

Original Paper

A Tentative Study of the Historical Themes in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract

Paradise is Toni Morrison's major work after her winning of the Nobel Prize which expresses complex themes and her hopes for the reconciliation between the black and the white. Race issue and the oppression of minorities are entrenched in American history which was reflected in the novel. This paper intends to analyze the themes of racism and oppression in terms of Ruby's death and Delia's fate from the historical perspective in search of Morrison's ideal 'Paradise' which is inclusive, accessible to everyone.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, Paradise, historical themes, reconciliation

1. Introduction

Paradise, released in 1998, is Toni Morrison's first novel after winning the Nobel Prize in 1993, and also the final piece of her historical trilogy. This novel has gained attention from critics, abroad and at home, who employ some theories to discuss the themes, narrative strategies and historical reconstruction of this complex novel. Critics analyze Morrison's works by explaining the experiences of women, as well as the elements such as gender, race, etc. Moreover, such approaches as existentialism, hermeneutics, feminism, deconstruction, symbolism, postmodernism, and structuralism are frequently employed by critics to analyze Morrison's works. They tend to point out the characteristics of postmodernism as well as the technique to reveal the relation between her novels and

the African American history in works.

The first scholarly article on Morrison, “The Novels of Toni Morrison: Studied in Thwarted Sensitivity” appeared in 1975. Since then, considerable research has done on Morrison from various kinds of perspectives. “The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, written by Peter Widdowson, may be the most representative one from the perspective of history, in which Widdowson discusses the chronology of *Paradise*, according with the freed black slaves, the American Civil Rights Movement, World War One, the Civil Rights Movement and the Vietnam War in American History. There are also critics who analyze *Paradise* from narrative techniques. For example, Magali Cornier Michel’s “Re-imagining: Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”, Juda Bennett’s “Toni Morrison and the Burden of the Passing Narrative”, to Mami Gauthier’s “The Other Side of Paradise: Toni Morrison’s Making of Mythic History”.

The study of Morrison in China lags behind that in the West. “Recent Publication of Afro-American Writers” (1981), written by Dong Dingshan, was the first to mention Toni Morrison. While up to now, there are a great deal of Chinese academic theses about Toni Morrison and her works. In 1999, Wang Shouren and Wu Xinyun published *Gender, Race, and Culture: Toni Morrison and American Black Literature of the Twentieth Century*, in which they explored Morrison’s idea on gender, race and culture by associating Morrison’s works with the related social and political contexts. Being the first academic book on Morrison in China, this book can be regarded as the milestone, indicating the beginning of the study of Toni Morrison. Therefore, there have been lots of studies done on this subject.

This paper intends to explore the complex themes of *Paradise*: historical theme by analyzing the phenomenon of racism and oppression. And the town of Ruby’s isolation and exclusion cannot exist after the attack, thus, reconciliation is their only way out.

2. The Analysis of Racism and Oppression

New historicists argue the importance of literary text and the importance of concentrating on history when analyzing a text. A text’s historical content and interpretation on the interplay between the text and historical contexts are the concentration of the new historicism. They hold that a literary text has more historical contexts and it is difficult to identify all of them.

New Historicism focuses on history and understanding, and calls for historical consciousness. They argue that a literary history is not just a tracing back of literary developments and changes about past literature, and thus combine the literary analysis of a work with the study of its historical background. New Historicism concentrates on recalling historicity and ideology. New Historicism proposes the track change of history-culture and emphasizes the necessity to implement a comprehensive study of politics, economics and sociology when studying a text.

Paradise opens with “They shoot the white girl first”. The word “white” for the skin color highlights the importance of race. “I did that on purpose”, Morrison says in an interview:

I wanted the readers to wonder about the race of these girls until those readers understood that their race didn't matter. I want to dissuade people from reading literature in that way...Race is the least reliable information you can have about someone. Its real information, but it tells you next to nothing (Lester, p. 63).

Racism, as the name suggests, asserts the superiority of one race over another and seeks to maintain the so-called purity of a race or the races. But in *Paradise*, racism has further manifestation, i.e., the racism among the black people themselves.

The establishment of town Ruby is based on racial purity, i.e., people in this town are a pure ethnic group, which follows an unwritten "blood principle" that forbids its members to marry the light-skinned people or the whites. Ruby adopted a kind of racism which is opposite to that of Fairly's. They established their racism by reversing the racism they themselves suffered. In the town, the 8-rock blacks are welcomed and their priority is obvious, while the others are discriminated.

In *Paradise*, the Ruby people strongly believe that they are the God's chosen people and they are proud of their dark skin. However, they adopt white racism, place money and power before their own people. They wrongfully think that the "white man" is devil; they flee from the oppression because of skin color to set up their own towns. However, these towns are modeled after those they flee. They undervalue and degrade the non-8-rock blacks. The lighter skinned and whites are considered as "outsider" and "enemy". In order to purify the blood, they exclude all the non-8-rocks. Moreover, the rejection from the whites and light skinned people enhanced the hostility towards the outside world. In essence, Ruby becomes the new Fairly, "disallowing" any and all who are unlike its inhabitants.

