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PROBLEMATICS OF BONDING IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* stands apart as a milestone in African-American and American literature. Morrison's mission in literature is to project and highlight the problematics inherent in African-American life and social structure. Morrison has a distinct style and uses a distinct technique to portray the maladies inherent in African-American life, especially, in the life of the women. Morrison's suffering as a child, an adolescent, an adult, a mother and a matriarch has seen no dearth. In later life this suffering has been universalized delicately and boldly in as representation in her many novels. The doubly oppressed females inhabiting the fictional world of *Paradise* deftly delineate the cultural confusion in America and the crave for togetherness and human bonding. Morrison's *Paradise* is a novel that projects a racist and sexist society where women suffer to a maximum and yet do not surrender to their fate. In this article I have attempted to focus on the social and internal problematics of women inhabiting the fictional world in *Paradise*. Her women subject to various crises of existence do not annihilate themselves; rather, take recourse to non-Christian pagan rituals for internal healing and harmonious co-existence.

Keywords: Representation, doubly oppressed, cultural confusion, bonding.

Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* stands apart as a milestone in African-American and American literature. Morrison's mission in literature is to project and highlight the problematics inherent in African-American life and social structure. Her mission started in 1970 with *The Bluest Eye*. Four novels later, she was honoured with the Nobel prize. She has been successful in putting across that African-Americans are not a marginal class but are as important to the American mainstream as the settlers. With a distinctive style and a technique of her own, she has portrayed the maladies of African-American life, especially that of the African-American female. She suffered as a child, an adolescent, a young married woman, a mother and a matriarch. She can neither resist nor voice the cultural confusion and her crave for familial bonding and material acceptance in mainstream America. Morrison's *Paradise* is a novel that projects a racist and sexist society where women suffer to a maximum. In this article I have attempted to focus on the social and internal problematics of women inhabiting the fictional world in *Paradise*.

Women subject to various crises of existence do not annihilate themselves; rather, take recourse to

non-Christian pagan rituals often used by the Afro-American women in order to attain psychic healing.

> Morrison's *Paradise* has sometimes been misunderstood and criticized. Geoffrey Bent, for example, has put down *Paradise* as Morrison's weakest book. He has been too quick to react and says that Morrison's stature as America's premier black novelist—a celebrated and gifted chronicler of the African-American experience—makes this lapse all the more painful; one feels obliged to dredge up the pieces and reassemble the wreck to determine what went wrong. (145)

Some of the novel's faults, he says, can be traced to flawed strategies or miscalculated effects. He feels that the brunt of the failure of *Paradise* lies in the "didactic purity that underlies every paradise" (145).

The one thing that can be said and reiterated in this context is that Morrison's novels do not attempt at achieving a traditional happily-ever- after picture of paradise. They are quite cerebral. In fact, in an open discussion of the novel at the May 1998 meeting of the American Literature Association, about fifty participants shared their frustrations in understanding this novel. Referring to this Philip Page says that "[Morrison] describes having to work very hard to create three-dimensional characters" (637).

Paradise is a story where African-American women of various ages and various backgrounds find freedom and happiness in isolation from a racial and sexually oppressive society in a Convent in Oklahoma, far away from everywhere. But unfortunately, their paradise is short-lived. The dominant patriarchal society of Ruby does not allow for a 'Herland' to exist. The Convent threatens Ruby's basic power structure and questions its dominance. Hence, it is out to extinguish this paradise before the concept of this kind of freedom can contaminate its hegemony.

In order to generate universal concern and comprehension Morrison vividly uses her productive imagination in *Paradise* (1998). Thus, she reduces the fictional gap between the reader and the text. The images stand out in the mind of the reader. The gaze of the reader penetrates the images drawn up by Morrison and goes beyond it. Philip Page is of the opinion that:

> Readers are familiar with Morrison's tendency to delve beyond the *what* into the more problematic *how* and *why*, with her non-linear, polyvocal, multistranded narratives; and with such challenging techniques as jump-cutting radically from one scene and/or perspective to another and dropping unexplained tidbits that leaves readers suspended, waiting for more information. (637)

Morrison does not directly provide the information. She records reality as well as evokes something that still remains unmarked, unravelled. She provokes the reader to feel something more than what the reader understands.

