



ARUMUGAM PILLAI SEETHAI AMMAL COLLEGE

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TIRUPPATTUR, SIVAGANGAI (DT), TAMILNADU.



Proceedings of the

TWO DAYS VIRTUAL NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

**Retracing the Narrative of
Subalternity: Historical
Evolutions and New
Applications.
(RNSHENA-2021)**

Organized by

27th and 28th of July 2021



Research Department of English
Arumugam Pillai Seethai Ammal College
Tiruppattur-630211, Sivagangai Dist.
Tamilnadu

Cover Design Dr.V.GuruDev Rajan

Publisher J K Printers, Karaikudi

ISBN (978-81-949586-6-6)



978-81-949586-6-6

Arumugam Pillai Seethai Ammal College, Tiruppattur

E-Seminar

Retracing the Narrative of Subalternity: Historical Evolutions and New Applications

28th of July 2021

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THE BOND OF LOVE IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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African American literature has become an inevitable part of American literature and culture. The strong presence of African American literature has paved the way for the emergence of Native American, Asian American, and Chicano American streams of literatures. It is only with the significant representation of African American literature American society stands to be cleansed from the problem of racial discrimination in all its philosophical, existential and epistemological aspects. It has traveled from mid 18th century with slave narratives to the current times with all its socio literary exuberance initiating a literary and cultural transformation in the fabric of American society.

Being an African-American woman, Toni Morrison has projected African-American feminist consciousness in her writings. A feminist is one who is awakened and conscious about a woman's life and problems, and feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. African-American feminist consciousness is an awakening that one is oppressed not because one is ignorant, not because one is lazy, not because one is stupid, but just because one is African-American. Feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. It's an apprehension that one is a victim because one is African-American, female and poor.

African-American women have a unique place in American life and literature. Toni Morrison's *Paradise* published centers around a multi-racial group of women living in an isolated southern country house—"the Convent," seventeen miles far from the town of Ruby. These women,

outcasts from their families and oppressed by the sexist and racist social tensions, take refuge there under the protection of “certainly not white,” older woman, Consolata. The Convent is truly a retreat for them: “The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too”. It is from a world which throws up such victimized but liberated women that the “unadulterated and unadulterated” Ruby must be protected. These damaged women who have drifted there by a series of fortuities, have an intimate relationship with the town-dwellers. The Convent is strongly associated with nature. The women support themselves through gardening and selling their wares and even the citizens of Ruby admit that Convent peppers are the spiciest. People from the neighboring town come to buy Consolata’s foodstuffs and their women hide out there in times of crisis. Each section of the novel is named after one of the women in the story, the exception being an unnamed coda to the final chapter.

Ruby is exclusively all-black town in Oklahoma, created in 1949 by fifteen families of African Americans whose ancestors have been in America since the mid-eighteenth century and who have had a long history since struggling to protect their freedom, including being rejected by other black townships they had wished to join.

Ruby is named after Steward and Deacon’s sister who dies because no medical attention is available to her: “No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them...She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse...had been trying to reach a veterinarian” (*Paradise* 113).

They choose to react founding their own exclusive community; rejecting all those who had rejected them, especially those African-American’s of lighter complexion who were perceived as those who showed evidence of “racial tampering” (*Paradise* 197). By labeling those of lighter hue the “impure,” they chose to see themselves as the “pure,” those who showed no visible evidence of racial tampering. Determined to maintain the purity of their line, they quietly encouraged intermarriage among the original nine-founding families. The desire for racial purity was a communal rather than a leader imposed goal. The collective rejection experienced through the “Disallowing” transformed them from a group sojourner to “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what had happened to them”. The preservation of tradition and racial and moral purity is crucial to the men who hold the power in Ruby because it allows them to cast Ruby as

superior to other communities. The accomplishment of these goals will, they believe, keep their families safe. Ironically, it is the way this set of concerns dominates that instead leads to Ruby's downfall.

The men pride themselves on Ruby's independence from whites and the rest of the world, and its culturally conservative values, which include the subtle subordination of women. Mistrusting all whites and any blacks with lighter skin, the men of Ruby encourage intermarriage within the community. All the women of Ruby are paired off in marriage at a relatively young age, possible, while maintaining the home, gardens and grounds. Women are supervised before marriage by their families and by the community to diffuse or eliminate any evidence of aberrant behavior such as the application of any cosmetics. "The women of Ruby did not powder their faces and they wore no harlot's perfume" (*Paradise* 143). Neither was it perceived as acceptable for them to wear lipstick or possibly any other makeup. Billie Delia, Patricia Cato's daughter, had rosy colored lips. It is evidently assumed by the women in town that she is wearing lipstick and they respond by trying to wipe it off.

