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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### CREATING A PARADISIACAL COMMUNITY: ASPECTS OF MULTICULTURALISM IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*.

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#### Abstract

The present paper studied the multiplicity of religious beliefs, racism and nationhood based on the principles of isolationism and patriarchy in Toni Morrison's novel *Paradise* (1997). The novel invokes and examines traumatic histories of the Ruby town. It gives emphasis to the important history of Christianity for American and Afro-American nationhood. The paper discussed how the isolative nature of the Ruby town, which forbids new ideas, religious beliefs or ethnicities and racial background, destroys itself from within. It attempted to analyse the multicultural, multifaceted world of a group of five convent women and criticises the contributions of Christian traditions in subjugating women. In this novel, racism is denounced as a concept where the division is between the powerful and the powerless. Morrison's attempt to challenge Christian Ethnocentrism finds a beautiful expression in this novel. While analysing this novel, the author also employed Zygmunt Bauman's theory of 'stranger'.

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#### Introduction:-

*Paradise* (1997) is the third novel of Toni Morrison's trilogy, the other two being *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). It invokes and examines traumatic histories of black identity and community. It distinguishes itself from the earlier novels in the trilogy by presenting a full "account of healing individual and collective historical trauma." (Romero 415) In the present paper, I attempt to analyse the multicultural, multifaceted world of a group of five convent women and criticises the contributions of Christian traditions in subjugating women. The paper also highlights Morrison's sensitivity about the discriminatory treatment meted out to the black woman by the black man in their own society.

Morrison wrote *Paradise* in response to the failures of the Black Nationalist Movement and the Civil Rights Movement to generate full equality and justice for black people. The novelist uses multiplicity of religious beliefs, racism and nationhood based on the principles of isolationism and patriarchy. It uses religious and spiritual beliefs of black people to enunciate the history of Afro-American in order to establish a cultural transformation for Morrison believes that it would provide possibilities of reimagining the future. *Paradise* is an extension of the project started in *Beloved* and *Jazz* of invoking traumatic past by employing spirituality and religion in inventive ways for healing the pains of the past.

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Morrison contra poses two different communities in the novel representing two different trends in America's construction of national identity. The readers are introduced with the desperate self-acclaimed leaders of Ruby town attacking to massacre the women of convent. This dates back to 1870s when some pure black Afro-American families migrated to Oklahoma in search of freedom by leaving their miserable life, racial and economic oppression they experienced during slavery behind in Mississippi and Louisiana. They were not only rejected by the whites but also ignored by the light-skinned blacks. As described by Erving Goffman, for these people, there is an eccentric situation:

One such deviation is important here, the kind presented by individuals who are seen as declining voluntarily and openly to accept the social place accorded them, and who act irregularly and somewhat rebelliously in connexion with our basic institutions — the amity, the age-grade system, the stereotyped role-division between the sexes, legitimate fulltime employment involving maintenance of a single governmentally ratified personal identity, and segregation by class and race. These are the 'disaffiliates'. Those who take this stand on their own and by themselves might be called eccentrics or 'characters'. Those whose activity is collective and focused within some building or place (and often upon a - special activity) may be called cultists. Those who come together into a sub-community or milieu may be called social deviants, and their corporate life a deviant community. They constitute a special type, but only one type, of deviator. (169)

Here, Goffman states that the black characters of the novel who are even segregated by their own race due to their darker skin colour chooses to establish a new town in Oklahoma. They came here "in order to escape being obliterated by racism, and ends with the consolidation of their particular ethnic identity, which materializes in the creation of the town of Haven" (Fraile-Marcos 11) and Ruby later. In this real heaven town for only blacks, they establish a rigid, isolationist code of behaviour that forbids any new ideas, religious beliefs or ethnicities and racial background to interfere with their racial pride. The citizens of the Ruby town begin to feel threatened by the open community of a group of women of the convent of different racial and ethnic backgrounds. The convent provide home to the individuals who have been marginalised by the rigid code of behaviour in Ruby. They work collectively to heal the traumatic histories of their own lives under the guidance of Consolata, a former Catholic nun.

### **Religion:-**

The paper criticises the contribution of Christian traditions in subjugating women as portrayed by Morrison in her *Paradise*. Morrison gives a vivid description that gender oppression is historically integral to Christianity. For instance, one of the convent women, Gigi is seen discovering a painting of the Roman Catholic Saint Catherine of Siena which depicts a woman on her knees, breasts on a serving plate with a "knocked-down look" and "I-give-up face". (Morrison 74) The act of placing a woman's breasts on a serving plate is very symbolic as it clearly depicts that woman is valued only when she is unconditionally servile and denies her own sexuality.

