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REVALORIZING FEMALE VALUES AND SUBALTERN HORIZONS IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE* AND *BELOVED*

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"By reading .... women's stories, the reader learns to recognize community. More important, perhaps, the advantaged reader draws on these skills to identify, decode and disempower exclusionary narratives that may victimize the Other and impede community building in the real world."

- Laura Nicosia

The concept of 'women empowerment' has engaged generations of scholars across the globe. "The gender dichotomy in our society has dictated that the male hero roams the frontier ''footloose and fancy-free'' while his female counterpart …remains behind in town, securely tucked away at home, herself the very embodiment of the stability and restraints of civilization. Leatherstocking, Ishmael, Huck Finn, Shane, a long list of American heroes stride or sail or ride off into the sunset and into adventure away from the clutches of the womenfolk who would try to tame them. The female by contrast, allied with the social forces of religion or education or cultural assimilation stands opposed to that severe independence of spirit that has been regarded as quintessentially male,remarked Ravits."1

The twentieth century multi-cultural women writers fervently resisted against their exclusion from the right to define themselves as individuals. Their fiction becomes the tool of resistance leading to the reappropriation and redefinition of society as a place of coordination between individual identity and communal support. Thus, we see that the contemporary women writers chose to challenge the patriarchal society for according a subordinate and alterior status for women. These writers created through their fiction, a tapestry of women who possessed the intrinsic feminine values of mothering, nurturing and concern for human values, which were necessary for survival. They spoke vehemently against the "patriarchal society's devaluation of women by revalorizing female values. In reaction to the Western patriarchal emphasis on the individual…these writers saw necessity of honouring female values. If women were to become empowered, it was necessary for them to perceive their own primacy, their centrality to the society, as well as to analyse how dangerous patriarchal values were to a harmonious social order." 2

Women could not assert the same sense of independence as a man. As Ravits remarks, "The independent, socially unfettered male is considered courageous; the independent, socially unfettered female is regarded as deviant."3In their respective acts of defiance, white and Black Women writers claimed for autonomy and demanded a society which would provide a reciprocal space for women, where they could live as individuals. They wrote with the dream to escape from the racial and social alterity and with the hope to possess the power of choice. In this paper, I would like to examine the subaltern sightlines in Toni Morrison's celebrated novels, *Paradise* and *Beloved* .

The twentieth century witnessed a supreme artist in Toni Morrison, whose contributions in the arena of Black Women's Literature is enormous and expansive. The Black woman's predicament has found many manifestations in English Literature. Often, they are projected as doubly victimized based on two things race and gender. However, in the deft hands of Black women writers, the portrayal of Black women writers is very different. The quest for identity

rather than just sexual exploitation becomes the focal point of analysis. In this context, the remarks of Frances Foster seem very relevant, “While the male slave stereotyped slave woman as a sexually exploited being, the slave women’s versions of their own lives, while documenting the trauma and the grief of sexual exploitation and physical abuse, portray themselves as far more than mere victims of rape and seductions. They present “Stronger, more complex portraitures of their sex.”4

Morrison confronted the traditional principles thrust on Black women by displaying several female protagonists in her novels. This connects Morrison to the other women writers who projected similar feminist stances through their works. Morrison’s work reflects her gendered perspective, a perspective that presents gender as complementary, affinitive, vigorous, and unconventional. In society as well as in the literary domain, Black women are considered incapable of possessing intelligence, cleverness, brilliance, being reactive, and above all being creative. It was worth noticing that before the 1970s featured even insignificantly in the arena of Black literature. The non-appearance, quietness, or fabrication of Black women in literary academia, projected by Black men and White men and women, speaks volumes about discrimination, sexism, and bigotry that the Black women writers were subjected to. The most stinging fact remains that they were not even included in the category of human beings and were unrecognized by the White people. “Belonging as they do to two groups,” Gerda Lemer remarks, “which have traditionally been treated as inferiors by American Society-Blacks and Women-they have been doubly invisible. Their records he buried, unread, infrequently noticed, and even more seldom interpreted.”5

The twentieth-century Black women writers have presented Black women as breathing living people who have the ability of tenderness, reason, and fantasizing about their own lives. Proud of their own identity they refuse to be deceived by others and can easily understand their equation with men and more so with women. In the 1960s, with the rise of the feminist wave feminists like Betty Friedan, and Julia Kristeva initiated a male-female opposition. Morrison’s fiction re-establishes the dynamism of Black women and projects the Black women as ready to face all adversities, evince confidence in their own self, and also create individuality in which they not only meet all challenges and build up resistance but also create their unique individuality within the "circles and circles of sorrow."6

Published in 1998, *Paradise* remains a tour de force of powerful narrative skills. What is perceptible is a unique blend of allegory and memory, mythology and antiquity. The hunt for an individualistic, consolidated recognition has been the recurring theme in the fictional oeuvre of African-American authors. This search is a deep yearning for a home and totality and is emblematic of the severe aspiration of Black people for self-discovery and self-exploration. Black women are visualized by White male authors as strong, adapting, and inspiring. However, Black male writers are comparatively more understanding and show Black women as tragic mulattoes. White writers showcase them as sexual objects. Interestingly, few writers have treated Black women like a mother or a goddess.

