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Black Bodies White Culture: A Black Feminist [Re]Construction of Race and Gender in Morrison's Paradise

Abstract *'This article intends to explore and expose through the analysis of Morrison's Paradise how the Afro American female writers [re]construct the potential of Afro American 'ecriture feminine' to seek the true freedom and empowerment of black women by appealing them to 'write-through bodies'. To achieve this purpose, this article articulates its theoretical agenda, through the exploration of the work of the outstanding, widely acknowledged award-winning, English speaking Afro American female writer: Toni Morrison. Though it aims to highlight the significance and contribution of the Afro American female novelists towards broadening the frontiers of 'ecriture feminine', it does not aim to offer the generalized history of women writing in Afro American literature. It seeks to propose alternative ways of informed analysis, grounded in discourse and Feminist theories, to evaluate Toni Morrison's contribution to 'ecriture feminine'.*

Key Words: Race, Gender, Culture, Black Feminism, Morrison.

Introduction

In a deeply racialized culture of America that has a long history of racialist colonization, the black body is constructed biological, natural and seductive, in order to project the white dominators as biologically superior, cultured and civilized having divine right to rule and civilize the black body. What dictates the national perception of Afro-Americans as venal and inhuman beings (hooks, 2000) is the generalized construction of the black people by the white gaze as people having more natural, inherent connection with their bodies. Resultantly, in contrast to white bodies which are constructed in such a way to signify purity, culture and racial superiority, the black female bodies are degraded, commodified and devalued as exploitable and vulnerable bodies. Drawing attention to the sharply contrasting discursive formations of the white and black bodies, "the black female body has been constructed as the ugly end of wearisome Western dialectic: not sacred but profane, not angelic but demonic, not a fair lady but darky" (Dickerson, 2001, pp. 195-96).

Compared with the white women who had to face oppression from the white man only, the black women had to face suppression and marginalization from both white and black men in phallogocentric American society and culture; therefore, the black female body is reduced to serve the reductionist phallic principle in a largely racist American society. Black women, due to their reproductive function, hold more closely to their bodies than black men that make them more vulnerable to exploitation in the continuation of the legacy of slavery. "[G]enerally speaking, maternal subjectivity – the presentation of pregnancy, childbirth, and the experience of motherhood from the mother's perspective – has not been well represented in written culture" (Eckard, 2002, p. 1); however, it does not hold true in case of Morrison's written culture because in her fiction the body – remembering scarred experience – is foregrounded and very artistically utilized to convey the black female experience, an experience that offers an alternative of the symbolic economy of the paternal word in pre-linguistic, semiotic, literal, feminine language in which Morrison subverts the paternal symbolic to write in "maternal symbolic" (Wyatt, 1993). This deconstructive use of maternal symbolism denotes not only a substitute language that integrates maternal and material principles but also designates a system that "locates people in relation to the other subjects" (Lacan, 1993, p. 475).

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Literature Review

According to Grosz (1994), the textual analysis of *Paradise*(1999) offers deconstructive examples galore of the Western dichotomous concepts categorizing the bodies based on the polarization of the mind and the body in which "the primary term defines itself by expelling its other" and by doing so establishes its own discursive parameters to construct an identity for itself (p. 3). The socially-discarded, paternally abused, domestically mal-treated, and bodily exploited black female characters in *Paradise* clearly conform to the phallogocentric domination of the society which perceives the female body as text upon which males inscribe their desires. If it is not so that the body becomes or/and exists independent of culture rather, for Grosz (1994) "[t]he body is not opposed to culture, a resistant-throw back to natural past; it is itself a cultural, *the* cultural, product" (p. 23, original italics), then the discursive formation of bodies in a racist Western cultural thought carries the pervasive and exploitable implications of the binaristic divisions between mind/body; white/black; culture/nature, male/female, west/rest; centre/margin; human/non-human and so on. Regarding how the black body is conceived by Western thought in terms of mind and body, in the mainstream Euro-American view the Afro American body has been conceptualized as more or less as an accumulation of "social meanings, meanings that, in the end, *mark* this body as Other or bodiless" (Handerson, 2002, p. 4 original italics).