"In *Paradise*", says Page, "the reader is forced to work hard simply to enter into the text" (638). Here Morrison constructs an elaborate model of reading and interpreting. For this she has deliberately made use of certain tools of the fantastic mode. For example, there is no closure in the novel and in the fictional world that is created, "many answers are not given or are hidden so well that readers are forced to look for the answers" (642). Morrison achieves this by employing the images of productive imagination—what is often termed by the Greeks as *phantasia*. These images have no periphery or boundary. "The focus may be expanded or moved, but this is not sufficient to establish the sense of a pre-existent ground; the ground comes into existence only through our mental gaze" (Schwenger 13). The effect of this curious groundlessness, i.e., vastness can be compared to the featureless grounds in the external world of fantasy, wherein we encounter "darkness, dense fog, or blank blue sky. These are never perfectly blank: the eye projects various stimuli into these fields, at times even to the point of hallucination ... these factors explain much about the nature of visionary experiences, which commonly occur in solitude under conditions of sensory deprivation" (113-114).

The four Convent women help us to understand how the boundary of the self gets fudged when it becomes necessary to heal one another. Consolata helps heal the four women

through her use of "templates" (*Paradise* 263) and "loud dreaming" (264). The templates—the outlines of themselves that Connie makes the women draw on the basement floor—become self-representations through which they are able to get outside their self-destructing egos and see themselves, interpret themselves and thereby begin to cure themselves.

> The templates are analogous to fictional selves, doubling the self and thereby allowing each woman to 'see in' to herself, to interpret herself, and thus, to find a viable identity.... In loud dreaming they not only unburden themselves of their traumatic pasts, but as each one talks, the other enters into her story, in full empathy with her, in intuitive fellowship akin to Lone and Connie's reviving of the dead. (642)

This mutual therapy and transcendent group interpretation helps them pass beyond the boundaries of individual and other, and beyond life and death. Stepping into a template and seeing into another self in loud dreaming demonstrates a kind of fantastic and intuitive knowing in the merger of self with others. Ricoeur asserts that understanding requires "the transference of ourselves into another's psychic life" (72-73).

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison uses productive imagination as a tool. The mode of imaging in the text shapes the images in the readers' psyche. The reader participates in the process and cannot ignore or differentiate himself from the plight of the characters in the fictional world of *Paradise*. Morrison's technique here can be well understood by Christopher Collins' explanation of groundlessness that emerges out of 'productive' imagination. He says that, "Bound as we are to the sequence of the words, we can only imagine what the current words ask us to imagine" (251). The very first sentence of *Paradise* is a pointer to how the reader is shocked by the immediate sequence of words.

> They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here. They are seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other. Hiding places will be plentiful in the Convent, but there is time and the day has just begun.
>
> They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns. (3)

The nine men shoot the "white girl first". Instantly the power of the dominant male over the female is exposed irrespective of the race to which she belongs. The menace of the men is further explicit as they are "obliged to stampede or kill" and they have an array of weapons. Morrison explains the action of the men of Ruby.

> Outrages that had been accumulating all along took shape as evidence. A mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day... And what went on at the Oven these days was not to be believed. So when nine men decided to meet there, they had to run everybody off the place with shotguns before they could sit in the beams of their flash lights to take matters into their own hands. The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes' was in the convent. And in the convent were those women. (11)

The explanation though ridiculous makes sense to the reader. The reader tries to sympathize with the motive of the men of Ruby. Incidentally,

> The town Ruby, named after a woman, is a kind of woman itself, a kind of ideal woman constructed by men for themselves and their companion women, who are above all responsible for enacting and representing the ideals of the men... The name of the town itself suggests the biblical feminine ideal of Proverb 35, the good woman 'whose price is above rubies', who works

> tirelessly and selflessly on behalf of her household. (Storace 66)

So the men of Ruby were baffled by the unnatural happenings and they easily shifted the responsibility for things that they could neither understand nor control onto something else that was absolutely external and not connected with their existence—the women who lived in the convent. These women did not conform to the rules set up by the patriarchs of Ruby and hence were supposed to be the cause of all evil. They had to be either killed or exorcised to save the community from further evil.

