Haven Imagined & Paradise Lost

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Toni Morrison, PARADISE, Alfred A Knopf, New York, 1998, 318pp.

> They don't need men and they
> don't need God... everybody who
> goes near them is maimed
> somehow and the mess is
> seeping back into our homes,
> our families. We can't have
> *it, you all. Can't have it at all. (276)*

THE statement here produced as epigraph is a declarative utterance which signifies the primary project of conflict of identities and power relations metaphorically and masterfully enuciated in Toni Morrison's seventh and most recent novel to date, *Paradise*. That statement made by a man of God, Reverend Cary at the peak of depression and animosity in the seedy, fictional town of Ruby is indeed a *testament* of the community's deep-seated rejection of the development and influence of a convent of women separated from and independent of the rigid and patriarchal structures of the main community. In very significant ways, *Paradise* is an extended and inventive narrative representation of Morrison's idea of cultural identity, history and memory; in this novel, the winner of the 1993 Nobel Prize for Literature has succeeded in telling old, familiar stories with jolting metaphors and refreshing panache. The characteristic Morrisonian text has a plural voiced narrator, reminiscent of oral storytelling pattern, with a multi-layered network of individual tales which coalesce into a grand narrative of community, communalism and, sexist and racial explorations.

As an extended, yet organic, work, *Paradise* reads like an intertextual consummation of an authorised project of envisioning a female-centered world free from, impervious to or subsistent in spite of male hegemonic structures. The idea of (a) potent female relationship(s) noticeable and which links such characters in filial bonding as Eva-Hannah-Sula (in Sula), Pilate-Reba-Hagar *(in Song of Solomon)* and Baby Suggs - Sethe - Denver/Beloved in (*Beloved*) is inventively and radically deployed in *Paradise* such that Morrison moves beyond given biological associations to speak about affiliative connections between and among women of different generations and colour. It must be noted that affiliation, in the Saidian sense, is stronger and thicker than the proverbial blood of filiation. Thus, the various shades of loves shared between and among such female characters of *Paradise* as Lone Dupres - Consolata - Mary Magna, Mary Magna - *Consolata, Consolata* - Soane Morgan - Mavis - Gigi - Arnette... are more developed and sustained.

Regarded as the final part of Morrison's novelistic trilogy on love coming after *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1991), *Paradise* is about sisterhood, motherhood and the overaching memorisation of the cultural institution of slavery coupled with its histories of migration and re-settlement. It is about women on the run, from men (and sometimes other women) in their cruel, conspiratorial, vindictive and violent poses; it is also about the history of territorial claims and the theory of racial separatism. The girls and women whose lives are narrated in bits include Mavis Albright who lost her set of twins in an accident of forgetfulness and consequently felt paranoid or convinced that her other children encouraged by Frank (her husband) are all out to kill her; there is Arnette Fleetwood, a daughter of one of the original nine families in Ruby, too young when she got impregnated by K.D., there is Billie Delia who almost got killed by her own mother, Patricia Best; there is Pallas who ran away from home to the Convent to have her baby; and Gigi (Grace), and Seneca, and Connie (Consolata) who has always been Mother Superior's (Mary Magna) companion since the age of the nine. The moving spirit of the convent is Sister Mary Magna, an old fairy-like woman, once a devoted American nun who 'kidnapped' or rescued three coloured children in 1925 from desolation and death on a South American street, left two of them in a Puerto Limon orphanage and retained the third one - Consolata - having developed a strong affection for the child. She travelled with the girl to her new posting - an asylum/boarding school for Indian girls. Located in a remote part of North American West and known as CHRIST THE KING SCHOOL FOR NATIVE GIRLS, the institution soon lost its original function of making Catholics out of natives and it transformed into a Convent, a receptacle of 'broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying'. (222)

For women on the run or in tears, the Convent is a house of succour, fellowship and tranquility where sorrows are shared and laugh-

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ters disseminated and spread in the sun; when 'the wind handled (them) like a man', the Convent is Paradise for 'crying women, staring women, scowling, lip-biting women or women just plain lost' (270). To the men of Ruby including the Morgan twins (Deacon and Steward), Arnold and Jeff Fleetwood, Harper, Sergeant Person and Reverend Cary, the Convent is an eerie school for witches, a coven of delusions where forms of perversions including sorcery, infanticide, alcoholism, abortion and lesbianism are practiced. In the male imagination, the place is seen as 'dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth' (18).