The corollary of this binaristic definition of mind/body is the discursive construction of the black body as passive, subaltern, voiceless, non-historical and irrational thus depriving the blacks of agency, subjectivity and voice of their own. In *Paradise* Morrison illustrates how black female bodies are the construction of the White culture which, on the one hand, constructs and devalues and degrades the black bodies and, on the other hand, uses them, as Vanessa Dickerson asserts "to extend the life, health and desirability of the others", thus "the black female body" reduced to abject phallus "is more than a prosthesis". It is, therefore, the repository of different meanings for different people: if for a white man it is a site of political empowerment, for black males it is a source of love, being, and shame and for white women, it is the symbol of freedom and aestheticization simultaneously, and thus the black female body assumes tremendous significance (p. 195).

Theoretical Framework

Afro American Feminist, Patricia Hill Collins (1991) is a prominent black theorist whose understanding of Afro American feminism I have drawn upon to broaden the spectrum of the theoretical framework and especially to incorporate women of the color theoretical perspective on the contemporary black women's issues regarding gender and race. Although a number of Afro American scholars and theorists such as Angela Davis, June Jorden, Audrey Lorde, bell hooks, and Adrienne Rich have significantly contributed to the black Feminist theory and posed challenges and threats to Western Feminist position, Patricia Hill Collins is an eminent Afro American Feminist scholar and theorist whose theorization of contemporary black women's life will help me understand the impact of dominant Western patriarchal capitalist power structures upon the black women's life and culture. By juxtaposing the Western and Afro American theorists' understanding of the patriarchal power structures in which women, particularly black women, have been suppressed and silenced, I intend to highlight Afro American female writers' unique articulation of Afro-centric Feminist epistemologies and knowledge claims.

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) validates Afro American women's identity and challenges Western stereotypical images and construction of African American women by stressing upon women to assert their subjectivities by the process of self-actualization through concrete everyday life experiences. These contrastive, self-defining, images of the black women, according to Patricia, will both resist the dehumanizing discursive constructs of the black women perpetrated by the dominant system and counter even reject internalized psychological oppression that Afro American women suffer from. In her classic work *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, she asserts the value of writing down every day lived experiences and sharing in confessional mode the innermost feelings. She writes "only the willingness to share private and sometimes painful experience can enable women to create a collective description of the world that is truly ours" (p. 16).

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Morrison's 'Paradise': A Safe Haven for Fugitive Black Women

The study of *Paradise*(1999) from the Black Feminist perspective has revealed that the black woman and her sex are the property of the men and the sexual emotions of a black woman are not valued; they are alienated from their pleasures as if only male sexuality matters and female pleasure is of no importance. They are treated just as the sex-dolls. Morrison (1999) gives a terrible account of every aspect of a black woman's life in *Paradise*; emotions are exploited, hearts are broken, bodies are assaulted, and tongues are made silent. This is what happens in a phallogocentric society. Morrison believes that the female body and sexuality must be printed in a written form. *A paradise* is actually a form of her ecriture feminine. The story of all these black women in *Paradise* is actually the story of all black women who have been exploited by men in a phallogocentric society. Morrison breaks the bonds and brings all the untold stories of black women in the form of *Paradise*. When the convent in *Paradise* is attacked by men, they fondle their weapons to demonstrate how they conflate women and an object: "Fondling their weapon, feeling suddenly so young and good they are reminded that guns are more than decoration, intimidation, or comfort. They are meant" (Morrison, 1999, p. 285). Now the word "Fondling" evokes feelings of sexual intimacy, but the men treat both their tools and black women, in the same way, demonstrating that black women are no more a living object rather a tool for men; both black women and tools are interchangeable.

