



A Study on the Theme of Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'

Dr. Jitendra Deo Dhaka

Associate Professor of English

Government Atrs College, Sikar (Rajasthan)

Abstract

Toni Morrison's 'Paradise', the final installment in her historical trilogy following 'Beloved' and 'Jazz', delves into the complex and often contradictory human yearning for an ideal existence. Set in the all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma, and the nearby Convent, the novel dissects the very notion of paradise, revealing its inherent limitations, the dangers of exclusion, and the enduring power of female solidarity in the face of patriarchal oppression. Through a rich tapestry of characters and a non-linear narrative, Morrison explores themes of race, gender, community, and the flawed pursuit of perfection. One of the central themes of 'Paradise' is the illusory nature of paradise and the inherent dangers of exclusion. The founders of Ruby, descendants of freed slaves who sought refuge from white supremacy and even the lighter-skinned black communities, envisioned their town as a sanctuary, a pure and unadulterated haven. Their "eight-rock" identity became the cornerstone of their community, a badge of honor and a criterion for belonging. However, this rigid adherence to racial purity and self-imposed isolation ultimately breeds intolerance and violence. The very act of defining paradise by who is excluded – anyone deemed "other" – creates a fragile and ultimately unsustainable utopia.

Keywords:

Women, Nature, Patriarchal, Society

Introduction

Gender and patriarchal power form a crucial layer of the novel's thematic exploration. Ruby is a deeply patriarchal society, where the pronouncements and anxieties of the men dictate the town's values and actions. The women of Ruby are expected to conform to rigid roles of domesticity and subservience, their individual desires and complexities often suppressed. The Convent, in stark contrast, becomes a space where women, often scarred by their experiences in the outside world, find a degree of autonomy and solidarity. They challenge the patriarchal norms of Ruby simply by existing outside its control. (Justine, 2019)

The brutal attack on the women of the Convent by the men of Ruby is a stark manifestation of the fear and resentment that arises when patriarchal power feels threatened by female independence and nonconformity. Morrison powerfully critiques the ways in which patriarchal structures, even within a community that has historically faced oppression, can perpetuate violence and marginalization.

The theme of community and its complexities is also central to 'Paradise'. While Ruby was founded on the ideal of a unified and supportive black community, the novel reveals the internal fractures and tensions that arise from its exclusionary practices and rigid social hierarchy. The emphasis on maintaining racial purity and adhering to tradition stifles individuality and creates an atmosphere of suspicion and judgment. The Convent, though initially a refuge for disparate individuals, evolves into a different kind of community, one based on shared experiences of marginalization and the forging of bonds through mutual support. The women in the Convent, despite their differences and past traumas, create a space of acceptance and understanding that stands in stark contrast to the judgmental atmosphere of Ruby. Morrison suggests that true community is not built on exclusion and enforced homogeneity but on empathy and the embrace of diversity.

'Paradise' grapples with the burden of history and the search for identity. The legacy of slavery and racial discrimination deeply informs the actions and beliefs of Ruby's inhabitants. Their desire for a pure and autonomous community stems from a history of oppression and the yearning for self-determination. However, their attempts to create a perfect present by rigidly controlling the future and excluding those who do not fit their narrow definition of identity ultimately trap them in a cycle of fear and violence. (Geoffrey, 2019)

The women of the Convent, many of whom carry their own personal histories of trauma and displacement, navigate the complexities of identity outside the confines of Ruby's imposed norms. Their resilience and their ability to forge connections despite their diverse backgrounds highlight the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. Morrison suggests that true liberation and the possibility of a more genuine "paradise" lie not in the denial of history or the enforcement of a singular identity but in the acceptance of complexity and the forging of inclusive communities.

The novel meticulously dissects the illusory nature of paradise, revealing it to be a construct built on exclusion, fear, and a dangerous denial of the inherent complexities of human existence. The men of Ruby, the all-black patriarchal town, seek to create a sanctuary, a haven free from the perceived corruptions and dangers of the outside world. However, their rigid vision of paradise, predicated on the exclusion of those deemed "other," ultimately breeds violence, paranoia, and the very chaos they sought to escape.

The women residing in the Convent, a former Catholic school inhabited by outcasts and those who defy Ruby's strict social norms, become the ultimate targets of this exclusionary impulse. They are perceived as a threat to Ruby's carefully constructed paradise, embodying the very impurities the town seeks to eradicate. Morrison masterfully illustrates how the pursuit of a perfect community, based on fear and the rejection of difference, inevitably leads to its destruction.