Toni Morrison
Photograph by Kate Kunz

The New Fathers of Ruby, Oklahoma, in their 'odour of righteousness' are broadly portrayed as misogynists for in the words of Patricia Best, 'everything that worries them must come from women' (217); reports of several outrages, from the comical to the tragic, in Ruby are attributed to the presence of the Convent women. The misogynic tendency of Sargeant, for instance, is driven by a materialistic force to possess the inscrutably fertile Convent land, while Menus thinks that the only sure way of regaining his manhood or relevance is by unleashing violence on the women. Perhaps, this misogynist figuration is so deployed in order reassert the feminist discourse of shocking men out of a lethargy towards complementary gender relations. Yet the act of hateful suppression of (the) female personae/association, brazenly displayed by the gang of nine is a subtle recognition, by men, of the latent powers of female fraternity - 'I *know* they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger. Why don't they just get on out, leave?' (275-6) In that fatal siege on the Convent, Consolata is killed while the fate of the other occupants floats between escape, massacre and disappearance depending on which version of that encounter is being retold. Thus, the Convent becomes further highlighted when in the last movement (strategically, untitled) of the novel, the women appear, with angelic brevity, to each of their loved ones. Gigi converses with Daddy Man, Pallas appears before Dee Dee, Mavis shares a meal with Sally in a restaurant, and Seneca engages Jean in a talk about identity.

In spite of the romantic verbalisation of the significant lives of the Convent women, the house of dream of paradise is shattered and abandoned. But the lesson of its destruction is contained in Reverend Misner's query of the Ruby onslaught ('How can they hold it together... this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved...?) (306); the values and the possibility of its *possibility* reside in Billie Delia's question - 'When will they reappear, with blazing eyes... to rip up and stomp down this prison calling itself a town?' (308) and in Deacon Morgan's act of contrition for being an accomplice to the siege on the Convent. Above all, Toni Morrison has presented the inherent aspiration for peace, love and comfort in the female psyche within what Francoise Lionnet has called a 'deep-seated cultural misogyny and the potentially fatal consequences of practices... Which construct women as objects of exchange' *(Postcolonial Representations,* 1995), (104).

Generally, the narrative pattern of *Paradise* is neither spiral nor locomotive as we find in Morrison's earlier novels; its pace is sometimes jazzy, breezy or poetic, sometimes florid and certainly chess-like that its original outlay may be qualified as cryptic and unusual; vignettes of tales are retold across sections/chapters/movements (named after *female* characters) in such a manner that there are intervening echoes of one experiential subject in the other. The setting of the novel temporally spans eighty-seven years - (1890-1976) i.e. between Reconstruction period and post world wars and Black Power eras; spatially, stories revolve around the settlers of a place called New Haven later named after Ruby a woman who died during the re-settlement of freed slaves. But more so, the virtual site of representation of women's lives is the Convent, a couple of miles on the outskirts of Ruby. The metaphor of the road which links the two sites, and the metaphor of the castle which refers to the Convent and its supernatural halo are necessary for a determinate reproduction of meaning in the novel. In Bakhtinian terms, these are called chronotopes which serve as time-markers, and tropes of actions. The castle - Convent, for instance, is the point where palpable voices or figures or legends like the Circe-like Mother Superior are domestically contained ('the house was like a castle, full of a beauty...') (225); the other chronotope, that is, of parlors and salons, where webs of conspiracy are generated, relates directly to the Oven, the meeting point of the community where group exhortation against

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the Convent takes place.