Morrison claims that Christianity constructs dualism between the spiritual and the material and humans and nature. Consolata took the initiative to teach other four women the importance of the connection between the material to the spiritual and the body to the soul. She states,

My bones on his the only true thing. So I was wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of the Eve (Morrison 263)

while talking about the sensation of feeling bodies connected to one another. She urges them not to categorise among themselves as she believes that the tradition of Christianity categorises women into Good and Bad. The male citizen of the Ruby town exhibits their power of patriarchal act on the women of convent for challenging the authority of men. The novel suggests that the patriarchal control separate women from each other and their bodies.

Consolata attempt to implement a new form of religion: a multiplicity of religious beliefs by speaking to multiple deities. She teaches the other women "to connect to the natural world and each other by eating a meatless diet, allowing the rain to help cleanse them of their traumas". (Romero 417) According to Consolata, women should share their sufferings and experiences with one another. They are encouraged to heal themselves by narrating and sharing their traumatic history of slavery. Consequently they are able to free themselves from the haunting memories unlike some people in Ruby where they are still haunted by their pasts.

### **Race and Community:-**

*Paradise* questions the concept of race in forming a black community. It redefines racism as a powerful relation between the stronger and the bigger community of male dominated town, Ruby, and the weaker community of the convent. The citizens of Ruby continue to be haunted by their traumatic histories. After their migration to Oklahoma from Louisiana to escape racism at the hands of whites refused to take entry at all-black communities due to their darker skin. They are determined to become even more intolerant due to their pasts. Their town emerges as a proud heavenly town. They adopt the Puritan origins of America thereby reproducing the isolationist, discriminatory and violent character of the American society.

Ruby's principle of isolationism is juxtaposed with the acceptance of multiple beliefs and ethnicities at the convent. The women at the convent hail from different racial backgrounds, religions and communities one of which is white. Morrison never specified which one the white woman is, suggesting that race need not be the most notable category for understanding individuals. In an interview with Gray, Morrison stated that she wanted her readers, to wonder about the race of those 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. It's real information, but it tells you next to nothing. (Fraile-Marcos 24) suggesting that racial matter is never an issue with the convent women. These women while living together in unity with each other "start repossessing themselves, reconstructing or recovering their unique souls, until their distress is replaced with happiness and a new acceptance of their whole selves." They "attain a personal inner peace and happiness rather than a well structured community with a defined identity" (Fraile-Marcos 28-29) whereas the men of the Ruby town are antagonistic toward each other. The divisions privileged in the Ruby town based on racism and gender is not privileged in the convent. They created a paradise in the convent as they overcame sexual and racial boundaries when the townspeople of Ruby could not overcome.

Readers are suggested to observe closely at the consequences of a community founded on the principles of exclusion and isolation. In one of her interview, 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. (Romero 419)

Creating Haven earlier and Ruby later, an all-black town, becomes more about a unique separate community only and less about safety as long as it remains isolative in nature. Reverend Misner states, "We live in the world, Pat. The whole world. Separating us, isolating us – that's always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future." (Morrison 210) Thus, the novel suggests that a belief which forbids new ideas or members is bound to destroy itself from within. Life itself is dynamic; it has to grow in order to survive. Change is a vital part of life, but any change in any form must go well in line with tradition.

Acceptance of different ideas or beliefs or ethnicities by the women of convent challenges the conservative rules practised in Ruby. The ability of the convent women to overcome their traumatic histories exposes the failure of the Ruby people to confront their own traumatic past of slavery and racism. The leaders of the Ruby town are enraged by the fact that women of convent do not feel the necessity of men or Christian God. These women empowers "themselves without needing to adhere strictly to male patriarchal control" by creating a much different lifestyle which exposes "the sterile and isolationist view of life and community in Ruby and within normative Christian traditions." (Baillie 173) They do not have faith in the patriarchal Christian god that the townspeople of Ruby follow.

### **History and Nationhood:-**

The connection between the Ruby town and America is made explicit by linking the history of America in *Paradise*. Chronologically, the narrative begins in 1755 by narrating the stories of freed black slaves. The main action of the novel is set in the Bicentennial, July 1976 suggesting the readers to look closely on the values and exclusions used to create a nation by the characters in the novel. It is concerned with the Vietnam and Civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s.

