

## Shackled Women In Toni Morrison's Paradise

Chitra C A<sup>1</sup>, Dr. R. Rajasekar<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Morrison paints a stunning picture of the ladies who reside in a convent near Ruby, Oklahoma, in Paradise. These women are at odds with the men who oversee the Convent. How women are treated throughout the narrative highlights the patriarchal culture in which they reside and impedes their ability to make independent decisions. Morrison's novels mostly highlight black women rather than taking a feminist stance. Morrison discusses these issues of racism, patriarchal culture, and sexual oppression, but she refuses to let them dictate her entire life.*

**Keywords:** *racism, patriarchy, sexual oppression, black women, and conflict.*

### Introduction

Toni Morrison is an American feminist writer who has won several awards, including the Nobel Prize. She is preoccupied with Virginia Woolf and Leo Tolstoy in her literary life. Her best known novel is *The Bluest Eyes*, followed by *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*, in which *Baltimore Sun*<sup>1</sup> describes her 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 writings are highly regarded in contemporary American literature; according to Brownworth, 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).

The trilogy, which also includes *Beloved* and *Jazz*, is completed with the Nobel Prize winning novel *Paradise*. Morrison paints a stunning picture of the ladies who reside in a convent near Ruby, Oklahoma, in *Paradise*. These ladies are at odds with the men who oversee the Convent. The names of the female characters in each chapter are listed: Mavis, Grace, Consolata, Seneca, and Pallas are the ladies who reside at the convent. Patricia, Lone, and Save-Marie are the town women who have their chapters anyway.

Throughout the novel, the treatment of the women is noticed which denotes the patriarchal society where they live, disturbing their freedom and choices. The novels of Morrison are focused 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)

Political feminism is defined by Hooks in *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre* as, “a movement to end sexist oppression” (26). Although Showalter defines it culturally

---

<sup>1</sup>Reg No: 20113014012010, Research Scholar, Department of English, Lekshmiapuram College of Arts and Science, Neyyoor- 629802 Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India - 627012

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Research Department of English, Lekshmiapuram College of Arts and Science, Neyyoor- 629802 Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu, India - 627012

in *Towards a Feminist Poetics* as, “it is a self-conscious interest in and celebration of the values, beliefs, ideas, and behavior uniquely, or traditionally characteristics of women” (131). Apart from cultural values, beliefs, and social or political equality being very concerned with being realized for women, feminists have generally been attempting to ascertain why and how power may be shared with women.

Black women are at the forefront of the conversation when it comes to the struggles they face in achieving womanhood. They desire their special manner to practice womanhood, regardless of gender or color, and they detest sexist and racist persecution. Denard says “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 ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism” (171).

Morrison’s treatment of female character development is comparable to how the majority of black female authors approach feminism. Morrison discusses these issues of racism, patriarchal culture, and sexist oppression, but she refuses to let them dictate every aspect of her life. She doesn’t offer a solution to the problems facing women; rather, one could argue that she raises some doubts about these problems as Denard continues to discuss them, “Morrison is more concerned with celebrating the unique feminine cultural values that black women have developed despite and often because of their oppression. As an ethnic cultural feminist, it is a feminism that encourages allegiance to rather than alienation from an ethnic group that she ultimately wants to achieve” (172).

Morrison gives a terrifying introduction to her novel *Paradise*, “They shoot the white girl first. With the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out there” (3). At the outset of the novel, the reader is immediately struck by the following: Morrison’s depiction of women and the gender inequality faced by both white and black women, the latter of which is her main focus, “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).

One of the Oklahoman ladies called Ruby appears in the opening chapter; upon her passing, the location is named Ruby in remembrance of her. When one learns it’s not a place fit for humans, Morrison skilfully conjures up an image in the reader’s imagination that is full of darkness, sadness, and emptiness; women are neglected in Ruby. It is said about the townspeople that they are harsh, unyielding beings who take pleasure in witnessing the suffering and wretched existence of these ladies. Morrison’s depiction of these men’s hunger and their use of the women as means of gratifying their sexual desires, rather than raping, as one could say is noteworthy, “Mavis tried not to stiffen as Frank made a settling-down noise 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 said that while she may not have intended to, her novels do not support either patriarchy or matriarchy in general, but when it comes to writing subconsciously, that is how women are portrayed throughout. Her depictions of women and their social exploitation are powerful.

Another significant problem with Ruby is the women’s silence. Rather than responding or voicing their own opinions toward the males, these ladies choose to express their pitiful agreement by nodding or by being silent, even when there are situations in which they don’t need to comprehend the other person.