Suppressed, oppressed and sometimes depressed, the women bore the weight of the sin measure of the town. However, the men impose a strict moral code that effectively controls the townswomen's sexuality, not only by compelling early marriage within the community, but also by making subjects such as gay and lesbians sexuality, and abortion, taboo. The pride and protectiveness the men of Ruby profess to feel toward their wives and daughter, becomes their rationale for relegating the women of Ruby to a purely domestic role, affording them no voice in their town's political or economic matters.

The men, on the other hand, unmonitored and free to roam, ruled Ruby. Nominally the "pure and holy," they were not liked to as the measurement for sin and were therefore not condemned for it when they participated in it (*Paradise* 217). For example, although K.D., nephew to the twin rulers of Ruby, Steward and Deacon Morgan, impregnated Arnette, he assumed that her baby was her problem since she had pursued him and invited his sexual attentions.

In fact, it does become her "problem" for K.D. does nothing to help her once she becomes advanced in the pregnancy. His uncles not only remove him from accountability they initially discourage any permanent union Arnette and K.D. were intimately involved before their wedding.

When Arnette, however, told K.D. her news, his response was hostile and unsupportive. Since Gigi, one of the women of the Convent arrived by bus at the exact moment of Arnette's disclosure, K.D. shifted his full attention to Gigi's "screaming tits closing in on them" (*Paradise* 55). Arnette's sharp retort, "If that's kind of tramp you want, hop to it nigger," partially provoked K.D.'s unacceptable riposte; he "slapped... her face" (54-5). The cohesion of Arnette's pregnancy and K.D.'s insults, physically, in striking her, and relationally, in his initial refusal to marry her, sparked the feud between the Morgans and the Fleetwoods. Arnette rids herself of the baby at the Convent, with repeated thrusts of her fists, and vicious jabs to her womb with a mop handle (250). The Morgans, placing none of the responsibility on K.D., may have then determined that the Fleetwood's were unholy.

Although it is not clear whether or not Gigi is or seems to be racially mixed, the provocative nature of her attire, from the perspective of Ruby's narrative, would place her in the category of an unholy, loose woman, the personification of sin. "There she was—across the street from them in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large, they forgot to laugh at her hair" (*Paradise* 53). The fact that K.D. loves Gigi and wanted to hold onto her, regardless of her eventual refusals, is not apparently discussed.

Mothering is a prominent motif in *Paradise*, occurring throughout the text in various forms, among north the women of the Convent and those of the town. Consolata, the mixed-race green eyed woman, is mothered as a child by the white American nun, Mary Magna, who took her from the streets of Brazil and brought her to the Convent. "Connie," as she is known, in turn mothers the young women who arrive at the Convent, whose own mothers have failed them. Within the town of Ruby, we witness women yearning for a mother or, childless, yearning to be a mother. Others reject motherhood altogether through attempting abortion or willing a miscarriage. A mother of sick children wanders off in the snow and the mother of a grown daughter assaults her with an iron. These violent acts and unfulfilled longings that surround mother-daughter relationships in text are addressed, if not always resolved, through a "religion of the maternal body," which evokes a maternal divine presence that nurtures and heals.

Though the final image of *Paradise* is of a black mother in the form of the Black Virgin, Piedade, Morrison has also situated this image within a sequence of mixed-race mothers and daughters throughout the text, thereby scrambling her readers' usual associations of white power and privilege and black servitude. Her line of interracial mothers, especially given the foregrounding of Consulate as a mixed race daughter and mother, points to this utopian impulse to overcome a racist past in America that Gubar identifies.

Lone and Pat, like Billie Delia and Misner, stand on the margins of Ruby where they can exercise greater powers of perception. It is Pat who spells out most clearly for the reader that racism is what informs the sexism so subtly and pervasively at work in the townsmen's day-to-day-lives. The men of Ruby fret about women's sexuality because they want to keep the town racially "pure". Even as it serves as a metaphor for racism in America, in *Paradise* anxiety over racial purity is inverted from the Anglo-American form it normally takes in the United States: the men of Ruby want to keep their town exclusively black and exclude any lighter skinned folks who excluded and abused them and their ancestors because of their darker skin. "In that case," Pat reasons, "...everything that worries them must come from women" (*Paradise* 217). According to the submerged logic of Ruby's men, since women bear the children, women bear the responsibility for maintaining the "purity" of the race, by coupling with and thus bearing dark-skinned children.

In Pat's effort to uncover the mysteries of what has been expunged from the record, she articulates many of the gender dynamics of Ruby: we learn that "a widower might ask a friend or distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects," that some of these couplings were incestuous, and that the community ostracized and expelled anyone caught having sex outside marriage. Thus the dynamics of male dominance become still more apparent.

