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## Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: A Hell of Black Women's Dark Experiences

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### **Abstract:**

*An Intelligent hell would be better than a stupid Paradise- Victor Hugo*

In general, the word 'Black' brings negativity and dark image to the human mind. It is distinctly evident that the blacks are abused, ill-treated and exploited by the Whites because of their skin colour. However, demoralizing of the black women by the black men is considered as the darkest side of their lives. Although it is common to find the suffering Black women characters in all of her novels like, loveless Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970); Peace less Sula Peace in *Sula* (1973); pitiful Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* (1977) and Self-denying Sethe in *Beloved* (1987); Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) discloses the gender inequality under the male-controlled stringency in the black community. Notably, 'Paradise' is a place where everyone longs to be. Because it assures the sense of joy, comfort, contentment and security. In contrast, the novel *Paradise* elucidates the melancholic breathes of black women.

**Keywords:** Patriarchal rigidity, Physical and Verbal abuse, Troubled Pasts and Violent-Deaths.

### **Introduction:**

In his review of Toni Morrison's 7<sup>th</sup> novel *Paradise* (1997) to N.Y. Times, Michiko Kakutani, asserted that the novel was "heavy-handed," "a contrived, formulaic book that mechanically pits men against women, old against young, the past against the present"

(January 6, 1998). The novel *Paradise* is centered on the black community which desires to create their own 'Paradise' excluding light-skinned blacks from their community. In this process, the men of the town fail to create the expected Paradise in the town. Besides that, they project an unspoken prejudice on the women who stay outside the utopian town named 'Ruby'. These women provide refuge to the 'suffering, helpless, abandoned and deceived women to stay in their 'Convent' - not a nunnery but a mansion of love care and comfort.

In the novel, the first ever built town in Oklahoma is called 'Haven'. This town was formed by nine families who have desired to live in an isolated place due to the marginalization they faced pertaining to the colour of their skin in the public life and employability opportunities. Eventually, the 'Haven' was incapacitated after World War II. Considering their forefather's decision to build an autonomous society, the men of Haven decides to build a dreamland with the fifteen families. They named the new-all black town as 'Ruby' under the name of Morgans' sister who was refused to give medical care because of her skin colour. Naming the new town symbolizes the racial discrimination and the powerlessness of black men in protecting their women from the racial prejudice. Hence, the men of the town resolved to follow stringent rules with regard to race (exclusion of the whites and the light skinned) and regulating the women's conduct. This decision centres the irony of the title that the desired paradise they wanted to build becomes the place of utter violence, gender inequality, patriarchal-rigidity and the source of bitter experience for women which ultimately leads to the 'massacre'.

### **Patriarchal rigidity:**

Morgan twins of Ruby epitomize Patriarchal rigidity in the town. Besides being stern in their exclusion of the light skinned blacks, these men took control over the conduct of Women in Ruby. These protocols caused negative impact on the town's men like Menus and Roger Best. Menus was not allowed to get married to the light skinned woman he loved. Therefore, he becomes alcoholic. Roger Best's marriage with light skinned Delia Best ended up in her tragic death as the men of Ruby refuse her to seek the medical help in her emergency. It should be noted here that the town's new name 'Ruby' is given due to the terrible death of Twins' Sister Ruby smith in her childbirth. Nevertheless, the men of Ruby consider their decision is in accordance with founding fathers of the town.

The first assignment of the men is to create a 'safe-heaven' on earth where there is holy, joyful and contended life. These men are unaware of their own conduct which blinded

them to be greedy for money and power. There was a “Convent” which is seventeen miles away from the town Ruby. It was once a fanciful mansion and a place of learning for Indian girls where “stilled Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget” (Morrison 4). However, the town’s men perceived the ‘Convent’ as a place of ‘female malice’. The predetermined- men of Ruby consider the Convent women as ‘bodacious black evils unredeemed by Mary’ (Morrison 18). There are anecdotes that support this notion. They believe that the Convent is the reason for disastrous situations in the town; a cold-hearted daughter bashing her mother down staircases, the waves in corporeal illnesses, the birth of four gravely sick children in the same family, audacious daughters, and endangered brides. Hence, they called them “detritus and “thrown way people” (Morrison 3). In view of town’s men, the women who are under the protectorate of men are upright but not the ones who live independently. Trudier Harris in his book *Fiction and Folklore* strengthens this point: “Must all women subsumed under some community standards, or ostracized if they do not adhere to such standards” (1991:188).