Morrison takes advantage of the naïveté of the reader. The reader believes what he is told. But as his curiosity is fanned he reads on and gets involved with the text. The narration makes the reader feel what the women in the convent, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Pallas and Connie, felt and also understand why they had escaped into the isolation of the convent. The reader empathizes with the women of the convent and starts feeling as trapped, as cornered and as hunted as them. There is an anxiety to escape from the impending danger in the form of the determined killers from Ruby. The anxiety gathers and rides high till the women are no longer hiding. "They are loose" (*Paradise* 287):

> Three women preparing food in the kitchen hear a shot. A pause. Another shot, cautiously they look through the swinging door. Backed by light from the slanted door shadows of armed men loom into the hallway. The women race to the game room and close the door, seconds before the men position themselves in the hall. They hear footsteps pass and enter the kitchen they have just left. No windows in the game room—the women are trapped and know it... An alabaster ashtray slams into Arnold's temple, exhilarating the woman wielding it. She continues to smash until he is down on all fours... The women run into the hall ... they run back to the kitchen, Harper and Menus ... grabs the waist and arm of one. She is a handful, so he doesn't see the skillet swinging into his skull. He falls, dropping his gun... The stock that drenches his face is so hot he can't yell. He crops to one knee and a woman's hand reaches for the gun spinning on the floor... Behind him a woman aims a butcher knife and plunges it so deep in the shoulder bone she can't remove it for a second strike. She leaves it there and escapes into the yard with the other two, scattering fowl as they go ... the women are not hiding. They are loose. (286-287)

These women have been forewarned by Lone of the impending danger, but simple, as they are, they cannot take any threat to their existence seriously. They did not believe a word Lone said. After driving out there in the middle of the night to tell them, warn them, “she watched in helpless fury as they yawned and smiled” (269). Not for once did they suspect that the men in Ruby thought that they were "Bitches. More like witches" (276). Keeping to themselves and helping people who needed their help made these women suspect. Moreover, the men could not accept the fact that "they don't need men and they don't need God" (276). They were "not women locked safely away from men; but worse, women who chose themselves for company, which is to say not a convent but a coven" (276). And these men were not willing to put up with what they could not control. Therefore, they were now ready to execute the bloody mission against the Convent women.

Utter desperation and an instinct for survival gives the women, who have never hurt anyone save themselves, the strength and courage to fight the armed men. They are able to meet terror in the face because they "are trapped and know it" (286). The contrast jars when the fleeing women unarmed and unprepared desperately try to save one another and remove the obstacles that come in the way of life and death. They wield an alabaster ashtray, a butcher knife or a pot of hot stock: tools clearly associated with the kitchen and the female. There is a distinct sense of relief. The racing heart slows when the women defeat the offending killers and run out into the yard towards openness and life.

Running away from suffering in absolute despair there are many such examples in the novel. Anxiety and desperation become pervasive when we encounter Mavis. She is trapped in a tight corner inside her own family. Mavis goes shopping to get some meat for her husband whom she is obliged to

please. In her hurry, she accidentally locks the car with all the windows closed and her twin babies, Merle and Pearl, suffocate to death inside it. Her family do not understand either her situational handicap or her grief. They accuse her of infanticide and hold her responsible for the death of the twins. As a punishment they torture her both mentally and physically. Even her own elder daughter Sal does not spare her. "She didn't dare Swat Sals' hand away or acknowledge the pain even slightly. Instead she scratched the corner of her mouth..." (23). She does not even dare to react when Sal stomps her foot in the pretext of killing a beetle. The comfort and security of family life is denied to her and she learns to dread her own husband and children.