Significantly, part of what gives Pat the distance even to attempt the genealogy is the problem that emerges as a motif through much of the novel: the absence of a mother. Pat's mother, Delia was an outsider, light-skinned and with no last name, who died in childbirth because none of the neighboring men would drive to the Convent or to any whites for help since they never fully accepted Delia-or so Pat hypothesizes. Widowed after a year, light-skinned and set apart, Pat has no allies in either a mother or sister. "We'd have grown up together," she imagines of her stillborn sister, "Patricia and Faustine. Too light, maybe, but together it would not have mattered to us. We'd be a team" (*Paradise* 198).

Mavis, Grace, Seneca and Pallas, the four women who are unwittingly drawn or directed to the Convent, each have had wrenchingly bitter experiences related to their perceived inferiority. Thus, the Convent in its openness to any in need becomes a haven for the women who arrive and also for those in Ruby who are in trouble.

The Convent women all yearn for a mother as well, but unlike Pat; they fill the void with Connie's ready ear and spiritual guidance. Each of these women has experienced some violence or threat of violence, and a break with her family that has left her motherless. Mavis, the first to arrive, has run away from her abusive husband to her mother's, only to leave her mother's when she overheard her calling Mavis's husband to come get her. Her experience as a mother herself has been still more disturbing: Mavis had accidentally left her twin babies to die, and believes her other children are colluding with her husband to kill her. She stays at the Convent in part because she is able to feel the presence of their dead babies there. Grace, the next to appear, refers to her granddaddy and her father, the latter of whom is in prison, but never mentions a mother. Seneca was abandoned at the age of five by a girl she thought was her sister, but who it seems likely was her young unwed mother. Pallas, the last to arrive ran away from her father with her boyfriend to see her mother in Mexico, and ran away again when she discovered her mother and boyfriend having an affair.

Each of the women agree to stay with Consolata and learn about "what [they] are hungry for" (*Paradise* 262). Consolata gradually takes them through the healing process of speaking, sharing, and shouting in the Clearing space they all work to create in the basement of the Convent. Using the space adjacent to the room which had been Connie's place of seclusion, Consolata creates a true haven for their spirits and their bodies. Free from all distractions: the basement is quiet and cleaned; free from physical inhibitions: Consolata instructs them to take off their clothes. Then they lie on the hard, cold stone floor, and are made to remain still in the position of their choice until eventually she guides them in *speaking*. They each review the event that serves as their central trauma, the one hurt deeper and more devastating than all the others they had experienced, and discuss it among themselves. "Are you sure she was your sister? Maybe she was your mother. Why? Because a mother might, but no sister would do such a thing" (*Paradise* 265). They share their insights and caring in that space and in the rooms above it. They learn self-control

and discipline; “Do what I say Eat how I say Sleep when I say” and they how to focus their minds past the immediacy of their bodies so that they can speak in that space.

In Paradise, “it is gender rather than race which is the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilizing change” (Widdowson, 329). Therefore, Mavis’ fatal wounding energizes the others in their hunt for innocent female victims. Yielding to the hatred and anger foundational to their narratives, they prowl about the Convent misreading their findings and allowing their conclusions to fuel their continued outrage. Consolata sees the men’s slaughter of Grace, Seneca and Pallas. When Deek looks at her, his narrative rationales all melt away. But as he “lifts his hand to halt his brother’s... [He] discovers who, between them, the stronger man is. The bullet enters her forehead” (*Paradise* 289).

The division between Deacon and Steward that began at start of Deacon’s affair with Consolata resumes and gains permanency immediately after the main Misery, the murder of the women. Awakened and informed by Lone of the atrocities occurring at the Convent, the majority of people from Ruby arrive to witness the carnage.

Soane Morgan, who has sought an abortion at the Convent, shows support for the women there after the shootings. These are women, Dovey. Just women. When Steward says that the “evil” is not in him but “in this house”, Deacon no longer willing to shut out or misread the truth refutes and opposes him. “My brother is lying. This is our doing. Ours alone. And we bear the responsibility”.

Deacon remains on the opposite side of the narrative door and views his neighbors and even his wife from the perspective of an outsider. Affecting even his hearing, all of his interactions in Ruby become distorted by the barrier of the closed door, firmly fixed in his mind. “Since July, other people seemed to him to be speaking whispers, or shouting from long distances” (*Paradise* 301). He, therefore, reaches out to form a friendship and share confidences with the only other recognized outsider in the town, Rev. Misner. The hope for Ruby’s eventual awakening to the injustices and hypocrisies inherent within their narrative lies in the union of those members of Ruby who live on the other side of the door.

Thus, the narrative of Ruby is founded on sexism, false righteousness, false superiority, and racial hatred. Based upon the narrative built on hatred, pride, anger, and materialism, the purity

and holiness of the inhabitants is only external. Paradise comes as culminations that have emerged in the text.

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