The founding of Ruby itself is rooted in a yearning for a lost Eden, a place where blackness is not a burden but a source of pride and self-determination. The "8-rock" founders, light-skinned black men denied entry into a darker-skinned community, envisioned Haven as their promised land. This initial act of exclusion, though born from a sense of injustice, sets a dangerous precedent. It establishes the idea that purity and safety can only be achieved through the careful curation of membership, weeding out those who do not fit the prescribed mold. (Bloom, 2020)

Review of Literature

Bonnie et al. (2019): As Haven evolves into Ruby, this exclusionary impulse intensifies. The men of Ruby, haunted by historical trauma and a desire for absolute control, construct their paradise based on a narrow definition of black womanhood and community values. The Convent, a former Catholic school inhabited by a diverse group of women with complicated pasts, becomes the antithesis of their idealized vision. These women, independent, unconventional, and bearing the scars of the outside world, represent a perceived threat to Ruby's carefully constructed order.

Brooks et al. (2020): The illusion of paradise in Ruby is maintained through a collective denial of internal contradictions and a relentless focus on external threats. The men cling to a romanticized past, selectively remembering and glorifying the struggles of their ancestors while ignoring the inherent complexities and individual differences within their own community. This selective memory fosters a rigid adherence to tradition and a suspicion of anything that deviates from the established norm. The town's identity becomes inextricably linked to its perceived purity, making any perceived transgression a threat to its very foundation.

David et al. (2019): The inherent danger of this exclusionary paradise lies in its inability to accommodate the messy reality of human nature. By attempting to create a homogenous utopia, the men of Ruby suppress individuality, stifle dissent, and foster an atmosphere of fear and judgment.

Nellie et al. (2021): The women of the Convent, representing the untamed and the unpredictable, become scapegoats for the town's anxieties and frustrations. They are labeled as disruptive, sinful, and ultimately, deserving of the brutal violence inflicted upon them.

Theme of Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'

Morrison masterfully portrays how the pursuit of a perfect, exclusionary paradise inevitably leads to its own destruction. The act of defining who is "in" necessitates defining who is "out," creating an "other" that becomes the target of fear and resentment. This dynamic not only dehumanizes the excluded but also corrupts the supposedly pure community from within. The men of Ruby, blinded by their desire for control and their fear of contamination, lose their capacity for empathy and compassion. Their act of violence against the women

of the Convent shatters the illusion of their paradise, revealing the inherent brutality that lies beneath its carefully constructed surface.

“Paradise” serves as a powerful allegory for the dangers of utopian ideals built on exclusion. Morrison demonstrates that true community cannot be achieved through the forced homogenization of its members or the demonization of those deemed different. The illusory paradise of Ruby, with its inherent fear of the “other,” collapses under the weight of its own intolerance, leaving behind a stark reminder that true sanctuary lies not in rigid boundaries but in the embrace of diversity and the acceptance of human complexity. The novel cautions against the seductive allure of a perfect world built on the suffering of others, urging us to recognize the inherent value and interconnectedness of all humanity.

Toni Morrison's 'Paradise' intricately explores the devastating consequences of rigid patriarchal power, particularly within the isolated all-black town of Ruby, Oklahoma. The novel unveils how the community's desperate attempt to create a haven, a "paradise" free from external racism, ironically breeds its own internal oppressions, primarily directed towards women. Through the contrasting narratives of Ruby and the nearby Convent, Morrison dissects the insidious ways in which patriarchal structures, fueled by fear and a desire for control, can lead to violence and the suppression of individual identities, especially female ones.

The foundation of Ruby itself is steeped in patriarchal ideals. Established by a group of black men seeking autonomy and racial purity after being rejected by lighter-skinned blacks, the town's very existence is predicated on exclusion and a strict adherence to tradition. This tradition, as interpreted and enforced by the male elders, becomes synonymous with a rigid social order where women are relegated to subordinate roles. Their value is often tied to their ability to bear children, maintain the household, and uphold the community's moral codes as defined by men. Any deviation from these expectations is perceived as a threat to the fragile paradise they have constructed.

