

Deconstruction Of Dichotomies In Toni Morrison's Paradise

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Abstract

In her 1998 novel Paradise, Morrison plays with her reader's desire in terms of gender, race and religion where binary oppositions can be easily constructed in the process of reading. However, as this paper seeks to prove, all these dichotomies are ostensible and false. It is not Morrison's intention to construct a disparate paradise as opposed to all-black patriarchy Ruby with its rigid Christian religion. It is Morrison's intention to invite the readers into the program of deconstructing the dangers of this utopian desire. As the present paper finds out what Morrison really endeavors to critique is dichotomy itself. In the progress of the novel, we can see that simple dichotomies of race, of gender, and of religion are undermined, and set interpretations are shattered.

Key Words: deconstruction; dichotomies; Toni Morrison; *Paradise*.

Introduction

Before publication, Morrison intended the title of her seventh novel *Paradise* to be "War," which would have indicated the gender opposition and religious factionalism (Kearly 14). And the "war" in the novel seems obvious at first glance, which demonstrates itself in a series of binary oppositions: the Convent & Ruby; Ruby & Haven; female & male; Reverend Misner's & Reverend Pulliam's versions of Christianity; Christianity & African "practice"; two sets of Morgan twins (Deacon and Steward and their grandfather Coffee and great uncle Tea); sisters and sisters-in-law Soane and Dovey; Soane's and Deek's two dead sons; four women who enter the Convent (the abandoning/murdering mother & the abandoned daughter, the sexual exploiter & the sexually exploited).

Because of these seemingly binary oppositions presented in the novel, it was under attack from critics from all sides. Reviewers criticized the rigid and legalistic male-female dichotomy and the unconvincing logic of its war between men and women which results in a formulaic and contrived book (Allen 1998; Gates 1998; Kakutani 1998; Menand 1998). Critics like Geoffrey Bent often see *Paradise* as a simplistic critique of a patriarchy in which all the men are bad and all the women are good. Bent suggests that "[o]ne of *Paradise's* shortcomings as a concept is that it's too schematic, a place that's all of this and none of that Morrison's new novel falls prey to this same exclusivity. Virtue and vice seem to have been rigorously sorted along the convenient divide of gender; all the woman are good; all the men bad" (149).

In fact, as the analysis goes deeper, the dichotomies can be proved false. It is not a simple gendered dichotomy of male against female either. It is not a simple racial dichotomy of black against white. Furthermore, it is not a simple religious dichotomy of African religion against Christianity.

1. False Gendered Dichotomy

The fundamental opposition in the novel is between the all-black inhabitants of Ruby and the all-female inhabitants of the Convent. The all-black town of Ruby is dominated by the Morgan twins and their freezing

and rigid vision for their history, while the all-female Convent is comprised of a group of women who have drifted to one house and been welcomed by its only resident, Consolata. These two groups of people are so disparate about their views on their past, their religious practice, and their moral beliefs on community building that they inevitably engage in a kind of struggle. However, the novel may well criticize patriarchal structures that insist on a specific, inflexible hierarchy of power with enforced obedience and silence, it does not so simplistically go for the matriarchy.

From the beginning Paradise defeats the possibility of viewing the Convent as a completely harmonious haven, a conflict-free commune of “sisters.” Mavis and Gigi engage in vicious and sometimes violent turf battles, managing “to avoid murder” only for Connie’s sake (259). The women bicker, choose sides, and say cruel things to one another, and tensions increase with Pallas’ arrival, which seems to jeopardize “the safety available in [the] house” (261). The women are complex individuals who are both good and bad. We are never allowed to fully trust, to believe completely in, anyone. The women of the Convent, who Bent says are purely good, are sometimes horribly flawed—self-pitying, fun-seeking, even violent, and all are participants in the three evils the house-mother Consolata notes: “disorder, deception and... drift The three d’s that paved the way to perdition” (222). Indeed, Consolata sees the women as childish and ineffective: “instead of plans, they had wishes—foolish babygirl wishes” (222). Even Consolata, arguably the most promising character, has been driven by lust, homesickness, pettiness and nostalgia, has fallen into alcoholism and self-pity, and is willfully disengaged from the people around her.