As a novel of cultural history and memorisation, *Paradise* describes in spurts the founding of Haven by freedmen who were shooed from one unfriendly town to another including wholly black communities until they acquired settlement in Arapaho territory; the story of later re-settlement and naming of the new territory is recounted through the retentive memories of Deacon and steward Morgan. The sharp practice of non-integration by members of the original nine (later disclosed as seven in a children's Xmas play) black families of settlers in New Haven is here presented as a sign of some conservative separatism. The racial argument has always been to keep the blood pure black.

The 8-rock, as they are known, wanted to maintain an unbroken continuity in the biological relationships which certainly could not last, for each error of miscegenation, it is the woman who gets blamed and stigmatised. This dogmatic desire for a non-intergrationist paradise in Ruby is sharply contrasted in the Convent by a transcendental group of women who are linked more by mind than by pigmentation. Mavis and Arnette are black, Mother Superior and Grace are white and Consolata is Latin - American (Chicano?)

Apart from this anti-racist racism diligently upheld by the 8-rock , an aspect of cultural polemics touched upon in Paradise is the diasporan/diffusionist argument about the historical connection of America to Africa. The argument is dialogised in the differing views held by Patricia Best who disregards any cultural devotion to 'a foreign country' and Reverend Richard Misner who believes in engagement, in seeking the knowledge of the past (209-10). Another dimension of cultural memorisation is practically demonstrated in the shifting representation of the original motto (as written on the Oven) of the early settlers - 'Beware the Furrow of His Brow' - which changed or is mis-read as 'Be the Furrow of His Brow' and which is later transformed into a declaration graffiti - 'We Are the Furrow of His Brow' - by the younger generation of the community. This attests to the dynamic structure of society and particularly the shift of consciousness from puritanism to blasphemy.

Paradise is also about revenant presences and magical or supernatural acts. Mary Magna/Mother Superior attains an angelic if not ghostly figuration so that the love relationship between her and Consolata seems to be that of a goddess and a worshipper. Consolata herself is described, after Superior's passage, as 'a new and revised Reverend Mother'. (265) She acquires an extrasensory power of resuscitation from Lone Dupres who guides her to 'step in... to find the pinpoint of light' to revive dead or sick persons (245). It is this gift of ESP that Consolata employs to resurrect Scout Morgan and prolong the life of Mother Superior. Invariably, the outlines of affiliative relationship between Mary Magna - Consolata, and Consolata-Lone is at once ethereal and magical; by extension, the relationship between Consolata and Soane Morgan is described as *fast* friendship, in spite of her erotic association with Soane's husband and because of her ability to 'step in' and save the Morgan kid from dying.

The reader of *Paradise* may be tempted to see it as a paradoxical text stringed with ironies and contradictions: a community in search of order but desirous of creating chaos in another community on grounds of some evil imagined; or a self-sustaining paradisiac commune occupied by liars, abortionists, lip-biters, infant-killers and nudists. Nothing is left but remorse and guilt in Ruby and a haunted emptiness in the Convent. And by banishing the dream of paradise from the Convent, the proud men of Ruby have themselves lost a huge part of their own humanity. However, the novel ends with a flash of Piedade's blissful song filled with both memory and hope of attaining a new paradise - 'the ease of coming back to love begun'. (318)

As the last part of the author's trilogy on love coming close to the end of the century, *Paradise* is arguably a textual confirmation of Morrison's deep concern for the varied negotiations of maternal as well as feminine filiations and affiliations within defined communities. The novel is not only an extended form of the Morrison artistic vision, it is also a very ambitious and complicating text in terms of its representation of cultural and individual histories, journeyings, flights as well as its basic trope on naming (of persons and places); practically complicating so, in terms of its chess-like narrative pattern which portrays, with nearly equal intensity, the related lives and motions of families and individuals from Haven to New Haven/Ruby and the Convent between the 1890s and the 1970s. By termination the narrative of *Paradise* in the 1970s, the decade which marked the rise of black female prose writing in America, Toni Morrison seems to have completed, metaphorically speaking, a phase of African American black women's representation, repossession, identity, integration and possibilities.

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