Almost all novels by Toni Morrison can be categorized as political. Morrison’s seventh novel, *Paradise* is also conceived in the same strain. What is most striking about Morrison is that her novels attempt to bare the hidden Africanist appearance in the arena of American literature. However, Morrison contends that since the literature she examines was not composed by African Americans and neither was it directed towards them, the creation of an Africanist identity is unintentional. Strongly embedded within the novel *Paradise* are questions of history, race, and gender, that make the novel very topical. The prime concern of the novelist however remains to explore the journey of the ‘Other’ toward selfhood.

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison tells the captivating saga of a Black female community struggling to build their own paradise. It relates to the saga of Ruby, a town comprising 360 Black people who have opted for seclusion instead of facing the brunt of extensive racism, they believe that by doing so, they will be able to retain the chastity of their Utopia.

This small-town Ruby was situated in Oklahoma built by survivors of eviction and elimination, of moral nature, and is set in striking contrast to a community, Convent which has been built by those who have been victorious in constructing their paradises. Whereas the residents of Ruby, deny the entry of people from outside with the motive of maintaining their safety and keeping their town free of racial discrimination, the women residing in Convent, on the contrary, accept all into their community. The women living in the Convent have no public opinion or ability to calculate how they are visualized in Ruby; they are easily framed as a victim.

The novel begins poignantly, "They kill the White girl first". Further, the novel proceeds to give records of the slaughter of a mass of women by men hailing from Ruby, a town, where only and solely, the Black people stayed. The novel focalizes on the inhabitants of Ruby and the women in the convent. Morrison is more interested in vocalizing the anguish and agony of the lower strata of the American community. The novel presents, the 8-rock Blacks claiming primacy and dominance over the light-hued Blacks. Through this novel, Morrison shares her vision of the ideal and faultless paradise as being panoramic, and open and accepting of all. She pleads for a discrimination-free society, a society that blurs the boundaries and walls of gender and race. Establishing conformity and adjustment between the Black and Whites forms the core of Morrison's artistic and literary vision. Through these interwoven stories, Morrison depicts how the glorification of whiteness ostracizes the Convent and Ruby. It also bears testimony to the fact that ethnical naming and recognition are based on gender and gender recognition is dependent on ethnic identification.

The backdrop of the novel spanning the 1960s and1970s moves from the civil rights movement to the post-civil rights period. Examining the truth of racial integration and gender equality, Morrison concludes that it was impossible to combat the repercussions of race, racism, gender, and sexism. The African Americans have houses, but not homes. All three abodes in the novel, Ruby, Convent, and Haven, don't do justice to their names. The doctrine of race and gender are so deeply entrenched in their minds that they can never have the feeling of living in the sanctuary of their homes. The ideology of Racism has possessed their hearts and minds and has permeated their very pillar of existence. *Paradise* thus affirms the troubles and toils of constructing a genuine home within the discriminated land of the land of liberty.

She creates new identities for the Blacks in a way that awakens socio-political as well as aesthetic concerns. Morrison's powerful portrayal of the past of Black women has changed the entire perspective regarding Black Africans. In an interview with Charles Ruas in 1981, Morrison rightly remarked: "This civilization of Black people, which was underneath the White civilization, was there with its own everything. Everything of that civilization was not worth hanging on to, but some of it was, and nothing has taken its place while it is being dismantled. There is a new, capitalistic, modern American Black which is what everybody thought was the ultimate in integration."7

Her novel *Beloved* (1987) is an excellent example of examining and analyzing the problems of being at the periphery. Derived from the story of an African-American slave Margaret Garner who killed her daughter to save her from the terrible life of enslavement, Morrison goes on to redefine and rewrite Afro-American history from the point of view of the disempowered mother.

Through her novel *Beloved*, Morrison explores the enervating consequences of the social formations of race and gender on the African-American community comprising men, women, and children. Exposing the emotional perspective of the blacks, Morrison employs the stream-of-consciousness narrative technique. Morrison probes into the inner recesses of their minds and souls and endeavours to rebuild history through their broken memories and past. The novelist's canvas features not only the experience of any particular character but of multiple characters hailing from the same community and thus provides a vivid and honest portrayal of their barbaric victimization not only in the past but also in the present.

Henderson believes that Morrison is among the writers who tried to show what happened to African Americans in the past and tried to show what has been forgotten or is being silenced: "Yet, in many respects, these writers were limited in their efforts to fully depict the physical and psychological suffering of African American people…Toni Morrison seeks to signify on those silences imposed by publishers and editors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In particular, Williams and Morrison extend the efforts of their predecessors by developing creative responses to those calls centered on the wounds of the African American body."8

By the deft employment of the stream-of-consciousness, Morrison analyses how characters coming from three generations are battling to bear their suppressed tormenting memories of the injuries inflicted on their body and soul in the past and the consequent sense of loss that they are engulfed in. Through various schemes, they try to cope with their dreadful tyrannized memories which are responsible for their isolated or oppressed actuality. Baby Suggs, for instance, reflects over various colors to erase the memory of her past. For the protagonist, Sethe, "the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay." Paul D on the contrary, shut his memories in a "tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" with its "lid rusted shut." Knowing the past becomes vital even for Denver who is rooted in the Reconstruction period and who has never known slavery personally. She feels apprehensive about comprehending herself when she sees the people around her who keep talking about their past. By presenting characters striving to cope with their past Morrison highlights the mental trauma that the oppressed had to bear.