At the same time, some of the broken women at the Convent were hurt most by other women: Seneca’s sister/mother Jean abandons her, her foster mother refuses to acknowledge or protect her from sexual abuse, and the sexually predatory rich woman Norma Fox further brutalizes her; Pallas’ mother abandons her and then betrays her with her lover; even Consolata was stolen from her home country by the woman she comes to adore, the nun Mary Magna.

The Convent, a seemingly female space, contains the remnants of a male embezzler’s desires: bathroom fixtures, doorknobs, and ashtrays shaped like genitalia; paintings of copulating couples or women in positions of subjugation; dark rooms whose original purposes are unknown.

On the part of the community of Ruby, the novel indicates that the strict regulation of women’s sexuality is not part of the town’s heritage. Steward Morgan remembers the story of his older brother Elder, who represents for his younger sibling the exacting moral standards the Morgan men had. Upon his return to the United States after the First World War, Elder gets involved in a fight which has inscribed in his mind forever. Seeing two white men arguing with a black woman whom Elder presumes is a prostitute because of the way she is dressed, he initially identifies with the men. However, he finds himself physically defending her when the white men beat her. Frightened by the consequence of offending the white, he flees away, but he can never forgive himself for fleeing after the fight rather than staying to help the black woman. Arriving home, he chooses to keep his uniform in its tattered condition and asks to be buried in it when he dies. His attitude toward the woman is greatly changed: “Whatever he felt about her trade, he thought about her, prayed for her till the end of his life” (94-95).

Steward is proud of his brother’s strict personal moral standard but is unable to relate to Elder’s charitable attitude toward the woman: “it unnerved him [Steward] to know [the story] was based on the defense of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own” (95). Steward’s judgmental tendency and his aversion to women’s sexuality ultimately lead him to abandon his own moral code.

In Zia Jaffrey’s 1998 interview for Salon magazine, Morrison responded to the issues of “patriarchy” and “matriarchy” involved in Paradise: “In order to be as free as I possibly can, in my own imagination, I can’t take positions that are closed ... I think 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”(Salon Feb. 2,

1998). Indeed, Morrison resists such labels as “feminine” and “masculine” altogether. It is not Morrison’s intention to create a paradise where a material, spiritual, and familial qualities can be found and serve the answer to all the problems. In fact, it is her intention to dig out the dangers of this utopian desire.

2. False Racial Dichotomy

The now famous first sentence of the novel: “They shoot the white girl first” (3), which describes the climactic attack of Ruby’s men on the Convent women, setting up the racial mystery which lures us into questions: Who at the Convent is white and who is black? To whom does it matter? The long-held beliefs about race and racial characteristics often color the way we understand the world. *Playing in the Dark* offers a compelling account of what blackness and black characters have been made to symbolize within white literary culture: “illicit sexuality, chaos, madness, impropriety, anarchy, strangeness, and helpless, hapless desire” (Morrison 1992:80–81). In other words, blackness continues to carry its usual label of otherness, unsanctioned passion, and authentic suffering. Certainly, critics have determinedly defined the race of the women in this novel. That would explain why many critics have determinedly defined the race of the women in this novel.

However, such identification does not point out the fact that the character’s race matters but that people have been taught by white-dominated American culture to believe that it does. Morrison repeatedly emphasizes that knowing someone’s race provides no real information, stating: “It was important to me to demonstrate that [concept] in *Paradise*, by withholding racial markers from a group of black women, among whom was one white woman... And if I could enforce that response in literature, it was a way of saying that race is the least important piece of information we have about another person. Forcing people to react racially to another person is to miss the whole point of humanity” (Timehost Chat).

Kathryn Nicol considers the racial ambiguity found in *Paradise* as a strategy for understanding in the novel, suggesting that race is about reading, about the identifier not the identified (102). Indeed, Morrison herself seems to support this claim in her 1998 interview with *Salon* magazine in which she explains that her father taught her to deal with racism by reminding her “You don’t live in that neighborhood... No, you don’t live in that imagination of theirs. That’s not your home.” In other words, racism is about the racist. By adamantly refusing to name which character is white, Morrison also urges those readers who try to solve the text’s racial puzzle to become aware of their own participation in the thinking of racial stereotypes. Her aim in her depiction of the Convent women, as she has remarked, is “to write race and to unwrite it at the same time” (*Oprah Winfrey Show*). The ambiguity of the characters haunts the rest of the novel, disallowing easy judgment individuals or the communities to which they belong.

