

Symbolism in Modern American Fiction: A Case Study of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract: *The study aspires to investigate the utilization of the symbolism in Toni Morrison's Paradise (1997). The female figures are endowed with shared characteristics of helplessness and loss that augmented our sense of man's entrapment and dehumanization. Their dilemma also triggered off a subsidiary cluster of themes, events, and imagery to trace the best means to set up equilibrium between man and his surroundings and before his entire shaky psyche. The study spotlights the interplay of symbolism with these elements to vividly convey and enrich the authorial message. It ultimately concludes that the symbolic dimension in the novel adds up to its literary merit and universal appeal.*

Key words: *Symbolism, Alienation, Captivity, Morrison*

I. Introduction

Symbolism simply means “attaching additional meaning to an action, object, or name” in order to “give it a new and more significant meaning.” (<https://www.thebalancecareers.com/symbol-definition-fiction-writing-1277138>). In Literature, it aids to convey and enrich the authorial message as vividly appears in the target text.

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) is a black novelist, editor, critic, and dramatist. Being the first black female Nobel-laureate, she has been acknowledged as “one of (the) most distinguished contemporary novelists” (Kubitechek,1998:1), a prominent literary American “artist of the first rank” (ibid.). Inspired by the blacks' double Diaspora, Morrison traces the ex- slaves' exodus from the South when persecuted and movement westward to settle in big cities following the termination of the American Civil War in the 1860's. Over one hundred towns were constructed in Oklahoma, of which 'Haven' was built in 1890. It was established as a self-sufficient society detached from the world. The descendants of Haven's founders constructed a similar community in 'Ruby', after the Second World War, to be their own paradise. Thus, both 'Haven' and 'Ruby' are ordered by color prejudice and imposed intentional isolation. No outsiders exist, except for several women settling in a desolate convent and suspected to be the root of all evil. In their turn, those women create their own world in the convent to be out of touch with daily troubles and exercise their liberty. Yet, they are all at odds with their patriarchal society and resemble a group of outlaws that can never be socially approved outside the convent walls. Apparently, no true paradise can reside in both locations: Ruby's conventions, though aim to guarantee people's security, abort their freedom and limit their horizon, whereas the convent itself turns to be another confining site whose female dwellers are obsessed with their turbulent memories that impede their leading a normal course of life. This notion of social ostracism is highly stressed as paradise – in the true sense of the word – must permit the existence of the other, not its exclusion.

PARADISE, thus, signals a hallmark in Morrison's fiction. It sketches out the touchy issue of racism coupled with an exploration of the concept of paradise from an earthly, realistic viewpoint – an attitude that renders it one of “the hottest literary novel(s) of all time” and a true saga that confirms her being “America's Greatest storyteller” (Tally, 1999: 12).

The current paper spotlights the symbolic dimension in the novel to gain a thorough comprehension of the authorial message and the portrayal of the human, universal dilemma of shame, guilt, and solitude.

Characterization in *Paradise*

Women, in the convent, exercise tangible syndromes of isolation. They epitomize a group of fragmented selves of deformed psyche in their insulated world. Mavis Albright is the first drifter to the convent. Described by her husband as “the dumbest bitch on the planet” (37), she is frustrated with her family life and even suspects that her husband is conspiring with the children to kill her. In a case of infanticide, she commits a tragic act resulting from negligence by leaving her babies to smother in her Cadillac. To avoid public rebuke, she wanders aimlessly away from the accident scene and becomes a hitchhiker. The convent is the best refuge she used to resort to every now and then. Still, the liberty she enjoys behind its walls cannot heal her agony, which is perpetually embodied in the obsessing vision of her dead kids in the kitchen. Another neurotic figure is Pallas or Divine Truelove. Doubly betrayed by her mother who stole her boyfriend and dumped by her lover while pregnant, she suffers from the loss of her voice in the wake of the betrayal act – a situation that “sharpen(s) her shame” (179) and leads to her stay in the convent to have her baby in peace. Similarly, Grace is also jilted in love. While her lover is in jail, she is impregnated by K. D. Morgan – the last male in the Morgan's' line. Dominated by his lust for her, he seduces her and then abandons her remorselessly. His devious conduct is a living embodiment of juvenile delinquency targeted by Rev. Pulliam in his lectures. Consequently, the women's endeavor to flee from their imprisoning milieu and paralyzing memories into their voluntary captivity in the convent turns them into another group of exiles helpless and incapable of coping with their reality.