In *Paradise*, it seems natural for white people to look down upon the black and refuse any help with the black, just as the law. What's more dangerous, the racism exists among black community, which leads to a twisted society.

2.1 *Ruby's Death*

In *Paradise*, Ruby is an all-black town, unique and isolated. This town is named after Zecharich's granddaughter, the twins Deek and Steward's sister, Ruby.

Ruby is a sweet and modest girl under the protection of her brother Steward and Deacon. But Ruby gets sick during the trip of their community moving to a new town. At first, the two brothers think she will be fine but rapidly she needs immediate medical help. They drive her to Demby, then to Middleton to find doctors. Colored people are not allowed to be in the wards, and the usual doctors will not attend them. She is at her last gasp by the time they get to the second hospital, she dies on the waiting room bench while the nurse tries to find a doctor to examine her. Later, the brothers learn the nurse has been trying to reach a veterinarian. And they gather their dead sister in their arms; their shoulders shake all the way home. Ruby is buried in a pretty spot on Steward's ranch. In order to memorize Ruby and remember this injustice treatment, they name their new town after Ruby.

Thus, “Ruby” has double meanings: one is the name of both Steward and Deacon’s sister, the other for the town Ruby. People in Ruby, especially Morgan families, devote their whole life to fighting for justice between the black and white, which are not equally treated. From the word “veterinarian”, we know, from white people’s point of view, the black people are like the dogs, cows or any other domestic animals and are much inferior to the white people. Racial injustice does not only exist between white and black, it also stays in black community dangerously.

The distorted belief in the white people even passes on the black people in Ruby. The Morgan’s believe in the superiority of “8-rock” family. They look down upon their lighter-skinned color people. Billie Delia and her family serve as the examples, which will be discussed in the following part. Injustice between the white and black is an obvious theme in *Paradise*; however injustice among the black community seems to be a more serious race problem in *Paradise*.

2.2 Billie Delia

In Ruby town, race problem does not only exist between the black and white, ironically, it exists in black community itself. The white always looks down upon the black from the salvation of African Americans with the faith that their race is superior to the black people and with a higher status. However, racism even exists among the same race of the black people, i.e., the darker skinned people look down upon the lighter-skinned black people. In *Paradise*, Billie Delia and her mother Patricia Best Cato are the good examples to illustrate the racial problem existing within the black community.

Billie Delia is the daughter of Patricia, the descendant of one of the first founding of the 8-rock families in Ruby. Her grandfather Roger Best, one of the “8-rock” families’ members, breaks the blood rules by marrying a lighter-skinned woman. So Billie Delia has to suffer from unfair treatment since her childhood because of her lighter skin. Billie Delia’s being discriminated can be traced to her grandmother Delia. Delia, who is discriminated by all the people live in the town that upholds blackness. She dies of dystopia when giving birth to Patricia, her daughter. However, the Ruby men do not give a hand to help the lighter-skinned woman, because they think of Delia as a wife of sunlight skin and a wife of racial tempering. Patricia Best Cato is Ruby’s history schoolteacher and finds the reason for the Ruby town distancing from her family: “They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rocklike you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter” (Morrison, p. 196). Thus, Patricia hates her daughter Billie Delia because she brings no glory but shame. As Ruby is an isolated and adoration for being black place. “Unique and isolated, [his] was a town justifiably pleased with itself” (Morrison, p. 8). So it is unacceptable for being white or light-skinned. Billie Delia cannot escape from being one of the victims of this unfair justice.

When Billie was three years old, she dropped her britches in public, which results in the town people in Ruby labeling her a “a loose woman”. The real reason unstated is being light skinned. As for Arnette Fleetwood, the daughter of 8-rock family, is pregnant with K.D. And she is supported by the town

people because she is pure black. Comparing with Arnette Fleetwood, Billie can't choose her skin color being black or being white. It is unfair for this girl to suffer from the discrimination. Billie Delia's mother Patricia Best Cato, later begins to understand her wrong doings:

Pat realized that ever since Billie Delia was an infant, she thought of her as a liability somehow. Vulnerable to the possibility of not being quite as much of a lady as Patricia Cato would like. Was it that business of pulling down her panties in the street? Billie Delia was only three then. Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was- only an innocent child would have done that, surely, have I missed something? Was there something else? But the question for her now in the silence of this here night was whether she had defended Billie Delia or sacrificed her... (Morrison, p. 203).

Racial discrimination brings suffering to Pat and Billie. So it is injustice for Pat to treat her girl as a shame. While searching for justice, people in the black community themselves become "the white". They think they have suffered from the white man when in fact they imitate them. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they hurt them.

However, the reason for Billie Delia, her mother Patricia Best Cato and her grandmother suffering from being disallowed is due to the "disallowing" of Ruby men themselves.

