

MAN WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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Abstract

Paradise (1997) is a novel, which completes the trilogy including Beloved-(1987) & Jazz (1992). Morrison in Paradise depicts a vivid portrayal of women who live in a Convent in the town Ruby (Oklahoma). The conflict is between these women and the men who run the Convent. Throughout the story, the treatment of the women is noticed, which denotes the patriarchal society that they live in, disturbing their own freedom and choices. The novels of Morrison basically focus on black women rather than have a feminist approach. Morrison deliberates the concerns of sexual oppression, patriarchal society, and racist issues; but she doesn't allow them to control over her whole experience. Man-woman relationship is as old as human survival. Earlier it was a biological need. There is a comprehensive portrayal of man-woman relationship in Morrison's novels. Morrison's novels expose the wide-ranging segment of man-woman relationship - marital, premarital, and extra-marital. A close study of Morrison's novels reveals the state of man-woman relationship as it existed in America. This was a male-dominated society. The burden of chastity and seclusion was put on the women while men enjoyed the freedom of permissiveness. They considered women as creatures for their delectation. This attitude of man towards woman is seen in this novel. The men despise anything they cannot control, and they are especially afraid of a group of women who do not appear to need or desire men for anything. The novel was set in a town Ruby named after the name of Deek and Steward's sister for whom they couldn't get medical aid in an emergency because of segregation. Ruby was established so that the black men residing in it would be able to protect the women in their community from the specific kind of racism present in the external world. However, this 'freedom' for the women is also a kind of restriction, because the men have strict ideas about how women should behave.

Key words: *conflict, patriarchy, oppression, racism, chastity, seclusion, delectation, restriction.*

Love is an eternal theme of all literature of the world. Let me tell you about love, that silly word you believe is about whether somebody likes you or whether you can put up with somebody... Love is none of that there is nature like it. Not in robins or bison or in the banging tales of your haunting dogs and not in blossoms or suckling foal. Love is divine only and difficult always. If you think it is easy, you are a fool. If you think it is natural, you are blind... love is not a gift. It is a diploma. A diploma conferring certain privileges: the privilege of expressing love and privilege of receiving it (Morrison 141).

These words of Reverend Senior Pulliam may be accepted as the view of Morrison about love. Through her novels, Morrison demonstrated how difficult it is to get this "diploma" as most of her protagonists fail to earn it. The reasons are obvious; love is something to be learned through

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suffering which is not so easy. In *Jazz*, Joe and Violet are ultimately able to learn through suffering how to love in different situations in *Beloved* Paul D is successful in convincing Sethe that in addition to her love and responsibility to her children she should live and enjoy her personal life as well. *Paradise* is the story of a black town Ruby, founded by the racially pure men and women who had full faith in religious and cultural value system and who skirt the town's boundaries threatening to blow the town apart. The town along with other people was basically established by twins Steward and Dick. Establishing a separated township specifically meant for blacks hints at the difficulties the blacks in America had to face in settling down in the north where they were not allowed to enter their villages by the whites when the blacks migrated from the South to the North in search of work and safety. Naturally, one may be tempted to talk about the racial conflict as the focus of the novel but a close scrutiny reveals that gender relationships between people of different races are at the root of all problems. There are, thus, many man-woman relationships in the novel, which play a vital role in the development of the theme.

To begin with, it will be in the fitness of things to see how difficult is to get the “diploma” of love, which is evident in the relationship between Mavis and her husband Frank. Quite surprisingly, Mavis forgets her infants, Merle and Pearl, in her car with the windows closed as she parks it in a market parking where she has gone to buy some edibles. The babies die of suffocation and she is dumb-founded. The journalists come and interview her but she is blank. The only clarification she has is that the mishap happened when she had gone along with both the infants to a nearby market to buy edibles for her husband who has just returned home. What shocks her most, even more than the death of her children, is the attitude of her husband whom she expects to be sad and sorry like her but unfortunately, even the very night when such a tragedy happened he is in a different mood. Shocked, Mavis is lying in her bed and in the mean time Frank joins her. Initially she thinks, as she should, that he had come to show her sympathies but he says nothing but simply starts playing with their daughter. Even during supper he had shown no concern on the mishap. She doubts that he had come for having love with her. When she tries to smell his mood, he pretends that he had no such intentions but suddenly he goes for sex and only after he shows his concern over what has happened. Mavis is amazed how he could even think of love in such an unfortunate situation. She cannot sleep the whole night as the behaviour of her husband Frank is something that she cannot understand. The shock is so deep that she decides to leave her husband and his house for ever and takes refuge in a convent in the outskirts of the Utopian village Ruby. For ten long years she lives in that convent without conjugal relations and is content to live in the same position as she never felt sorry over her decision unless she is illustrated by Gigi when she calls her “dried up husk” for not having sex for ten years(168).