Seneca, dramatizing another case of dislocation, reflects a need to proceed with her life elsewhere. Abandoned and turned into an outcast by her teenage mother, she was raised in foster houses where she was sexually abused more than once. Stranded emotionally and financially, particularly after the imprisonment of her boyfriend, she sets a relocation and attainment of security within the confines of the convent. Concerning Patricia, the schoolteacher and the product of an alliance that is socially disapproved as it broke Ruby's sacred blood rule, she is ashamed of her father's practice as a vet with no license and his marriage to a woman with a lighter skin and no last name. Her mother's status as an anonymous outsider ostracized her on the basis that she is “a bastard-born daughter” (203). Such a predicament entails the same affliction and denunciation imposed by the community on her daughter Billie Delia. The latter is loved by the two brothers Brood and Apollo. In a travesty of the past of their ancestors, they compete and one of them even shoots the other. Deep down, she misses the convent's inmates on their miraculous disappearance by the end and rebels against Ruby's men dictatorship that deprives her of their company.

The only neighbor to Ruby is the deserted convent that lies “seventeen miles from a town which has ninety miles between it and any other” (3). After its later demise as a school for Indian girls, it hosts several broken women who drift there, striving for anonymity and invisibility, in a matriarchy against the male hegemony. Their presence there distanced from the mainstream of society displays Morrison's intention to go “beyond the traditional notions that always describe paradise as ‘male enclaves’, while the interloper is a woman, defenseless and threatening” (Mckay 306). Furthermore, in creating such female characters as scapegoats seeking to challenge social pressures and have their own Eden, Morrison aims to dispel the former stereotypes of black women and affirm that “(her) world didn't shrink because (she) was a Black Female

writer , it just got bigger ” (Bloom, 2000: 10) , because “ in all the history of black women , (they) have been both the ship and the harbor ” (Ibid.).

The convent is soon conquered by Ruby ’s men to get rid of that “obscene breed of females” (279). Yet, their raid camouflages their failure to construct a true selfhood detached from their painful past. After dancing in the “hot sweet rain” (283), women are metamorphosed into ghosts and disappear; each achieving her own heaven and regeneration after a prolonged period of suffering. On their way to the future, each one revisits an aspect of her past: Mavis returns to her mother’s house and has lunch with her daughter as a sign of their reconciliation. Similarly, Grace claims love for her father who finally wins a reprieve from death. As for Pallas, she accepts the baby growing inside her. To wash away her guilt, she passes her mother’s name to it, but remains unable to call her out on seeing her vis-à-vis after the massacre. In her turn, Seneca denies her mother on seeing her in a park by the end. Having no future of her love to Deek , Cosolata returns home to enjoy and relax. The man ’s final break with his brother gives rise to expectations of change and salvation. Thus, their spiritual liberation is only attained after their departure to have a life of their own void of the old, haunting fears. Unlike Sabir, in *The Search*, currently more apt to demolish their inner cage, they can break the physical bars to ultimately attain due equilibrium between body and soul, self and society.