> Sal had Frank's old shaving razor unfolded by her plate and asked her father a series of questions, all starting with "Is it sharp enough to cut...?." And Frank would answer, "Cut anything from chin hair to gristle, or Cut the eyelashes off a bedbug", eliciting peals of laughter from Sal ... Billy James spit Kool-Aid into Mavis' plate ....
>
> She didn't think it would take them long, and seeing how they were at supper, enjoying each other's jokes and all, she knew Frank would let the children do it. (25)

Thus a terrorized Mavis is convinced and mentally conditioned to believe that her own people are out to lay a trap for her; to kill her; as a punishment for the death of the babies. Even her mother does not believe in her innocence. When Mavis flees to her mother's home for protection her mother telephones Frank and asks him to come and fetch Mavis "pronto" (32). She thinks that Mavis has gone insane. Mavis takes her husband's car and flees in order to save herself and her sanity. Mavis' desperate flight leads her to the Convent where she finds peace and "a swept world. Unjudgemental. Tidy. Ample. Forever" (48). In sharing Connies' labour, in taking care of the Mother, Mavis Albright's fragmented life finds a bonding in the convent itself.

There are three other such women who have been victimized. Pain, violence and deprivation form the essential content of these women's lives. They are suspended in time and place: their life choices are so severely limited that the women themselves are nearly destroyed. The women here have attempted to escape from a world predicated upon denigrated images of African-American womanhood. Seneca deserted by her unwed mother moves from one foster home to another. She has learnt to be silent, to keep her feelings and wants to herself. She feels that she can never express her natural feelings of sorrow and hurt, because people always blame her for all that she suffers, "she knew it was something inside (her) that was the matter" (261).

Once, in one of Seneca's foster homes a boy called Harry molested her. In the process of yanking on her jeans a safety pin had scratched her stomach. The foster mother, Mama Greer, was concerned about the cut and blood, but ordered her not to say a word about Harry's behaviour to anyone. She was badly reprimanded. "'Don't you ever say that again. Do you hear me? Do you? Nothing like that happens here.' After a meal of her favourite things, she was placed in another home" (261). Thus, shame and sorrow were internalized and she develops a masochistic tendency of surgically slicing her own body under her clothes till blood flows freely. We cannot blame Seneca because this masochistic activity seems to be the only alternative before her to escape her painful female realities. Grace or Gigi as she is called is flamboyant and brazen. Unwanted by both parents, she is left alone in the world to fend for herself. She is in search of stability and love, that has been denied to her in family life. Her quest is transmuted into carnal desire and involvement with men which has resulted in disillusionment. She wears a 'couldn't care less' attitude which actually serves in camouflaging the insecurity, pain and the incurable romantic in her.

Pallas Truelove elopes from school with the janitor, Carlos. She leaves the home of her rich and dominating father for the home of her painter mother with Carlos. Carlos and Pallas' mother Divine are closer in age and become attracted to one another. Pallas who had felt secure in Carlos' love and had given herself to him in complete abandon feels betrayed by both her lover and her mother. The selfishness of a mother who had once deserted her, dawns on her for a second time. She

runs away from the traumatic situation, is chased and raped by some hoodlums and then crashes into a lake. Later, she is rescued by some Indians who help her reach the hospital. She is in such a state of shock that she is unable to stop shivering and constantly re-lives her experience in the dirty cold water. The moment she wants to break her silence and speak, she falls again into the coldness of the lake and its associated trauma and also into the icy pits of language itself:

> So there. She had opened her lips a tiny bit to say two words, and no black water had seeped in. The cold still shook her bones, but the dark water had receded. For now. At night, of course, it would return and she would be back in it—trying not to think about what swam below her neck. It was the top of the water she concentrated on and the flashlight licking the edge, then darting farther out over the black glimmer. Hoping, hoping the things touching below were sweet little goldfish like the ones in the bowl her father brought her when she was five. Or guppies, angles. Not alligators or snakes. This was a lake not a swamp or the aquarium at the San Diego zoo. Floating over the water, the whispers were closer than their calls. "Here, pussy. Here, pussy. Kitty, kitty, kitty", sounded far away; but "Gimme the flash, dickface, izzat her, let go, may be she drowned, no way", slid into the skin behind her ears. (163)

Pallas had lived a secure life in the house of her father and now her sojourn for love and independence had left her traumatized and terrorized beyond reason. Billie Delia discovers her at the hospital, takes pity on her and brings her to the safety and security of the convent. It was a place where she could stay for a while. It was a place where the women were nice and never asked any questions. The women there were absolutely relaxed and never pried into anyone's business; "you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it" (176).