Through black women in the convent, Morrison suggests the idea that black women can get rid of phallogocentric society and can live a life of their own choice. Ruby is full of men dominating women, but the convent is a symbol of that revolt that may be found in every black woman in order to combat against the patriarchal society. Black women in the convent succeed in getting freedom from men by living a separate life. They have their own source of earning money, and if they want (Morrison, 1999 p. 156), they have nothing to do with the men in Ruby. If the women of Ruby have been deprived of the "Oven", the women of the convent have their own Cadillac to drive. Cadillac is a symbol of freedom for these women of the convent who may go anywhere the way they desire. The women in the convent are free from the isolation of women in Ruby. Despite the town's women, they have the power to decide for them, to live alone and to do what they want (Morrison, 1999, p. 225). Here Morrison proves that women in the convent are more powerful than the men in Ruby as the men are afraid that the freedom of women in the convent may reach their town. That's why they attack the convent to get rid of their inner fear. It is intolerable for them that women should change their life according to their own will. They make the convent women scapegoats in order to prove their phallogocentric ideas. But Morrison succeeds in proving that women do have the power to challenge the authority of men only if they make a collective effort and dare a little.

The most significant aspect of Morrison's fiction that underscores her representation of black female characters and their subjectivity, particularly in *Paradise,* is her discursive reconfiguring of the black bodies in order to bring them from periphery to centre. In this regard, the connection between body and subjectivity is not merely a readable sign, a (de)codable symptom "but also a force to be reckoned with" (Grosz, 1994, p. 120). In this connection, Morrison's depiction of the black female body in both historical and contemporary perspectives signifies the traumatic, disoriented, and scarred psyche of the black people in general and females in particular. Morrison's fictional world comprises of victims of slavery, racial and gender discrimination, for instance, characters in *Beloved* (1987) and in the same way domestic and communal violence is evident in the case of the group of women in *Paradise*(1999). When black people suffer from the atrocities of slavery, race and gender, the maternal body (both literal and symbolic since the Convent symbolizes the maternal body to its inhabitants and offers a safe haven from the violence of the gendered society) becomes a site for them to strengthen their lost and mortified relation with their cultural past in search of their black subjectivity. In this context, Seth's scarred black body with figures on its back, for example, when discovered by Paul D, not only signifies healing for them from the traumatic effects of slavery but also reconnects the black people with their cultural roots (Morrison, 1999, pp. 189, 194).

Paradise starts in a horrifying manner: "They shoot the white girl first. With the rest, they can take their time. No need to hurry out there" (Morrison, 1999, p. 3). Now the very start of the novel immediately makes the reader think about the treatment of women. Though a white girl has been shot at, the attack on the white girl is not justified in any way as it leads to the gender discrimination of

black and white women as well as a hatred found among the blacks against the Whites, the focal point of Morrison's research – the black family – which is the most meaningful and intimate institution for her leads her to broaden the spectrum of the research and incorporate "the black community, regains of the United States, foreign lands and alien culture and history" (Heinze, 1993, p. 12).

Morrison sets*Paradise* in an all-black town, Ruby and a suburban Covent, some seventeen miles away from Oklahoma. Though Ruby is founded by the free descendants of the old Afro American slaves to materialize the dream of independent life envisioned by their revolutionary forefathers, the patriarchal structures of the black society built on the ideals of righteousness, strictly enforced moral law, and fear of the insider/outsider resistance, are no more different from white patriarchal/phallogocentric society. All about the Convent, it is a place seventeen miles away from Ruby where a group of exiled women who escaped Ruby in death and despair, have inhabited it as a place of peace and security to live a life of their voice and choice (Morrison, 1999, p. 158).