Symbolism in *Paradise*

The novel is very rich in symbolism. The setting is of paramount importance: It wavers between the town of Ruby and the convent. The former is a self-enclosed location, semi-dark with neither jail nor cemetery to banish any possibility of sin or death. The oven is the central symbol of the residents’ commitment to “a god-fearing communal life” and “the impossibility of ... change” (Matus 160). Described as “round as a head, deep as desire”, “huge, flawlessly designed” to both nourish and “monumentalize what (the ancestors) had done” (6-7), it turns to be the “lieu de memoire” (Matus 161) and repository of secrets that combine oral and written culture. To clarify, the iron plate set at the base of its mouth holding the words “Beware the Furrow of His Fury” is a visible symbol of the elder Morgans’ defiance of the inhumanity of the slavery system which is against divine justice. Being also a common kitchen to bake bread, a site to baptize the newly born and an outer gathering place, the oven can be deemed a social cornerstone manifesting group solidarity and togetherness and providing physical as well as spiritual feeding. Yet, it gradually deteriorates into a corner of the lazy young whose radio and pop music replace gospels. They even dare to defy its motto and strive to alter it in accordance with their will – a condition that renders it a signal of decay, lost ideals and loss of public consensus. It is, in brief, a symbolic cage that must be modified and developed.

Food constitutes another functional image in the novel. Originally, “the idea of devouring is associated with the traditional images of the female as voracious, and therefore a danger to men” (Tally 79). Such a concept is strengthened by the women ’s insatiable desire for food. Most of them approach the convent while ravenous and eager to eat voraciously – a sign of distress that leads to their gathering at one table to share lunch or a delicious roast-chicken dinner. Their companionship aims to mitigate their woe and hunger for love and passion. Their devouring of the food of Mary Magna ’s funeral also stands for the need to let go of old memories. Moreover, it is significant that Ruby is known as a place “in the middle of nowhere” distinguished with “the best rhubarb pie in the nation” (66). After the collapse of the giant oven, people used to buy the convent residents’ bakeries and the rare hot pepper they cultivate. Accordingly, food triggers off a direct friction between women and the populace, a link that affirms the value of their belonging to a larger, social group. Many other examples sustain the symbolic function of food: Mavis always finds hot potatoes irresistible and feels safe in the convent kitchen, where women spend most time in its warmth. Therefore, “the thought of leaving disturbed her” as “in fact she had an outer rim-sensation that (it) was crowded with children – laughing? singing?” (41), a reminder of her dead kids she deeply misses. Sweetie can also hear there the crying of her sick babies and regrets leaving them. In her turn, Connie – after her conversion – prefers staying in the kitchen ’s dim color that comforts her eyes. It is she who usually does the cooking, after her declaration at the table “I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here, you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will

teach you what you are hungry for” (262) – an action signifying her reclaiming of direction in her and their life likewise. Although all women are inarticulate or silent as they lack the linguistic capacity, a visible manifestation of their distress, some of them, like Pallas, crawl onto Connie’s lap near the stove and articulate parts of their painful stories in an expression of their instinctual craving for a caring mother. In her last visit to the convent, Anna Flood holds five warm eggs in her hands, standing for fertility and rebirth the women diligently endeavor to achieve to finally have a fresh start. She herself owns a grocer’s shop that caters to the young ’s appetite. Rev. Misner accompanies her while carrying long pepper pods of green, red and plum black; such a mixture of colors symbolizes the co- existence of people from different colors and races he calls for.

Morrison’s real forte lies in her precise choice of title and characters’ names. As previously stated, the title invokes the discourse of paradise from the very outset. Morrison justifies her choice of the word as a title to criticize that traditional idea that it excludes certain people , “ the whole idea is to get paradise off its pedestal as a place for anyone , to open it up for passengers and crew ” as “ it is recognizably earthly , imperfect , accessible , and welcomes both lost and saved ”(Matus 167).In addition, she makes use of names inundated with biblical and symbolic connotations. The story of the black people’s exodus to the South is based on an amalgamation of the Old Testament Exodus story and search for the promised land, the story of the wandering of the holy family and the New Testament story of the Israelites’ journey to Bethlehem. Playing the role of God, the men of Ruby want the same fate for the convent women, though unmaliciously, to overcome their own inertia. Their attempt to murder them echoes earlier generations’ habit of burning witches to purify society – a tradition emanating from the folkloric commonplace notions about women’ s ability to “engulf and destroy, as well as to poison the air” (Trudier 152). ‘Ruby’, the name of the location, is derived from the Latin ‘Rubeus’ – a very rare, valuable, red gem – which signals its combination of seeming beauty and latent danger. It also alludes to the biblical comparison: “Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above Rubies” (xxxix, 10). The interrogative harps upon the males’ sexual aggression against the convent females as wrongly deemed the enemy to make up for their failure to handle the true one, namely, their inner cage of ineptitude and failure to confront others and before all themselves