In contrast, the Convent functioned as a place of solace to not only the outsiders but also to the town’s women. Soane Deek, the wife of Deacon, though, confronts Connie about her illegal affair with her husband eventually makes friends with her. Her psychological grief of her son’s death is healed by the ‘tonics’ offered by Connie- the convent lady. Arnette Fleetwood, impregnated by K.D- the town’s only heir, also takes shelter at Convent. Although she aborts her child in self-harm, it is speculated in the town that it is because of Convent’s Women’s Physical abuse to Arnette. Bellie Delia, a child labeled promiscuous and wild is welcomed by the Convent women. The care of the convent women towards Menus delivers him from his alcoholism. However, the men of the town, as rightly affirmed by Michiko Kakutani: “...are almost uniformly control freaks, eager to dismiss independent women as sluts and witches, and determined to make everyone to submit to their will” (The N.Y. Times, January 6, 1998).

### **Physical and Verbal abuse:**

The women in *Paradise*- exclusively the women live in the Convent are considered to be less than humans. The Convent, once a mansion of embezzler turned into boarding school and then to a Convent which accommodates people in need of safety, peace and comfort. Although, the Convent stays away from the young town ‘Ruby’ it is not a scary place. Connie, the woman who receives the first guest of Convent called ‘Mavis’ delivers her from the fright by saying “scary things not always outside, Most scary things is inside”

(Morrison 39). Mavis runs away from threatening twin children whom she believed to plot for her killing and Frank, an abusive husband who calls her “the dumbest bitch on the planet” (Morrison 37). Mavis also suffered from forceful sex from him. Gigi, another woman, inadvertently lands in the Convent. She is deceived by her boyfriend who makes her believe that there is a rock formation resembling a couple making love. However, she neither finds that place of love nor the love of her boyfriend. In addition to this, it is observed that she was also misguided by a man saying that there is a pair of trees grow intertwined in the town called ‘Ruby’ and they promise an incredible happiness to those who squeeze themselves in between the trunks. At this juncture, Morrison visibly denotes how men take the advantage of women who trust them for love and delight. Seneca, another woman who seeks shelter at the convent also was immediately welcomed and cared for because she suffered from her unhappy relationship with abusive old boyfriend named Eddie Turtle. All these women who are outsiders of ‘Ruby’ are comforted by Connie- the spiritual guide of the Convent. These women are able to forget the physical and verbal abuse, abandonment and deception they experienced in their past.

On the other hand, Gigi becomes a love object to K.D, the expected heir of Morgan's Line, He impregnates Arnette Fleetwood but does not feel responsible for that. Furthermore, he takes control of Arnette's life. When Arnette confronts him of his flirting with ‘Gigi’, he slaps on her face. This physical abuse damages Arnette's reputation in the community and she seeks refuge at the Convent. It is because of his strong faith on his uncles that “However disgusted both were, K.D. knew they would not negotiate a solution that would endanger him or future of Morgan Money” (Morrison 57). Bellie Delia, a virgin in fact, is labeled as licentious for the absence of underwear in the horse ride as a child of three. For this reason, she was shunned by the town's people. In the deeper line, it is observed that she is the granddaughter of Delia Best, who is a light skinned woman. Therefore, it is markedly known that the brand she got as ‘immoral’ is because of their racial prejudice.

In contrast, the town's elder Morgan, while returning to US in 1919 witness two men punching a young prostitute in the New York City. When he observed the scene, he perceived men in the scene to be the Whites and the woman as Black. Though involved in the fight to deliver the whore, runs away from the scene owing to the threat from the police. This regret in Elder Morgan motivated him and the founding fathers of Haven and Ruby to guarantee women's safety. Ironically, town's women also suffered from this patriarchal stringency.