In *Paradise,* Morrison narrates the story of a group of women who live in a Convent in the town of Ruby (Oklahoma). It begins explosively in the year 1976 when nine murderous men from neighboring Ruby embark upon the horrific undertaking of killing a group of peacefully, though, independently living Convent women not because they have harmed them physically but because they have challenged their masculinity and black patriarchal authority. The story dramatizes the conflict between these fiercely independent women who run the Convent and domineering men who, first try to dominate and later, upon their revolt and resistance, fear these women. The attackers are influential men of Ruby, a black historical town founded on the black ideals of life with a small population of 360 only-all black (Morrison, 1999, p. 116). The assailants include, among others, the twins Steward and Deacon or Deek Morgan, who is also the de facto leader of the town. Along with narrating the story of black men and women, Morrison poignantly relates the histories of the genesis of Ruby from Haven, the causes for Ruby's hierarchical social structures and its rigid xenophobia to the extent that its apprehensive leaders resolve to decimate the town and lynching women who had troubled histories of past relations with men and even women. Women living in the Convent are named Mavis, Grace, Consolata, Seneca and Pallas whereas women living in the town are Paricia, Lone and Save-Marie. Ruby has emerged from Haven which was founded in 1890 in Oklahoma by a group of nine closely-knit families: The Blackhorse, Catos, Dupres Families, Pooles, Floods and Fleetwoods (Morrison, 1999, p. 188). It was the racial segregation and xenophobic intolerance of the White society that excluded these dark-skinned black men from public life, denied them job opportunities, and fundamental rights that forced the founding fathers, under the aegis of Zecharian Morgan, to found an exclusively dark-skinned black community.

Though Morrison clearly demonstrates here the xenophobic and racially intolerant nature of the American society where black people are perpetually othered, excluded, denigrated and deemed uncivilized and hence exploitable but ironically the black men when they built exclusively black town fall prey to the same vices of the white hierarchical and phallocentric society and perpetrate violence upon those who fail to conform to their exploitative and oppressive patriarchal values. On reaching the place of building a new town, first of all, they build a big Oven made of brick and iron (Morrison, 1999, p. 101). The big Oven symbolizes, among other things, two prominent features of human life: the nourishment they need to keep alive and the collective achievements they have made. After flourishing for several decades, Haven falls during the post-second world war period (Morrison, 1999, p. 194).

On perceiving that no substantial changes have taken place in terms of colorism and anti-black bigotry since Haven was instituted, the twins Deacon and Steward Morgan, the leader of the town, reinitiate their forefathers' abortive mission in 1949 of building a self-sufficient all-black town in collaboration with 15 families (Morrison, 1999, p. 189). The Haven men take with them Oven when they leave the town for a new one and rebuild it painstakingly, though the function it serves in the new town is chiefly symbolic rather than practical. The new town, after being temporarily called New Haven (in the manner of New England, New Orleans, etc.) is finally named 'Ruby' after the twin Morgans' younger sister to commemorate her tragic death as dies because of being refused by the white society to be given medical treatment due to her black race. The name of the town, Ruby, therefore becomes a symbol of hatred and indignation against the exclusionary and racist politics of white society on the one hand and venerates the black woman whose tragic death eventually

enkindles the spirit of freedom among the blacks, on the other hand. Morrison, (1999) however, doesn't remain indifferent to the presence of racial and gender hierarchies within the black community and shows how out of 15 founding families of Ruby first ten and later only seven were considered pure black, racially elite.

Morrison doesn't fail to indict the capitalistic intentions of Morgan twins as capitalizing upon the legacy of their father's founding the bank, and they accumulate most of the money and property in a highly unscrupulous, capitalistic vein. Ruby becomes exactly what it stood against: the racial discrimination of the black. But, conversely, the exclusionary white society changes color but not the purpose as the light-skinned blacks are discriminated against by the dark-skinned blacks, virtually leaving no difference between the white and the black peoples' exploitation of the others on racial and class bases. Notwithstanding, Ruby provides protection to some of its residents safeguard against racial discrimination in the world outside, the intrinsic racial bias starts becoming more visible in the Ruby society as not all blacks are equal rather some blacks are more black than the others, so the society inheres patriarchal, hierarchical structures of the White society and the town's inflexible moral codes embedded in racial affiliations harm some of its residents ruthlessly. Albeit Vietnam war had taken its toll upon Misner's psyche (Morrison, 1999, p. 209), but he's taking to excessive alcoholism is basically out of his sense of shame and depression he feels for having abandoned a light-skinned black woman he intended to marry but could not because of the increasingly inherently racist nature of the black Ruby society (Morrison, 1999, p. 190).

