

Toni Morrison and Tradition of Christianity
Comment on Sugiyama Naoko,
“‘Blessed Malelessness’ as Womanist Critique?:
Toni Morrison’s Representation of Goddess
in *Paradise*”

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Sugiyama Naoko begins her provocative and insightful paper, “‘Blessed Malelessness’ as Womanist Critique?: Toni Morrison’s Representation of Goddess in *Paradise*,” by referring to the relationship between Christianity and African Americans. She then proceeds to explore its relationship with African-American women writers, citing a number of works, for example, by Zora Neale Hurston, and Ntzi Shange on to Alice Walker. I was impressed by Sugiyama’s coverage of an extensive range of African-American women writers and her accurate analyses of their texts. Although she makes reference to various writers, her main analysis focuses on Toni Morrison’s controversial novel, *Paradise*.

Sugiyama emphasizes that Christianity is the backbone of Toni Morrison’s writings, and I tend to be in agreement with her. I find no reason for objection because explicit/implicit symbols or traces of Christianity can be easily found in her writings. To name a few, Sugiyama refers to Baby Suggs’ speech in *Beloved*, and the funeral scene in *Song of Solomon*. In addition to these, I would like to mention here one of the impressive Christian scenes from *The Bluest Eye*: Pecola is taken away, “carrying a white tail” behind her and Claudia follows her, hoisting Pecola’s pants soiled with blood. Obviously, this is based on the biblical scene in which Jesus Christ is taken away to Golgotha by a mob of soldiers and people. Claudia, the narrator, confesses near the ending of the novel that people including herself took advantage of Pecola in order to achieve their own happiness. To be sure, although Claudia always pretended to help and support Pecola, she never did so in reality. For instance, Claudia and Frieda didn’t protect Pecola from Maureen Peal’s malicious intent because they wanted to get into favor with Maureen. They hurt the feelings of Marie, the whore who was very kind to them, with their heartless words. They went to Pecola’s work place despite not having any important business and caused Pecola to be beaten down by her mother. This is only insinuated in the text, but Claudia also tells Pecola about Soaphead Church, a bogus adviser of dreams, and Pecola’s visit to him turns out to be the direct cause of her schizophrenia. The motif of victimization in *The Bluest Eye*

resembles that of *Paradise*, which I will refer to later.

Historically, Christianity was introduced to enslaved African Americans as a means of domesticating them. Christianity's emphasis of happiness after death was a convenient tool for the white slave holders to tame slaves and suppress any insurgence, as was the case in most former colonies in the world. However, if I use Houston Baker, Jr.'s terminology, African Americans mastered the form their masters forced on them and "deformed" that mastery to create quite another thing. As Hortense J. Spillers' keynote paper pointed out, the practice of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s progressive church was a good example of the deformation and reformation of white-centered Christianity. According to Spillers, his progressive church, combining pulpit and street, the holy and the secular, remade the original segregated Christianity into a different kind of religion that makes a protest against social injustice.

I agree with Sugiyama's opinion that Toni Morrison's writings are deeply connected with Christianity, but a few questions remain that I would like to pose to Sugiyama. The first question is as follows. In making a comparison with Alice Walker who contributed to the formation of African-American feminist theology, Sugiyama argues, "Toni Morrison, on the other hand, seems to emphasize the African-American characteristics within Christian tradition" (4-5). What is Sugiyama referring to as being "Christian tradition"? She continues, "Morrison's representation of feminine divine [in *Paradise*] is never totally apart from Christianity and its American and African-American religious tradition" (5). According to this citation, Sugiyama regards the American tradition and African-American tradition of Christianity as being coextensive. On the other hand, as Spillers pointed out, historically they are both often mutually exclusive. According to Spillers, Christianity in the United States was, regardless of denomination and region, "a veritable extension of an unjust social order" and that the African-American church was a critical base for voicing opposition to it (12).

Also, Sugiyama describes Piedade, the Goddess-like image in *Paradise*, as being rooted not only in the African-Brazilian religion of Candomblé, but also in Catholicism and "Christianity in one of its most original form" (7). Thus, Sugiyama insists that Piedade is the amalgamation of various religious images. I endorse this inference of hers, but I do not think this necessarily implies the inclination of the author to whole-heartedly embrace Catholicism and Christian tradition. I am not certain whether early Gnostic Christianity, whose words Morrison used for the epigraphs of her two novels, is viewed as having been a part of traditional Christianity because it is a faith that had been set apart from Christian tradition at its early stage of development. I will refrain from expanding further on this topic here because it would require extensive discussion.

Traditional American Protestantism and Catholicism were severely criticized by King because of their silence toward racial injustice in the United States.

According to Gallup's 2006 survey, approximately 80 percent of Americans believe in Christianity (including 2% Jewish), and 49 percent of Americans are Protestant and 24 percent Catholic. However, historically, American mainstream Christianity had long acquiesced toward slavery and been compromised with regards to racism and apartheid in the United States, as Spillers pointed out in her paper. Therefore, if Sugiyama is to emphasize Toni Morrison being within the tradition of Christianity, I feel it important that she define exactly what the "tradition of Christianity" is or what the "American tradition of Christianity" is. In short, the problem here is whether African-American Christianity should be regarded as being a part of the American tradition of Christianity. Or, would Sugiyama be implying that although Morrison is critical of American mainstream Christianity, at the same time she embraces some hope about its future?