### **Troubled Pasts and Violent deaths:**

Woman, though, a fragile character by birth, still have the right to live a happy, independent and free life. Whereas, all the women in the novel –be it a woman of Ruby or resident of the Convent; seemed to have troubled pasts that made them to be terrified, deserted, betrayed, labeled and molested. Connie, the comforter of the woman/ girls that come in need of shelter at the Convent opines that these are “broken girls and frightened girls” (Morrison 222). The troubled pasts of the Convent women turned their lives at the Convent as self-sustaining, brave, beautiful, Independent, compassionate, responsible, guilt-free and spiritual. The dark pasts of the Convent women starting from Connie’s experience of rape as a child, Mavis’s fear of physical and verbal abuse from Frank and her children, Gigi’s hopeless search for the false ecstasy and love from her boyfriend, Soane’s traumatic life with abusive husband, Pallas’s terrible shock from the unexpected relationship of her boy with her mother etc., brought these women to a real ‘Paradise’ called the Convent established by Mary Magna, a caring and compassionate woman who, in her death bed too can make the women feel “ it was worth getting sick , dying even , to see that kind concern in an adults’ eyes”(Morrison 224). Mary Magna is the one who made Connie realize that “body is nothing” and “Spirit is everything” (Morrison 263).

After the death of Mary Magna, Connie takes care of the Convent. She made the woman who came in need of comfort to realize that they are worth living in this world. Connie instills courage in the frightful mind of Mavis and makes her realize that she has “Perfect Peacon hands” (Morrison 42) that made her to handle things quickly. The Convent is the only place where the problems of these women are cared for, listened to without any judgment. The “loud Dreaming” therapy introduced by Connie relieves all the Convent women from their haunting past. Morrison states that “Unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (Morrison 266)

The moral weakness of the men and the unrest in their hearts about free and independent woman who deny the help of Ruby’s men made them turn violent. The men who decided to “ impede or kill”( Morrison 3), are armed for their assignment with hand guns , hand cuffs, mace and a palm leaf cross among other items. Though, Lone, a woman who overhears the plot of the men to crusade on the Convent, could not succeed in stopping it. However, the armed men start their mission by shooting the gates of the Convent which is unlocked always. This symbolizes the implied chauvinism of the men on the Convent women. The waist high mist in which the men start their mission reveals the ambiguity of their mission. The men are astonished to find the cool and tranquil interior of the Convent.

They mistook the Catholic iconography as idol worship and the luxuries found in their bedroom like, name cards written in lipsticks, hammocks rather than beds, astrology charts, letters written in blood, baby shoes, teething rings and the absence of Christian Crosses made them to believe that these are sinful women. Hence, they aim their rifles and handguns for their lethal storm. They think that they first shot a white girl and are afraid of the enforcement of the White law. But there is no evidence for a white girl living in the Convent. . In spite of Deek's resistance to stop aiming at Connie, Steward takes revenge on Connie, who questioned the male authority in the lives of the convent women. Morrison metaphorically remarked that "the sign of racial purity that they have taken for granted had become a stain"( Morrison 194). The blood of these women is like an un-washable stain in the 'Ruby'. It is not certain that the women of the convent are dead or alive because the bodies disappeared from there. However, Belie Delia, who believe them as holy and powerful, assures that Convent women will "reappear with blazing eyes , war paint and huge hands to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town"( Morrison 308).

### **Conclusion:**

Briefly, it is understood that the cruel act of these men made them guilty of what they have done. The purpose of building an all-new black town in which, they believe, that there is no need for cemetery became the place of horrific death and violence. Richard Misner, a preacher of the town, rightly points the men's mission, "How could so clean and blessed mission devour itself and become the world they had escaped?" (Morrison 292). The name of the novel is obviously ironic that the utopian town 'Haven' or the all-new black town 'Ruby' are the replica of hell on earth. In contrast, the Convent is treated as the 'Paradise' for its openness, generosity and compassion. Mysteriously, the vanished dead bodies reappear, not as fearful and troubled women but as compassionate and gracious people in reconciliation of their past. Gigi appears to her father who has been in prison for a long time. She conveys her warm presence to him. Mavis, meets her daughter Sally and they both apologize each other. Pallas, who ran away from her mother Dee Dee appears bearing sword as Greek goddess of justice and war called 'Athena'. At the end of the novel, Consolata (Conie) is found in the lap of singing woman anticipating the work they have to do "down here in Paradise" (Morrison 318). Succinctly, at home, in a town or in a country; with patriarchal rigidity and gender inequality no one can create a PARADISE but HELL.

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