Female names are highly suggestive. Mavis, for instance, is a kind of bird – an emblem of her incessant quest for liberty. She always appears in tired legs, white dresses while scraping and steaming potato chip crumbs to embody her sense of insecurity and desperate need for emotional warmth, also concretized by her keen observation of a rose of Sharon at her mother’s lawn along with a green cross in a field of white “slid from brilliant emergency light into shadow” (28), symbolic of her struggle for deliverance from her troubles. As for Grace, her name is that of the Greek goddess of fertility that often appears nude. It also means “‘a gift’ in Christian theology, a species of cat” (David 173) and comprises forgiveness, salvation, repentance, human and divine love. The girl ’s preference for tight pants, high heels, large earrings, mini-skirts and fast walking indicates her captivity in her impure body that should be countered by yearning for grace and spiritual regeneration. Ending dressed in military attire as a woman warrior, she is not a victim any longer. Similarly, Pallas’ name is that of the Greek goddess of wisdom. Her self-inflicted silence again brings back Ovid’s myth of Philomela – a Greek legend in which the heroine – after having her tongue cut by her rapist – wore a tapestry identifying him. The story also recalls Shakespeare’s famous *Rape of Lucrece* in which a Roman wife stabbed herself after the rape. Both tales bring to the mind the scapegoat myth precipitated by the victimization of Pallas who remains mute while pregnant and the other women by men. The surname, Truelove, functions as another indication of her sensitivity and romantic nature. Seneca, in her turn, used to inscribe pain on her body, slash herself with razors and always wear long-sleeved shirts to keep her scarred body hidden. Her bloody nature is reminiscent of her namesake, the famous Roman philosopher, statesman, and dramatist who created a sub-category of literature known as Senecan tragedy full of horrible deeds.

Finally, Consolata’s name reflects her endeavor to console other embittered females. She wears and eats sunglasses, opts for yellow cotton dresses with tiny white flowers and fancy buttons, unlaced low-heeled shoes and wide-brimmed straw hats – an appearance manifesting her hunger for carnal pleasure.

Consequently, she shares a secret love affair with Deek Morgan, who is repelled by her biting his lips during lovemaking and then licking the blood. Bereaved on losing him, she drinks herself to death for months and inhabits the dark wine-cellar, conceptualized as a womb holding her. Then, “a sunshot seared her right eye, announcing the beginning of her bat vision” (241). Turning into a “Shamas” (Bent 147), she urges other women to relate their stories and organizes their last dance. They all bring tubes of paint – an image of graphic art – and sticks of colored chalk. While Seneca duplicates one of her sears with a drop of red at its tip, Grace draws a heart locket, an old gift from her father, near her body’s throat. Her image foreshadows their reconciliation later. Pallas draws a baby in her template’s stomach and a woman’s face near it, but no image of a father exists for being unknown. Connie, then, gathers them unspeaking in a consoling image of divine, maternal love to counter racism and sexism:

**In ocean hush a woman black as firewood
singing. Next to her is a younger woman whose head rests
on the singing woman’s lap and ruined fingers troll the tea
brown hair. All the colors of seashells – wheat, roses, pearl
– fuse in the younger woman’s face. Her emerald eyes
adore the black face framed in cerulean blue. Around them
on the beaches, sea trash gleams. Discarded bottle caps
sparkle near a broken sandal. A small dead radio plays the
quiet surf. There is nothing to beat this solace which is
what Piedade’s song is about, although the words evoke
memories neither one has ever heard: of reaching age in
the company of the other; of speech shared and divided
bread smoking from the fire; the ambivalent bliss of going
home to be at home – the ease of coming back to love
begun. When the ocean heavens 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 (318).**

The passage encapsulates Morrison’s own vision of paradise. The audio-visual image filled with an amalgamation of variant colors, particularly blue and white as traditionally associated with Virgin Mary, creates a lovely, bright picture about the future expectations. The ship-image in the ocean complements the general air of safety for reaching a secure harbor of a utopia in which the original citizens can easily accept and tolerate the existence of strangers as well as the vicissitudes of life. Furthermore, Connie’s mystical union with Piedade, “a singing woman who never spoke” (285), while bathing her in emerald water evokes the image of black Madonna or Pietè, originally a name that means in Portuguese “the goddess like muse and the supreme singer storyteller” (Boson 216) associated with piety and compassion. The scene also brings back to memory Michaelangelo’s famous statue of Mary holding dead Christ in her lap. It briefly sums up the women’s victimization and their current attainment of salvation under the auspices of Connie – their spiritual leader. In addition, Consolata’s occult practices are tightly linked to African-Brazilian religion of Candomblè and its belief in the “Orixas”; a “link with forces of nature as source of vital energy” (Ibid. 238). During its ceremony, dancers incarnate “the dance of the gods” (Ibid.) – a situation very similar to the women’s rain-dance naked in candlelight while “the drops were like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces... the irresistible rain washed them away” (283) – a symbol of a new life affirmed by the emergence of Mother Superior in white light in a dark house to miraculously exorcise their traumas via a new beam of hope. Hence, the closure lies in their forming a kind of collective mythic presence

and their passage to a new terrestrial Eden to enjoy a better life of absolute freedom – an image that best translates Morrison's comment that

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's the nature of paradise. It's really defined by who is not there as well as who is (Angelo 123).

The epigraph or the epilogue is another key point worthy of discussion. It is unattributed, vague, presumably taken from Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* along with "The Nag Hammadi" tractate "The Thunder, Perfect Mind" Promises:

**For many are the pleasant forms which exist in
numerous sins,
and incontinencies,
and disgraceful passions,
and fleeting pleasures,
which (men) embrace until they become
sober
and go up to their resting place.
and they will find me there,
and they will live,
And they will not die again (1).**

Gnostics were among the earliest Christians whose writings were burned by Orthodox Christians as heretics. In 1945, an Egyptian peasant found dozens of their manuscripts in the village of Nag Hammadi, describing a female god usually silent, invisible, and assisted by a male one. Her case correlates with that of the convent women who could evade their seekers and foreshadows their redemption gained later in the epilogue.

II. Conclusion

Though Toni Morrison's *P* harps upon the notion of racial antagonism that robs blacks of their humanity because of their skin color, 'Ruby' dwellers create a replica of 'Haven' marked with self-imposed isolation. In their turn, the women there construct a fragile matriarchy that soon collapses due to their inability to attain deliverance from their poignant past. Through such a racial, sexual battle, Morrison accommodates a different version of paradise. She conceptualizes it as inclusive and earthly including all people to ridicule the stereotypes of exclusion. Accordingly, the women's silhouettes, by the end, emerge to have a second look at their life and reconcile with their tragedies. Such a final, hopeful vision of redemption that transforms their old shame into pride at overcoming their dashed hopes is crystallized in a vision of paradise as terrestrial, not only celestial, on a beautiful seashore, not divorced from the world.

Throughout, Morrison employs graphic details loaded with sometimes startling, but always illuminating symbols and hidden connotations that evidently grab the attention to fully externalize the pathos of the trauma of the protagonists as representatives of humanity at large.

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