

# The Silence of Women in Toni Morrison's Paradise

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**Abstract:** *Paradise* (1997) is a Nobel-Prize novel which completes the trilogy including *Beloved* (1987) *Jazz* (1992). Morrison in *Paradise* depicts a vivid portrayal of women who live in a Convent in the town Ruby (Oklahoma). The conflict is between these women and the men who run the Convent. Throughout the story, the treatment of the women is noticed which denotes the patriarchal society that they live in, disturbing their own freedom and choices. The novels of Morrison are basically a focus on black women rather than a feminist approach. Morrison deliberates these concerns of sexual oppression, patriarchal society, and racist issue; but she doesn't allow them to control over her whole experience.

**Key words:** conflict, black women , patriarchy, sexual oppression, racism.

## 1 Introduction

Toni Morrison is born in Ohio, United States of America in 1931. She is a very well-known feminist writer in America and a Nobel Prize winner. In her literary life, she is occupied by Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy. Her famous first novel is *The Bluest Eyes* in (1970), then *Sula* (1974) and *Song of Solomon* (1977) where she is described in *Baltimore Sun* as "at the top of her form, uniting meticulous craftsmanship of early works like *The Bluest Eyes* and *Sula* with the magical realism and deep moral insight". Her works are considered significantly in American modern literature; Brownworth states that Morrison is "who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American reality." (*Many Faces of Slavery*, 2008).

*Paradise* (1997) is a Nobel-Prize novel which completes the trilogy including *Beloved* (1987) *Jazz* (1992). Morrison in *Paradise* depicts a vivid portrayal of women who live in a Convent in the town Ruby (Oklahoma). The conflict is between these women and the men who run the Convent. Each chapter is given under the name of female characters: the women who live in the Convent are Mavis, Grace, Consolata, Seneca, and Pallas. While the townswomen who have their own chapters are Patricia, Lone, and Save-Marie.

Throughout the story, the treatment of the women is noticed which denotes the patriarchal society where they live in, disturbing their own freedom and choices. The novels of

Morrison are basically a focus on black women rather than a feministic approach; she has confirmed " it's off-putting to some readers, who may feel that I'm involved in writing some kind of

feminist tract. I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it's a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things." ( Jaffrey, 1998)

## 2 Portrayal of women

Hooks in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* (1984) defines feminism politically "a movement to end sexist oppression" (26) While it is defined culturally by Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* (1985) as "it is a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas, and behaviour uniquely, or traditionally characteristics of women" (131). In general, feminists have been trying to find out the reasons why and the way power can be shared with women: this is besides of cultural values, beliefs, and social or political equality under high concern to be achieved for women.

Black women, are on the top of the discussion, whom they suffer in accomplishing what is being called "womanhood". They abhor sexist and racist oppression; they want their unique way to practice "womanhood", regardless to gender and race, Denard states "for black women, their concern with feminism is usually more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political. As a result, they tend to be concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism" (171). ( *What Moves at the Margin*, 2008)

Morrison's development of the female characters is similar in a way most of black female writers deal with feminism. Morrison deliberates these concerns of sexist oppression, patriarchal society,

and racist issue; but she doesn't allow them to control over her whole experience. She doesn't provide a solution for the women issues; she presents the problem only that relates to women or one might argue she questions these issues to some extent as Denard further debates that "Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed in spite of and often because of their oppression. For as ethnic cultural feminist, it is a feminism that encourages allegiance to rather than an alienation from ethnic group that she ultimately wants to achieve" (172).

Morrison starts her novel *Paradise* in a horrifying manner "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out there." (3) What comes to reader's mind at the very beginning of the novel are: the treatment of women and the gender discrimination of black and white women which the latter is the core theme of Morrison's writing, "in her novels, Morrison begins her search by addressing what is most intimate and meaningful to her- the black family- and then broadens her scope to the black community, regions of the United States, foreign lands and alien culture, history and reality" (Heinze, 12)

The first chapter is named Ruby who is one of the women in Oklahoma, after her death they name the place Ruby as a memory. Morrison artistically creates an image in reader's mind which is full of darkness, gloominess, and emptiness when one realizes it is not a suitable place for human beings; womanhood is ignored in Ruby "there is no window" "at each end of the hall is a bathroom. As each man enters one. Either is working his jaws because both believe they are prepared for anything. In one bathroom, the biggest, the taps are two small and dowdy for the wide sink. The bathtub rests on the backs of four mermaids- their tails split wide for the tube's security. Their breasts arched for stability. The tile underfoot is bottle green. A Modess box is on the toilet tank and a bucket of soiled things stands nearby. There is no toilet paper" (*Paradise*, 9). The townsmen are all described as rigid and severe creatures that they enjoy watching the pain of these women and their bitter life. It is note-worthy that Morrison depicts the hunger of these men, using the women for fulfilling sexual pleasure, rather raping would be a term here "Mavis tried not to stiffen as Frank made a settling-down noises on the mattress. Did he have his shorts on? If she knew that she would know whether he was looking to have sex, but she couldn't find out without touching him". (*Paradise*, 25) Morrison herself stated regarding her novels neither for patriarchy nor matriarchy even, the fact that Morrison might not intend to do so, yet when it comes to writing unconsciously the whole portrayal of women is depicted in that

way. She has effective images of women and their exploitation in the society.