In the history of Ruby town, their ancestors, nine African American ex-slaves from Mississippi and Louisiana, get together with their wives and children and a few strays they pick up during the trip and settle in Oklahoma. When they arrive in a town named "Fairly", the blacks with lighter skin refuse the nine families. So, remembering the disallowing, the twin brothers Deacon and Steward Morgan are trying their best to maintain the purity of the blood of their "8-rock" black people.

The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened-things they witnessed and things they have not... And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather-the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves (Morrison, p. 13).

Racial injustice exists between the white and the black and even among the black community, which leads to a twisted society. Ruby, a lovely girl, dies for being black. No white doctors would like to cure her. Billie's grandmother dies for being light skinned. Rubymen refuse to give any help. Billie Delia, labeled as "loose woman" suffers from her community for her lighter skin color. Thus, a passion for racial justice is remarkably necessary to solve the nation's problem. Exclusion in Ruby is primarily based on racial purity, while gender is another reason for exclusion.

3. Reconciliation

Morrison's ideal paradise is accessible to everyone. Men and women, whites and blacks can inhabit in it. In the end of *Paradise*, Morrison implies what her ideal paradise is like, that's, the reconciliation between men and women, blacks and whites. Morrison gave a good conclusion of its fatal influence in an interview:

Isolation carries the seeds of its own destruction because as times change, other things seep in, as it did with Ruby. The 50's, that was one thing; the 70's, that was another, and they refused to deal with the changing times, and simply threw up their gates, like any gated community, to keep everything away. And, in fact, that was the necessary requirement for the destruction of their paradise.

In Morrison's interview with James Marcus, Morrison states: "Our view of Paradise is so limited: it requires you to think of yourself as the chosen people—chosen by God, that is which means that your job is to isolate yourself from other people". That is the nature of Paradise: it is really defined by who is not there as well as who is. The town's system forbids the difference, new ideas and new residents.

At the end of the novel, one assured that the isolation days of Ruby are over: "Roger Best will get his gas station and the connecting roads will get his gas station and the connecting roads will be laid. Outsiders will come and go, come and go, and some will want a sandwich and a can of 3.2beer. So who knows, maybe there will be a dinner too. K.D. and Steward will already be discussing TV" (Morrison, p. 306). Ruby's geographical isolation, ninety miles away from the Convent, cut its inhabitants off from national developments. As Misner notes "Not even newspapers popular in Ruby" (Morrison, p. 208). This leads to the isolation and distance from the cultural, economic and political events. For about twenty years, nobody dared to disturb their dream and isolation. This is the result of defending a paradise based on exclusion enforced by violence. Violence, especially the murder, contradicts to the idea expressed by the title. After the attack, Misner believed that these men "had ended up betraying it all": "Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, as an unnecessary failure" (Morrison, p. 306). Misner envisioned the town's future: "mortality may be new to them but birth was not. The future panted at the gate" (Morrison, p. 306). The strange disappearance of women's corpse made the trace of the crime vanish. People believe "God had given Ruby a second chance" (Morrison, p. 297). And it echoes with Morrison's purpose—Paradise and Reconciliation. At the end of the novel, the hopefulness and optimism are obvious and the beginning of a new cycle may be foreseen. The novel implied that it is necessary to create an "open house" and the home. The Oven was once a part of the Haven or Ruby way of life. The Oven was the centerpiece of a community kitchen. When the descendents transferred from Haven to Ruby, the Oven lost its functions both as a common cooking area and as the site of baptism. By the end of the novel, the central functions of the Oven shifted to the Convent, where the women cook together and dance together. The novel implied that it is necessary to create an "open house" and the home.

Morrison closes *Paradise* with a heartening note. When the ocean heaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise.

The mysterious ending of *Paradise* displays a promising future. In an interview, Morrison has said that the last word in the book, *Paradise* should have a small “p”, not a capital “P”. Toni Morrison’s ideal paradise is a place for anyone, both passengers and crew.

4. Conclusion

Toni Morrison’s literary creation is a milestone in the development of African American fiction in 20th century. What makes her historical novels unorthodox is that Morrison has always given voices to those people whose voices have been ignored in American history. *Paradise* writes down people’s misery and tribulation. In *Paradise*, the 8-rock blacks assert superiority over the light-skinned blacks. To Morrison, a perfect paradise should be inclusive, accessible to everyone. Morrison implies what her perfect paradise is like that at the end of *Paradise*, that is, the reconciliation between blacks and whites; men and women.

Morrison depicts the injustice between the male and female, the black and the lighter-skinned among black community. Because of the male dominance over the female, thus female characters begin to search for justice. Feminist theology enlightens the motivation for the black men’s dominance over the women. Eve is not the original sin of all. Thus, justice becomes the focus of female characters.

Morrison at last comes to the conclusion that the only way for African Americans living in the paradise is justice and love. Only with united efforts, can black people achieve ultimate justice, freedom and integrity, only by eliminating the evils of sexism and racism, may real paradise be established.

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