Importantly when race-ridden Ruby men prefer the abstractions of race and skin colour over solid life issues and let Delia Best, a light-skinned black wife of Roger Best, die in childbirth rather than seeking outside medical help for her in an emergency, it takes the time back and holds a mirror to the terrible experience of Ruby Smith's tragic death. The novel opens at a crucial time during the history of the Ruby: cracks have started to appear in the unity of the town, and its future is highly uncertain (Morrison, 1999, p. 2). There are dissensions, and sharp differences of opinions and people stand at cross purposes. Morgan brothers' legacy of leadership is facing fast decline as Steward, and Dovey Morgan remains issueless while Deek and Soane's children are taken up by war. The only Morgan heir is K.D.Smith, a wanton young man interested in Gigi, one of the convent women, more than anything else, thus causing frustration and anger for his once authoritarian uncles (Morrison, 1999). A young radical from the outside world, Richard Misner, teaches the gospel of civil rights to struggle, puts his belief in the possibility of living in peace with the Whites in the light of Martin Luther King's vision, causing the older generations of Ruby to believe he is sparking radical and rebellious ideology into Ruby's youth (Morrison, 1999, p. 101). The older and younger generations disagree on the purposes of Oven, morals and life itself causing the older generations to complain that the younger generation does not respect or/and identify with Ruby's history, signified in their desire to amend the proclamation inscribed on the Oven from: "the furrow on his brow" to "Be the furrow of his brow" omitting "Beware" that the elders say used to be written at the beginning of the slogan, making it read "Beware the furrow of his brow" (Morrison, 1999, p. 100). Finally, the boisterous appearance of Convent women at the K.D. Smith and Arnett's wedding, a wedding celebrated in an attempt to bridge the differences between the Morgan and Fleetwood families, outrages the town patriarchs and they being convinced that Convent women are spoiling the purity and morality of the town with their wanton morals choose to obliterate the Convent with its corrupted inhabitants. As discussed earlier with reference to *Beloved*, in *Paradise* too, Morrison tells the untold stories of Afro-American women who have been maltreated by patriarchy for a long and are forsaken and forgotten and are trying to combat phallogocentrism. Morrison's writings are predominantly the outcome of feminism but her focus, actually, is on black women instead of a feministic approach only.

Conclusion

In the U.S, racial isolation has remained and remains a fundamental issue assigning black women a status of outsiders within sociology. In this regard, the black women's experiences recorded in Morrison's *Paradise d*emonstrate tensions and conflicts experienced by these women during their historical and contemporaneous interactions with the powerful insider white community which examine these people's experiences in the light of the personal and cultural experiences of the

dominant insiders, and thus these black outsiders within remain perpetually different people. In this regard, Morrison has a firm belief in giving a political shape to the work of art. She finds it to be a strong tool when she exposes power relations of her society through her enrapturing imagination scrupulously-built narrative, evocative and rhythmic language; she vehemently resists the dominant Euro-American power and instigates a new spirit among Afro Americans to speak through their bodies even if their tongues have been captured. She converts the virtuous American myths into the untold violent stories of suppression woven out of the lived experiences of the Blacks of her society. In this regard, she portrays Black women who abhor sexist and racist oppression, who yearn to practice their womanhood in their own particular way, the one that should not be directed by any patriarchal and phallogocentric society. Regarding ethnic and cultural thrust, black feminism is more group-centred than self-centred, the black women show concern more with female cultural values of their ethnic group than commitment with changing the fate of women in general, so "they advocate what may be called ethnic-cultural feminism" (Denard, 2008, p. 171).

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