The silence of these women in Ruby is another major issue which is very difficult to hear a woman answering or having own opinion towards the men, they rather shows her pitiable agreement with silence or nodding; even though sometimes they do not need to understand when they are talking to:

"I don't understand, Deek."

"I do." He smiled up at her. "you don't need to".

She had not meant that she didn't understand what he was talking about. She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problem to help them out." (107) This vision of women given in *Paradise* is more akin to Buchi Emecheta's, a female African writer, novel *The Bride Price* (1976) in which she deals with all female characters by showing their doubtful existence of being. Aku-nna, the protagonist, experiences the same patriarchal society like the Morrisons' characters; they are being exploited by men as the male-ego of male characters here in these two novels are succinctly depicted: women are created for serving their lord-husband. Being obedient and submissive are the typical women of that time. However, Aku-nna dies at the end of the novel which is a happy moment for her as she can escape from the society, male dominated society. So as two black novelists, Emecheta and Morrison share the same view of treating women.

Escapism is not easy to be achieved for these women from the ill-managed society, death can be the only beam of hope to be away and rest forever. Consolota, one of the female characters in the Convent, has wished to die many times "in the good clean darkness of the cellar, Consolota woke to the wrenching disappointment of not having died the night before...each night she sank into sleep determined it would be the final one" (221) Consolota and Aku-nna both share same features, to some extent, in the way being treated by surrounding male characters. Furthermore, virginity is another issue for black community as a reason, Aku-nna's first man whom he is in love with leaves her due to the statement that she is not virgin anymore which brings black mark on her personality. Consolota is not virgin as well, which also leads a black scare on her name and obliged to do whatever she is told "Consolota was not a virgin. One of the reasons she so gratefully accepted Mary Magna's hand over the litter like a dove's wing, was the dirty poking her ninth year subjected her to. But never, after the white hand had enclosed her

filthy paw, did she know any male or want to, which must have been why being love-struck after they celibate years took on an edible quality" (*Paradise*, 228). Whatever the reasons are, the blame goes to the women as if falsehood naturally given to the personality of women as the narrator tells the reader "the blame usually went to the girls. A girl who had had adventures before marriage was never respected in her new home, everyone in the village would know about her past, especially if she was unfortunate enough to be married to an egocentric man" (*The Bride Price*, 85).

*The Bluest Eyes* (1970) again deals with female characters in which Morrison explores what is to be damaging of sexist and racist oppression on black women "...the perpetuation by the larger society of a physical Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty as a measurement of self worth. Blonde hair and blue eyes, according to this standard, are considered the prerequisites for female beauty and virtue. A physical standard of beauty, Morrison believes, commercializes the virtue of all women, but because the inherent origin of the physical traits glamorized in this standard are Anglo-Saxon, it suggests that women who are not Anglo-Saxon are not beautiful and hence inferior" (Denard, 172). Morrison's harsh voice can be detected from the novel, and Pecola's innocent longing to beauty and blue eyes, Morrison herself states "the concept of physical beauty as virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it. Physical beauty has nothing to do with our past, present, and future". (Behind the making of the Black Book, 89).

Pecola is the protagonist of the novel, a woman with no owner-parents always fight verbally and physically, especially her drunken father who makes Pecola pregnant (raping) and leaves her with a child. Pecola has always been reminded for her "ugliness" which brings her desire to get "blue eyes" in her life. Morrison very sensitively tells the readers about this black lady in the novel throughout the narrator Claudia.

Heinze (1993) has stated that in most of Morrison's novels colourism functions has detected as an addiction for the black female characters. It is a dream for these black characters to obtain white skin – beauty more specifically. The ideology of "beauty" is concerned with Pecola "trying to discover the secret of ugliness, the ugliness that made her ignored or despised at school by teachers and classmates alike. She was the only member of her class who sat alone at a double desk...her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her, and called

on her only when everyone was required to respond. She also knew that when one of the girls at school wanted to be particularly insulting to a boy, or wanted to get an immediate response from him, she would say, "Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove !" and never fail to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused" (*The Bluest Eye*, 39) then she understands that "if her eyes, those eyes that held the pictures, and knew the sights- if those eyes of hers were different, that is to say beautiful, she herself would be different." (40).

There is an ideal beauty which is expressed best by Claudia, the narrator in *The Bluest Eyes*, who is incapable of understating the universal meaning of the white babe doll. This is because the novel is not merely about a young black girl, Pecola, it also concerns with another story who examines a white babe dolls to discover the beauty that they hold: "I had only one desire: to dismember it. To see of what it was made, to discover the darkness, to find the beauty, the desirability that had escaped me, but apparently only me. Adults, older girls, shops, magazines, newspapers, window signs—all the world had agreed that a blue-eyed, yellow-haired, pink-skinned doll was what every girl treasured. "here," they said, "this is beautiful, and if you are on this day "worthy" you may have it."..I could not love it. But I could see what it was that all the world said was lovable." (20) Yet, the idea of beauty is the core theme for her female black characters—rather an obsession one might add psychologically—as a result, Morrison suggests this is a biological given, there is no guiltiness in having so. Furthermore, she clearly states that assuming superiority by colour distinction would bring weaknesses rather than strengths "Morrison's concern with colourism exposes the many sides of a problem that continues to assault the black community" (Heinze, 24).