In the company of Mavis, Seneca and Gigi, Pallas finds a comfort in sisterhood. Connie is the matriarch, authoritative yet never hegemonic or dominating. She soothes each one and offers them the affection they craved for, at the same time encouraging them towards a positive self-image. The domination suffered by the women now living in the convent has been uniformly negative. Their knowledge of self emerges from their struggle to reject images and incidents that have threatened to maim them psychologically and physically. They parley their anger into soft armour of survival. They have consciously distanced themselves from familiar situations. The Convent is the location where the women find the ideal space, where they can be free and feel a blessed malelessness. It is essential for them to integrate knowledge deemed personally important that is, a kind of internal knowledge essential to the African-American woman for survival.

Interplaying the roles of mothers, daughters, sisters and friends to one another, these African-American women affirm one another. Schwanger has rightly reminded us of language's reality-making properties and has pointed out that as the reader abandons his world to get absorbed by the book's world, he senses that if words are capable of making a fictional reality appear, they are capable of making a "real" reality appear as well (17). The reader's gaze penetrates beyond the fictional reality of existence of a place like the Convent in Oklahoma, miles away from any other town, and its five women inhabitants, into why these women have shunned society in favour of this isolation. And why they have chosen the company of one another. These African-American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist (Collins 1990, 97). They find this in their daily conversations and also through serious conversations and humour. In the isolation and security of the convent these women fashion their selves nurturing their consciousness and individuality.

As historian Darlene Clark Hine points out:

> Because of the interplay of racial animosity, class tensions, gender role differentiation and regional economic variation, Black women, as a rule, developed and adhered to a cult of secrecy, a culture of dissemblance, to protect the sanctity of

> inner aspects of their lives, the dynamics of dissemblance involved in creating the appearance of disclosure, an openness about themselves and their feelings, while actually remaining in enigma. Only with secrecy, thus achieving a self-imposed invisibility, could ordinarily Black women accrue the psychic space and harness the resources needed to hold their own. (915)

Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Pallas, all victims of various social discrimination, adhered to a cult of secrecy under the tutelage of Connie. They resorted to the ritual of 'loud dreaming' in the darkness of the cellar. The 'loud dreaming' helped protect the sanctity of the inner aspects of their individual lives. It offered them a psychic space and allowed them a positive self-image. At the beginning they drew templates around their naked bodies as they lay on the cold floor of the cellar. Then encouraged by Connie they spoke coherently and incoherently of things dead and long gone. These were "undone by murmurs of love" (*Paradise* 264) from others.

> That is how the loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Half-tales and the never dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles ... bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale. (264)

All of them enter Mavis' Cadillac and feel the tension that Mavis felt when she was accused of killing her babies. Together they are pulled underwater and experience the trauma of drowning. Each of them feels a mother's rivalry, and so on. The periphery or boundary of one's trauma merges with the traumatic experience of the other.

The loud dreaming becomes a ritual that helps them to exorcise their hurt. It was therapeutic. Thus their inner calmness became externally visible. Seneca did not cut her body any more, instead she drew crisscross marks in red on the template suggesting her body. Consolata did not need to cover her eyes with dark glasses. They had suddenly become adult and calm. They were "Sociable and connecting" when they had visitors, "otherwise they were still and appraising" (266), clinging onto their secret which was the only way they could parley their anger and hurt into a positive calmness. The reader is so absorbed in the fictional reality of the "loud dreaming" that he/she is not conscious of stepping over the boundary line of reality and imagination. Toni Morrison is successfully able to present the glaring problems of the African-American women who are haunted and hunted by a discriminating and oppressive society. Western cultural and religious values fail to give an alternative to these women living in the convent. Convent is the symbol of staunch Christianity, yet the pagan rituals conducted inside the convent do not seem like blasphemy because it helps to calm the turbulent spirit of the inmates.

Rituals are very much a part of African and African-American folk tradition. They help the women reach an understanding of their own lives and refrain from self-destructive activities. The problems of the African-American women seem more glaring and stark as we are taken in by the language and images through which Morrison depicts the problematics. She goes beyond the depiction of racial and sexual oppression in *Paradise*. The four Convent women and some of the women from Ruby reach towards a solution in the shamanistic rituals and in the bonding that they have created for themselves.

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