Despite attaining freedom, they still feel victimized due to the memories that keep hovering and torturing them. Encounters with the past not only allow characters to move on in the future but also prepare them to know their being. The ghost Beloved therefore becomes an important character in the text who is not only the physical demonstration of Sethe's dead daughter but also becomes a figurative spokesperson of the painful unforgettable past, both individual and national.

Morrison believes that African American history is distorted and romanticized. Spargo cites Morrison's ideas about African American history: We live in a land where the past is always erased and America is the innocent future in which immigrants can come and start over, where the slate is clean. The past is absent or it's romanticized. This culture doesn't encourage dwelling on, let alone coming to terms with, the truth about the past.9In *Beloved* Morrison reinvents the past and wants the reader not to forget what happened in African American history: Morrison's critically acclaimed novel *Beloved* probes the most painful part of the African American heritage, slavery, by way of what she has called "rememory" -- deliberately reconstructing what has been forgotten.10

The novel opens twelve years after the culmination of the American Civil War. We are introduced to slaves who are nine in number working at Sweet Home: Sethe, Paul D, Baby Suggs and her son Halle, and other five slaves. Even though all the slaves in Sweet Home are distressed by slavery, it is Sethe who has to bear the pain most. Sethe got raped and flogged by schoolteacher's nephews and she was so brutally treated that she finally decided to commit the heinous crime of killing her two-year-old daughter.In the novel, we perceive that what essentially troubled Sethe was not the pain and humiliation she had to bear, but for her the stolen milk was significant. At the time Sethe got flogged she was pregnant and that is why she had milk in her breasts. In the novel, Sethe does not seem to cry so much for the the pain she had to tolerate, but she chiefly talks about the milk that had been taken from her which was so essential to feed her baby:"They used cowhide on you? And they took my milk. They beat you and you were pregnant? And they took my milk!"11Her grief is unbearable as she breaks down: "Nobody will ever get my milk no more except my own children. I never had to give it to nobody else—and the one time I did it was took from me—they held me down and took it. Milk that belonged to my baby."12. Sethe was so hurt by the taking away of her child's milk that she kept mentioning it many times.

Bonnet believes that taking Sethe's milk from her is a violation of the bond between mother and child. The shackles of slavery not only inflict physical trauma on Sethe but also offends her feelings for her children: "The robbing of Sethe's milk, which is so often evoked in the narrative and referred to as what she owns and as her children's very life, is thus the materialization of the fundamental perversity of the institution which kills the slaves' selves by severing the bonds between mother and child."13.Thus we see, Morrison's *Beloved* not only explores the racist aspect of history but also unravels the sexist attitudes found not only outside the black community but also within the community.

After this terrible event, Howard and Buglar regained health by their grandmother's care. Sethe was sent to jail to await her trial for the murder. Since Denver was still a suckling infant, she went to jail with her mother. With the help of the Bodwins, a family in the novel who support the cause of abolition of slavery, Sethe gets imprisonment, rather than the death sentence. After her imprisonment, Sethe and Denver return to Baby Suggs' home, on 124 Bluestone Road. Life after Sethe's imprisonment is also difficult for her. Because she has to face social alienation. Her past memories make life much more difficult for her, and she feels remorseful. Initially, society doesn't appreciate or pardon Sethe's crime. They consider it unethical and sinful. However, when Paul D comes to stay with them, Sethe remarks "For twelve years, long before Grandma Baby died there had been no visitors of any sort and certainly no friends"14.

In 124 Bluestone Road, Sethe discovers that the spirit of her murdered daughter moves around in the house. However, when Paul D comes to stay with Sethe and Denver, he succeeds in sending the spirit out of the house. After some time, when Sethe, Paul D, and Denver come home they see a girl in front of their house. She looks very young and behaves like a baby. Her speech is impaired, and she does not have full control over her bodily functions. This young girl seems to be emblematic of an infant. She says that her name is Beloved. This girl symbolically represents Sethe's dead daughter. Sethe feels guilty about killing her daughter. She desperately wants to share with Beloved the reason for which she has killed her and her feelings of remorse afterward. Sethe is aware that she has had to pay a great price to save her child, "I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: It cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much..."15 Sethe plans to disclose the cause of her horrible deed to

Beloved, “How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her. When I explain it she’ll understand, because she understands everything already.”16

Thus, we may conclude that Morrison’s fiction is a beautiful interplay of human attributes of good and evil, love and hate, beauty and ugliness and life and death. In her writing, Morrison probes the tragic fate of African American women and appreciates the spirit of their unassailable fight against destiny, which has considerably added to the progress of African American fiction.

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