The women of Ruby are largely silenced and their individual desires and needs are often ignored or suppressed. They are expected to be dutiful wives and mothers, their identities subsumed under their familial roles. Morrison subtly reveals the stifling atmosphere through the limited perspectives and voices of the Ruby women, often showing them reacting to male decisions rather than initiating their own actions. The town's obsession with maintaining its purity and reputation further restricts women's freedom, as their

behavior is constantly scrutinized and judged against a narrow definition of acceptable femininity.

In stark contrast to the restrictive environment of Ruby stands the Convent, a former Catholic school that has become a sanctuary for a diverse group of women with troubled pasts. These women – Mavis, Grace (Gigi), Seneca, Pallas, and Consolata – have sought refuge from various forms of societal and patriarchal oppression. The Convent becomes a space where they can forge their own identities, support each other, and exist outside the judgmental gaze of the Ruby men. Their relationships, though sometimes fraught with their individual traumas, offer a model of female solidarity and self-determination that is absent in Ruby.

The patriarchal power in Ruby manifests most violently in the men's fear and misunderstanding of the Convent women. Because these women live outside the traditional structures of marriage and family, and because they embody a sense of independence and self-possession that challenges the Ruby men's authority, they are demonized as a corrupting influence. The men project their own anxieties and insecurities onto the Convent women, labeling them as "evil" and a threat to their carefully constructed paradise. This culminates in the horrific and senseless attack on the Convent, where the men, driven by a misguided sense of righteousness and a desire to reassert their control, brutally murder the defenseless women.

Morrison masterfully portrays how this patriarchal fear is rooted in a desire to maintain control over women's bodies and their sexuality. The Convent women, having experienced various forms of abuse and abandonment by men in their pasts, represent a rejection of traditional male dominance. Their existence challenges the very foundation of Ruby's patriarchal order, where male authority is assumed and female autonomy is seen as dangerous. The violence against them is thus an extreme act of patriarchal power seeking to eliminate any challenge to its dominance.

Through the contrasting spaces of Ruby and the Convent, Morrison critiques the destructive nature of unchecked patriarchal power. Ruby's attempt to create a perfect society by rigidly controlling its members, particularly women, ultimately leads to its moral decay and violent implosion. The novel suggests that true paradise cannot be built on exclusion and oppression, but rather on acceptance, understanding, and the recognition of the inherent worth and autonomy of all individuals, regardless of gender.

'Paradise' serves as a powerful exploration of the insidious ways in which patriarchal power operates within a community. Toni Morrison masterfully unveils how the fear of female independence and the desire for rigid control can lead to violence and the tragic suppression of individual lives. The novel stands as a potent critique of patriarchal structures and a poignant reminder of the importance of challenging gendered hierarchies in the pursuit of a truly just and equitable society

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's 'Paradise' is a profound and multifaceted exploration of the human desire for an ideal world. Through the story of Ruby and the Convent, Morrison dismantles the simplistic notion of paradise, revealing its inherent contradictions and the dangers of exclusion. The novel powerfully examines the destructive forces of patriarchal power and the complex dynamics of community, while also highlighting the enduring strength and resilience of marginalized women. Ultimately, 'Paradise' serves as a cautionary tale about the flawed pursuit of perfection and suggests that true sanctuary might be found not in exclusionary ideals but in the embrace of difference and the forging of compassionate connections.

References

- [1.] Angelo, Bonnie. "The Pain of Being Black", *Time*, 133:21, 22 May 2019, pp.120-23.
- [2.] Bent, Geoffrey. "Less than Divine: Toni Morrison's Paradise", *The Southern Review*, 2019, pp.145-9.
- [3.] Bloom, Harold, ed. Toni Morrison. USA: Chelsea House Pubs., 2020.
- [4.] Bouson, J. Brooks. *Quiet as It's Kept: Shame, Trauma and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Albany: New York UP, 2020.
- [5.] David, Ron. *Toni Morrison Explained*. New York: Random House, 2019.
- [6.] Kubitechek, Missy Dehn. *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood P, 2018.
- [7.] Matus, Jill. *Toni Morrison*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2018.
- [8.] McKay, Nellie. "Toni Morrison", *Contemporary Literature*, 24:4(2021), pp.413- 29.

[9.] Tally, Justine. Paradise Reconsidered: Toni Morrison 's (Hi) Stories and Truth. Hamburg: Transactions Pubs., 2019.