers accept only pure blood which has not been mixed with that of outsiders as the members of the town. Roger Best, however, he is the first person who broke the blood commandment. He got married with a woman who was light-skinned like the white people. Since then, the people of the 8-rock are beginning to avoid him. In Roots, there is a woman who is avoided by the Juffure people, because she has been raped by a white man and got pregnant. The woman was treated as if she were polluted just as in Roger’s case by the same tribe. Especially in Roger’s, the 8-rock men could not allow the betrayal of the patriarchy in his act of selecting a light-skinned woman. Therefore the Ruby women have to adapt the patriarchy way not to be excommunicated from the town like

Roger Best. The women, however, try to inwardly find out where they belong, because their desires are quite different from the 8-rock men (Okuwaki 150).

“While the women of Ruby were fairly easily controlled in the past, the women of the Convent merely by their presence provide an alternative paradigm of womanhood that confounds the Ruby patriarchs” (Tally 68). Tally also stated that “The tensions in Ruby result from the changing meaning of race in the post-civil rights era,” adding that for men like Steward Morgan, “undoing the racial rules of Ruby would unravel the meaning of gender and sexuality as well, turning the social order of Ruby upside down”(28). Schur continues, “The Convent, the town’s double, haunts the community precisely because the fears and psychic wounds that they [the town] brought with them get mapped onto the women of the Convent” (29).

### **Conservative Men of the Patriarchal Town of Ruby**

While the Convent women preserve their individual personalities, the people living in the town of Ruby are subordinate to the rules of the conservative patriarchal community which limits their personal growth. Kella claims that “Community provides the individual with the meaning and purpose, with a sense of belonging to something larger and more powerful than the self” (Naskova 32), but being a part of a community can also suppress an individual’s identity, for it often leaves little room for an independent personal development (40).

### **The Liberal Women of Ruby**

Despite the patriarchal order of the community they are members of, the women of Ruby also become progressive and do not consider themselves to be only the means of preserving the bloodline. Although often their “identity [rests] on the men they married,” for without their husbands they only have one name (Morrison 187), the women of Ruby gradually become liberal as well. ‘But change, independence and liberation are not solely represented through the presence of the beyond-the-pale women of the Convent. Even more significant are the inner distancing from, or resistances to, their men folk amongst the Ruby women themselves’ (Widdowson 311).

While the Convent women manage to heal each other and become better people, the men of Ruby are not conscious of their weakness resulting from the community’s collective trauma. Romero stated that “the people of Ruby continue to be haunted by stories of their past traumas” (418). The Ruby men consider their positions within the community vulnerable and attempt to control the Convent women who oppose the patriarchal values. “[Morrison] shows that men who feel insecure in their grasp on the patriarchal status of manhood will turn to violence to confirm their possession of masculine strength and power” (Read 533). However, there are female characters in Ruby who do not yield to the patriarchal order and also oppose the traditional conservative values” (Noskova 44), each in her own way. Therefore the rigid patriarchal community of Ruby under the influence of these liberal women is bound to moderate and liberalize its values. In this perspective, Consolata is a matriarch in her communities and provides shelter and guidance to the needy.

### **The Women at the Convent and Their Liberal Community Separated from the Patriarchal Social Order**

Although the women come from different parts of the United States and from diverse backgrounds, they have at least one thing in common: their rejection of men who represent the

patriarchal society that has mistreated them. As Widdowson points out, "the Convent is truly a retreat for [these women]" (330). It is a place where anyone in need can stay, no matter what trouble she is in, what her skin color or religious belief may be. No one asks questions unless the person wants to share her problems. Connie is a tolerant, unprejudiced woman. There is only one rule, as she clarifies as soon as Mavis arrives: "Lies not allowed in this place. In this place every true thing is okay" (Morrison 38). "Later Grace, Seneca and Pallas join Mavis and Connie at the Convent, and create what it is considered as a community based on tolerance and liberal views" (Noskova 37-38).

### **The Achievement of Desires through Escapism**

Morrison, in creating the patriarchal town of Ruby in opposition to the matriarchal society of the Convent, is creating a meta-textual relationship to the often misogynistic views. Though she obviously admires and attempts to understand the struggles of women in a patriarchal society.

In the Convent, the women struggle not only to give voice to themselves but also to their individual identities, to "liberate their woman-story" from the patriarchal influence in their lives (Tally 69). This liberation is wholly apparent when Consolata, perhaps the leader of the regular women at the Convent, encourages the women to exorcise their demons. They do this by drawing outlines of themselves on the floor in the cellar and then sharing their stories. Morrison emphasizes not the freedom of their bodies, but of their words, detailing how each voice becomes heard.

### **Gender Inequality**

The community of Ruby in Morrison's novel *Paradise* follows the patriarchal model which is deeply embedded in the American society. This model is based upon the dominance of men and submissiveness of women who are both materially and emotionally dependent on their husbands. "Most men in a patriarchal society fear and resent women who do not assume traditional passive roles" (Hooks 79). Consequently, Hooks notes, "in patriarchal homes men are likely to feel threatened even if women have a babysitting job that provides them extra grocery money" (79). "Men in wholly black communities, like Ruby in *Paradise*, are no different in their perception of their roles in the community, which survives from the past" (Noskova 13).

Moreover, black men who are "victimized by racism" need to somehow establish their masculinity, therefore they "act as sexist oppressors of black women" (Hooks 88). For black men, unlike white men to whom patriarchal society automatically grants their status, have to endeavor to earn their dominance. However, the patriarchal order is also often supported by women who respect the traditional approach to the roles of men and women in a community. Their stance is based upon the "assumption that men find their identity through work and are personally fulfilled by acting as breadwinners" (Hooks 93). "But the urge to demonstrate their maleness is connected to the time when young men attain maturity, much earlier than they have to provide for their families. For example they manifest their courage and capability of violence. This is, according to Hooks, typical for black men" (Noskova 13-14).

"It seems that violence is a crucial aspect of black men's masculinity, but Hooks adds an interesting observation" (Noskova 14).

All the attempts which have made throughout this article were for clarifying some hard situation of women, not just among black community but also all around the world, anywhere which the women live by oppression and consider as the “other”. It is hoped that all women all around the world can realize their rights as men and can live with liberty and freedom without any physical or spiritual harassments which impose by men. This article sheds light on how living under patriarchy can result in extreme conflicts which may be ameliorated to some extent by adaptation or escapism.

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