Morrison here plays with her reader’s desire in terms of race and then undermines it. While the reader may attempt to find clues that would determine the race of the women at the Convent, those desires become subverted when the reader is forced to question themselves as well as the narrative. By employing a liberal perspective of individualism, readers can then deny the barrier of racial difference in order to identify with black characters.

3. False Religious Dichotomy

It seems as if Morrison creates in *Paradise* a nun (Consolata), apparently Christian, whose mysterious powers link her to a non-Christian world. She is bestowed to have the power of “stepping in” to raise the dead. In the novel, Morrison describes how Consolata uses her gift—her ability to step inside other people—to prolong the life of Mary Magna: “Stepping in to find the pinpoint of light. Manipulating it, widening it, strengthening it. Reviving, even raising, her from time to time” (247). But Connie never reveals her stepping in to Mother, knowing that Mother would be appalled by the knowledge that her life was being prolonged by evil, as Connie calls it. The reason why Consolata feels guilty of performing “stepping-in” is that it is quite against what she has been taught by normative Christian principles.

Critics like Therese E. Higgins points out that Consolata assumes the role of the Spanish woman god named Black Virgin of Monserrat (Higgins 132-33). It is true that Consolata's method of raising the dead and healing the women is not in line with the Christian belief, but it is also unsafe to say that Morrison offers an alternative of the African religion to criticize the Christian religion. In fact, Morrison thinks highly of Christian virtues. It is interesting here to note that there is a division between an Old and New Testament God. The God the founding fathers of Ruby seems to follow is indeed an Old Testament God, one who is arbitrary, who sets the rules to be followed. But in Richard Misner's version, intention and action are central and people are responsible for themselves. What the Convent women have at last learned is to love oneself and to love one another, which is just what Reverend Misner is trying to preach: "God loved the way humans loved one another; loved the way humans loved themselves" (146). Most critics agree on the point that Morrison creates the character Richard Misner to express her own stance.

Another character Morrison identifies with is Lone DuPres, "the most beloved, endearing character created by Morrison since Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon*" (Higgins 137). Morrison writes of Lone: "She knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the 'trick' of life and its 'reason'" (272). Lone practices a Christianity that calls for active participation in the world, and this is what drives her listening: "Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in. He did not thunder instructions or whisper messages into ears. Oh, no. He was a liberating God. A teacher who taught you how to learn, to see for yourself. His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid attention to His world" (273). Rather than listening and reading signs, Lone allowed herself to nurse resentment "Had she been paying attention, first to the buzzards, then to the minds of men, she would not be using up all her Wrigley's and gasoline on a mission she hoped was her last" (273), trying to save the Convent women. Again, Morrison does not follow the simplistic logic of denying one religion for another. Paradise may point toward the importance of questioning those narratives and to considering religion with its religious essence and without its religious outfit.

4. Conclusion

As a renowned African-American female writer, Toni Morrison is noted for her examination of the black experience and Paradise is another attempt to for her to bring life to essential aspects of American reality with binary oppositions of gender, race, and religion. Because of these dichotomies presented in the novel, readers are likely to be left to dig out meaning between a male place Ruby and a female place the Convent, between whiteness and blackness, and between Christian religion and African traditional religion. Perhaps the most substantial and intricate work that Morrison initiates does not occur within Ruby and the Convent or even within the text; it occurs, to a large extent, between the reader and the text. The slaughter at the Convent is not the end but the beginning of a new one. As Morrison remarks about Paradise on Oprah, "I wouldn't want to end up having written a book in which there was a formula and a perfect conclusion and that was the meaning and the only meaning" (Oprah Winfrey Show). Therefore, what Morrison really endeavors to critique is dichotomy itself. In the progress of the novel, we can see that simple dichotomies of race, of gender, and of religion are undermined, and set interpretations are shattered. Then real meaning as to the significance of these dichotomies would arise out of every reader's mind.

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