Pecola never loved herself. Always seeing herself through the eyes of others, she never saw anything to love. At the end of the novel Claudia views Pecola's destruction as the "fault of earth, the land, of our town" stating that "this soil is bad for certain kinds of flowers". Here the blame goes to nature as if nature has a hand in making this disappointed situation for these black exploited women. It is worth-mentioning the black community scandals the pure living of a twelve-year-old girl who has been raped by her father and never wish for her babe to live "certain seeds it will not nurture, certain fruit it will not bear, and when the land kills its own volition, we acquiesce and say the victim has no right to live. We are wrong, of course, but it doesn't matter. It is too late" (*The Bluest Eyes*, 160).

Morrison denotes that Pecola is the victim of the sexist and racist oppression of an Anglo-Saxon standard of female beauty. Readers may not hear any rebellious voice against this standard of beauty, it is rather Morrison's voice on society that makes these women victims. So, the enemy of these issues is not men only, black or white, it is entire culture in Morrison's perspective.

*Sula* (1974) is another novel which strongly deserves a feminist study in relation to the personality of the innocent female characters such as Sula. Here, Morrison's approach dealing with feminism is different from other novels; as a result there is the implications of a black women's self-conscious objection to these oppressions. They believe that the societal roles and traditionality of black community are too limiting "I know what every black woman in this country is doing" Sula says to Nel "dying just like me". Denard confirms that "these characters especially resent the black woman's acceptance of this role for herself. Thus even at the risk of distancing themselves from other black women, they seek to assert a sense of self defined outside of the parameters set for women by the black community as well as by the society at large" (173).

Morrison gives this permission to hear from Sula, in a conversation with Morrison, stating "Sula knows all there is to know about herself because she examines herself, she is experimental with herself, she is perfectly willing to think the unthinkable thing and so on. But she has trouble making a connection with other people and just feeling that lovely sense of accomplishment of being close in a very strong way". Sula is hopeful when she leaves Medallion, her home town, hoping to find a more fulfilling life than any other women in her community. But she returns back to Medallion at last after being disappointed from any change in her life. Sula is one of the voiced-out characters among Morrison's in which she stands as a rebellion against any reactions towards women. Yet, any rebellion she may have taken is restricted to the barriers of her ethnic society.

The issues of "love" is another concern in Morrison's writing, that is a lack of love for women in her novels. Love does not exist in *Ruby*, the men completely complicate the terms "like" or love". What is there for these men is probably a complete "likeness" as an evidence of having sexual desire, and hurting the women physically. Morrison describes the word "Love" realistically "Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether you like somebody or whether somebody likes you or you can put up with somebody in order to get something or someplace you want or you believe it has to do with how your

body responds to another body like robins or bison or maybe you believe love is how forces or nature or luck is benign to you in particular not maiming or killing you if so doing it for your own good. Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tails of your hunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always" (*Paradise*, 141).

It is stated clearly that love is not easy nor its natural given to people, it something should be learned. In *Ruby* that sense of learning 'Love' is already ignored because 'Love' is lost by itself. This makes the society lost and brings bitterness for the women affectively. It is an empty land even the title of the novel '*Paradise*' is ironically given by Morrison, the moments of mercy and love are already gone. However Morrison herself wanted to give the title of the novel *War* but is changed by her editor. Yet this irony makes the characters optimistic enough in searching for another land where they can find their dreams and hopes, Mavis ironically after stroking her wound says "this is the most peaceful place on earth" (*Paradise*, 182).

### 3 Conclusion

Morrison is an outstanding feminist figure in American Modern Literature. Her fame lies in the portrayal of black society in America. Her female characters can be witnesses in supporting her work. Morrison shows her indirect anger in having sexist and racist concepts in relation to white community. She focuses on an ethical cultural value as a group for the whole black community; a community which lacks societal support and vitality. They need a place where womanhood can be practiced like the rest of the women regardless to race, sex and gender.

In *Paradise*, silence covers up all the women; bad treatment is practiced by the town men. The characters in *Paradise* are all mute-figures, unable to speak out about their needs. Morrison is unable to give a chance to these women to criticize as they are not allowed to. But the words can carry enough to tell readers what the chaotic place they are in. Pecola dies at dreaming of having "beauty" and "blue eyes" so that she can carry on her life with happiness. Sula is, different from other female characters, admired for her bravery. She is against all the bad traditions in the black community, failure to make any changes as she is bound to the societal boundaries. A silence cry is heard from each of these

fictional women who are in dire need of something; differing from one character to another. Shortly, it is a general picture of black women in a black community where their needs and rights are totally ignored.

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