This question is connected to my second question concerning the interpretation of *Piedade*. Sugiyama states as follows:

The ending of *Paradise* suggests that both Convent women and the people of Ruby will ultimately come to this Black Goddess for salvation and consolation. Morrison in fact presents a religious vision in which African-American Christianity, in accordance with its tradition, answers people's needs and helps them to survive, first women in this case, but eventually men and women both. (8)

Although I endorse Sugiyama's argument in other sections, I hesitate to agree with this rather optimistic interpretation of the novel's ending: Convent women and the people of Ruby will ultimately come to *Piedade* "for salvation and consolation." In my view, like other endings of Morrison's novels, the ending of *Paradise* doesn't seem to ring of promise or hope, but is rather dominated by hopelessness. I hereby briefly explain the reason for this viewpoint and would like to receive the comments of the participants.

The town of Ruby is populated by only black people and has churches of three denominations: Methodist, Baptist, and Pentecostal. Although there are all Protestant churches, the specific characteristics of each denomination are neither explained nor seem to have significance in the novel. The Convent, situated 17 miles away from Ruby, was formerly resided by Catholic nuns, who are all gone except for Mary Magna who soon dies at the beginning of the novel, and it is now the home of five women. It can be said that whether the Convent is Catholic or not has no meaning in the novel, because none of its current residents are Catholics in the proper sense. Therefore, that Ruby is of Protestant faith and the Convent of Catholic faith doesn't explain the reason for the antagonism between the two. Reviewers such as Kakutani Michiko, Brooke Allen, and Louis Menand assert that the theme of *Paradise* is the war between men and women. This view also does not fully explain the reason for the antagonism because the town of Ruby has as much female as male population, and the residents of the Convent are not exclusively women. There is also Pallace's baby boy.

Piedade appears twice in the fairy tale narrated to the women by Consolata.

According to Consolata's tale, Piedade is an idyllic woman who is singing by the side of the emerald sea. This beautiful seascape with Piedade in it is likely to be Consolata's image of Paradise. However, Piedade who appears in the last page of this novel is quite different from the Piedade of Consolata's imagination. That is, Piedade is "black as firewood" and her fingers "ruined." Consolata described Piedade as being surrounded by the gleams of emerald, ruby, sapphire, gold, and diamond, but this Piedade is instead surrounded by the gleams of sea trash drifted from civilization, such as a broken sandal, a radio, and bottle caps. Her ruined fingers are associated with the hard manual labor enforced on Third-World female workers, the girl with damaged hands referred to by Richard Misner, and finally the red-black swollen fingers of the peppers grown at the Convent, symbolizing the five women gathered there. Thus, Piedade's ruined fingers signify the suffering of subaltern women who have been deprived of their speech.

Therefore, my interpretation of this ending is that it signifies the severe reality that Paradise, so to speak, does not exist anywhere in this world. The fantastic tropical scenery of the Paradise that Consolata dreamed of is completely reversed at the ending. The fiction of the image of tropical Paradise was disclosed from within and re-described from the point of view of the residents in the tropics, as did Jamaica Kincaid in *A Small Place*. Paradoxically, the realism and disillusionment at the ending of *Paradise* rings so true that it seems rather reassuring to me.

None of the religious establishments appearing in the novel turn out to be effective in resolving the situation. The only cleric who seems trustful and conscientious in this novel is Reverend Misner, the minister of the largest Baptist church. However, readers soon learn that he is not a special man for although he was informed that nine men from Ruby had assaulted the women in the Convent, he didn't indict the men in the end. Anna Flood, his fiancé, had already perceived the dulling of his eye light. Since he plans to marry her and continue to live in Ruby, he feels no need to be bothered by those vagrant women. He almost smiles, thinking about the bright and affluent future of the town in the midst of his sermon at Save-Marie's funeral. Save-Marie is a little girl with "destroyed hands" who was born only to end up suffering throughout her life and die without anyone to grieve her death or any detailed description of her in the novel. Misner talks to Save-Marie in her coffin "as if to apologize" to her: "Oh, Save-Marie, your name always sounded like 'Save me.' 'Save me.' Any other messages hiding in your name? I know one that shines out for all to see: there never was a time when you were not saved, Marie" (307). Although he finds himself a bit embarrassed by these hypocritical words, everything will turn out well for him and the townspeople because the annoyingly heavy burdens are being taken away all at once at this time. From this viewpoint, we know that in *Paradise*, traditional Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic, is totally powerless in solving and helping the deep afflictions of subaltern existence.

At the ending of *The Bluest Eye*, Claudia confesses as follows:

All of our waste which we dumped on her [Pecola] and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. [...] Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. (205)

Piedade is Pecola, the footstool for other people. People go to her, seeking consolation from her, but they won't give it to her. Paradise is a paradox, because someone's paradise is always another person's nightmare. I, however, do not intend to say that *Paradise* is a pessimistic novel. Far from that, its pessimistic, realist recognition of the world's status quo paradoxically contributes to engendering the optimistic feeling of coping with it. It is in this context that I give high evaluation to Sugiyama's conclusion to Morrison's valiant undertaking of exploring the power of religion and black women's civil empowerment.

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