Once more focusing on female characters, Morrison examines the detrimental effects of sexism and racial persecution on Black women in *The Bluest Eyes*, “...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 is Anglo-Saxon, it suggests that women who are not Anglo-Saxon are not beautiful and hence inferior" (Denard, 172). Morrison herself notes that Pecola's naive desire for beauty and blue eyes is evident throughout the book, as is her harsh voice, "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).

The heroine of the novel is a woman named Pecola who has no ownership. Her parents, particularly her inebriated father, frequently argue and physically abuse her before raping her and abandoning her kid. Pecola's need to have blue eyes in her life stems from the constant reminder of her ugliness. Through Claudia, the novel's narrator, Morrison delicately informs the readers about this black woman.

According to Heinze, colorism has been identified as an addiction for the black female protagonists in the majority of Morrison's works. For these black characters, having white skin more precisely, beauty is a dream come true. Beauty philosophy is focused on Pecola, "trying to discover the secret of horror, the spectacle 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. Mock anger from the accused" (The Bluest Eye, 39) suddenly she realizes 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 would be different" (40).

The finest representation of ideal beauty comes from Claudia, the narrator of *The Bluest Eyes*, who is unable to comprehend the significance of the white baby doll on a global scale. This is because the novel tells the tale of a white baby doll that is examined to uncover its hidden beauty, in addition to the story of a little black girl named Pecola. However, the notion of beauty serves as the central motif for her female black characters. Rather than being a psychiatric fixation, Morrison says that this is a biological trait and that there is no shame associated with possessing it. She also makes it very evident that claiming supremacy based just on color differentiation will result in weaknesses rather than strengths. "Morrison's concern with colorism exposes the many sides of a problem that continues to assault the black community" (Heinze, 24).

Pecola never had self-love. She was always looking at herself through other people's eyes and never found anything to love. By the novel's end, Claudia believes that Pecola's demise was caused by a "fault of the earth, the land, of our town," adding that "certain kinds of flowers don't do well in this soil." Here, nature is blamed as though it had something to do with the depressing circumstances these black women who are exploited are in. The scandalous life of a twelve-year-old girl who was raped by her father and who never wants her baby to die should be brought to the attention of the black community.

Morrison suggests that Pecola is a victim of the Anglo-Saxon ideal of feminine beauty, which is oppressed on a sexist and racial basis. Morrison's commentary on society, which renders these women victims, is what readers may hear instead of any rebellious voice opposing this ideal of beauty. According to Morrison, the entire society is the adversary of these problems, not just men or people who are black or white.

Another theme in Morrison's work is love, specifically the absence of affection for women in her novels. Ruby is devoid of love since the males tend to overly conflate the concepts of like and love. For these males, the proof of their bodily harm to the women and their sexual desire is most likely their entire likeness. Morrison gives a truthful description of the term love, "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 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 good. Love is none of that. There is nothing in nature like it. Not in robins or bison or 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 made very obvious that learning about love is necessary because it is not something that comes naturally to everyone. Ruby already disregards this idea of learning Love as Love is lost in it. This destroys society and adversely affects women's feelings of resentment.

Morrison expresses her subtly expressed rage at racist and sexist ideas about the white community. She concentrates on an ethical cultural value that the black community as a whole, which lacks societal support and vitality, holds dear, as a group. They require a space where they may live as women, just like other women, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. All the ladies in Paradise are hidden by quiet, and the males of the town treat the women badly. All of the characters in Paradise are silent creatures who are unable to express their wants. Morrison cannot enable these ladies to voice their criticisms because they are not permitted to. However, the language is clear enough to convey to readers the chaotic environment they are in. Pecola passes away while dreaming of getting blue eyes and beauty so she can live a happy life. Unlike other female characters, Sula is respected for her fearlessness. She opposes all of the negative customs that exist within the African American community and is unable to effect any change because of her social constraints. Every one of these made-up ladies, each of whom is different from the other and in desperate need of something, lets out a silent cry. In a nutshell, it's a generic depiction of black women in a community where their rights and needs are completely disregarded.

### **Work Cited**

- Brownworth A. Victoria. Many Faces of Slavery. The Baltimore Sun, November 3, 2008.
- Denard, C. Carolyn. What Moves at the Margin: Selected essays, reviews, and speeches. USA: Jackson, 2008. Print.
- Jaffrey, Zia. "The Salon Interview with Toni Morrison". February 2, 1998.
- Heinze, Denise. The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness" Toni Morrison's novels. Georgia: Walbaun, 1993. Print.
- Hooks, Bell. Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre. Boston: 1984. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. The Bluest Eye. New York: Pocket, 1970. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. Paradise. USA: Penguin, 1997. Print.
- Showalter, Elaine. "Towards a Feminist Poetics," The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women, Literature and Theory. New York: 1985. Print.