*Paradise* attempts to remind the readers about the national history where many blacks were sacrificed for a concept of nationhood. Slavery system is described as “the “brutal work” of field labor required to ensure that “none of their women had even worked in a whiteman’s kitchen or nursed a white child.” (Morrison 99) The attacks made on the black people in 1919 summer are represented through the character of Elder Morgan and an anonymous black woman. Through the story of Big Daddy who is sent to retrieve supplies, Morrison recounts the prohibition against alcohol in 1920.

The construction of an ideal community or nation based on separateness and distinction demands that there be those who will be viewed as inferior and, consequently, either oppressed within the community or violently excluded from it. (Romero 421)

The Ruby town built based on the principles of isolationism and superiority ends up killing the five harmless women of the convent. Rather than creating a perfect paradise, Ruby ends up as a patriarchal, conservative, thoroughly racialized and violent community. *Paradise* urges a critical investigation of the Afro-American concepts of nation and belief.

### **Patriarchy:-**

*Paradise* deconstructs the concept of patriarchal system and its oppressive nature practised during the Civil Rights Movement. Women’s “existence is marked by perennial state of self-destruction and stasis” (Ellen 230) because they are controlled and manipulated by patriarchy. As Rooney Ellen stated:

Over the past fifty years, at least since the era of civil rights and women’s rights struggles in the 1960s, race and gender have been variously represented as being parallel, intersecting, and overlapping systems of identity formation that structure social relations. (232)

During this movement, the black women faced gender discrimination both in the hands of whites and blacks. Black men, victims of racism, establish their masculinity in Morrison’s *Paradise* by acting as sexist oppressors of black women.

Morrison presents the inherent flaws of the patriarchal system in *Paradise* by employing feminist methodology. She illustrates how men become abusers and exploiters of women rather than protecting them. The impact on women is more severe than in the white world for a town like Ruby which emphasizes on protecting pure blood line of blacks.

Gender differences become important in nation-building activity because they are a sign of an irresistible natural hierarchy that belongs at the centre of civic life. The unholy forces of nationalist biopolitics intersect on the bodies of women charged with the reproduction of absolute ethnic difference and the continuance of blood lines. The integrity of the nation becomes the integrity of its masculinity. (Baillie 173)

The citizens of Ruby fear to lose their hard won “integrity of masculinity” (Baillie 173) resulting in killing the five harmless women of the convent. They consider and term these women as the “stranger” whose very existence challenges certain codes of behaviour, as theorized by Zygmunt Bauman.

The stranger disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance: he is *physically close* while *remaining spiritually* remote. He brings into the inner circle of proximity the kind of difference and otherness that are anticipated and tolerated only at a distance – where they can be either dismissed as irrelevant or repelled as hostile.... His presence is a challenge to the reliability of orthodox landmarks and the universal tools of order making. (Baillie 174)

Bauman’s stranger has complete freedom to leave any place at any point. Their temporary abode can transform gradually into a home. All the five women came to the convent as temporary refugees. As Bauman pointed out, these women find a home in the convent. They created a ‘paradise’ in the convent though they all intend to leave at one point in the novel.

The convent provides a home and shelter to the helpless women and a “space of refuge for those fleeing from their communities tacitly sanctioned forms of intolerance, exploitation, and wilful blindness to victimization.” (Morrison 46) These women have their own “unique way to practise “womanhood”, regardless of gender and race.” (Abdul

1266) For these women of different colour, their concern with feminism is usually more group-centered than self-centered, more cultural than political. As a result they tend to be concerned more with the particular female cultural values of their own ethnic group rather than with those of women in general. They advocate what may be called ethnic cultural feminism. (Abdul 1266)

### Conclusion:-

Morrison's attempt to challenge the Christian Ethnocentrism finds a beautiful expression in *Paradise*. She made a hard hitting attack on the hegemonic paradigm of the binaries which divides the world: good and evil, moral and immoral, male and female etc.

*Paradise* illustrates the power that stories have for building a community. The convent women get to experience bliss and salvation. Ironically, Ruby which was supposed to be a paradise for pure black people became a hell "due to their stubbornness and dogmatism" where some older black men "tyrannize all the others." On the other hand, the convent became a paradise of the women living in it by "following the path of sisterhood and a religion of their own." (Oberoi 60) Black women writers opine that for the black women to survive in a world regnant with racism, sisterhood is very important.

Morrison denounces racism as a concept where the division is between the strong and the weak or between the powerful and the powerless in *Paradise*. Through this novel, Morrison echoes her desire for maintaining peace and harmony and for perceiving one's paradise within the soul and objects to the idea of destruction.

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