Not only Mavis, but most of the women living at the convent had been betrayed by their male counterparts and they all lived at the convent harmoniously sharing each other's sorrow and love. While Mavis leaves her husband, it is Palas, a girl in sixteen pregnant and in a miserable condition, who is deserted by her lover. Billie Cato, a girl from the village Ruby, is moved by her condition and brings her to the convent. Her lover Carlos loved her when she was a “butterball” but left her at lurch when she was pregnant accusing her of overweight, though she was still very slim. So after choosing her, loving her and sealing her confidence in him he betrayed her when she most needed him in her pregnancy. Conny (Consolata), the senior most and in charge of all women at the convent, helps her resume the normal behaviour and health. Now she is happy at the convent and she thinks that away from Carlos she can find herself:

In fact, as they (Palas and Seneca) climbed the stairs, images of grandmother rocking peacefully, of arms, a lap, a singing voice smoothed her. The whole house felt permeated with a blessed maleness, like a protected domain, free of hunters and exiting too (177).

So both the relationships – between Mavis and Frank, and Palas and Carlos – are unsuccessful. Another relationship, and a very significant one indeed, is between K.D., the nephew of Shoane Morgans and Arnette, the daughter of Arnold Fleetwood. K.D. is the only boy in the family of Morgans. Fleetwoods and Morgans are business rivals so the two families do not have cordial relations, but K.D. does not bother about it and their affair goes on uninterrupted. One day when the two lovers were standing by the roadside and discussing their future plans when Arnette informs him about her pregnancy. The news of her pregnancy results in a feud because when she tells K.D. about her pregnancy and her desire to get rid of it before going to school, he tries to get rid of matter saying that she herself was responsible for putting her in that situation and he had nothing to do with it. “K.D. looked from Arnette's neat shirt waist dress to the bangs across her forehead and then in to her face - sullen nagging accusatory – and slapped it. The change in her expression well worth it.” (54).

Obviously Arnette was not prepared for such callousness from him, so their relationship is almost broken. K.D. is pretty sure that his uncle will ultimately bail him out by negotiating a solution that would not endanger either his position or the economic interests of the Morgan family. Actually K.D. being the only male in the next generation of the family is their hope and despair. His uncles hoping that Arnette may have a male baby, a Morgan grandnephew, want to restore the relations between K.D. and Arnette by negotiating an amicable solution. The Morgans and Fleetwoods come to the points of terms after serious efforts from the Morgans but the marriage between K.D. and Arnette becomes possible only after a long gap of four years because K.D. again upsets the apple cart. Soon after the compromise Arnette goes to the convent to deliver her child with the help of Connie before marriage. It is here that new trouble is waiting for her. In the convent K.D. meets Gigi who has come there like other women. As his nature is, K.D. forgets his commitment and is fascinated by Gigi and tells her every thing about Arnette. So Arnette was again deserted by him. For four long years their romance continues. However, this time it is not K.D. who takes lead in the desertion but becomes victim of it as their love becomes an aching self loathing exercise for Gigi. Following months of risky sweetness she becomes indifferent, bored, and even hateful. “Like sugar turning from delight to the body's mortal enemy, his carving for her had poisoned him, rendered him diabetic, stupid helples (147).

Now that he has learned a lesson from Gigi, he realises what desertion is. His uncle tells him the right line and he decided to marry Arnette so that he can flush Gigi out of his life completely.

Arnette is now very happy. She is free from the bleak sadness that encouraged her as soon as she was home from college. She felt unrelenting suffocation in the house of her parents because the place reminded her all the time of her broken love. Even Morgans are very happy over this development. Thus the relationship between K.D. and Arnette becomes successful ultimately, indeed after a lot of hiccups and a long test of nerves for Arnette and her family members. It is mainly Arnette's patience, her rationality and faith in the power of her own love that her long cherished dream comes true. K.D., who has deserted her repeatedly is short tempered and irresponsible. His unsuccessful doting for Gigi also plays a vital role in his transformation and positive turn of the events.

No doubt, he ultimately marries Arnette but he is a husband who had forgotten all about her when she was away and chased any dress whose wearer was under fifty. He left his future bride pregnant despite the fact that in Ruby any girl who got pregnant could count on marriage, whether the boy was eager or not, if he still had to live in the city near her family and of course in his own as well. The utopian city had a set of norms formed by the people living there and K.D.'s uncle was

instrumental in forming these rules. Ironically, it is their nephew who defies the rules. He left the girl to suffer for four years and consented to wedding only after he had been kicked out of another women's bed.

The best husband and wife relationship can be traced in case of Morgan couples, specially in case of Steward and Dovey. Deek and Steward are twins and their wives Soane and Dovey are sisters. The two couples live in harmony. Steward is a very sensible person and he has accepted his wife totally. Dovey is not a good cook but Steward never complains about it. When Dovey thinks about his losses, she feels that apart from the sale of his herd and his defeat in state-wide church secretaryship etc., the remarkable one is the loss of his sense of taste. His hairline and his taste buds faltered over time. In addition to those small losses they also patiently suffered the greatest loss in 1964, "when he was forty. Fairy's curse came true: they learned neither could ever have children."(82).

Despite these setbacks, their love stands firm as a rock, so does their faith in their cultural roots and values. The numerous loss that Steward and his wife Dovey have suffered are not able to shake their faith in each other. They have no children yet their love continues to grow. Steward cannot live without her as he "did not look forward to any bed without Dovey in it and tried again to think of an argument to keep her staying in town so often." (95). His love for her is so deep that he cannot sleep without her even in this age," Sleep without the fragrance of her hair next to him was impossible."(100).

Like the relationship between steward and Dovey, the relationship between Deek and Soane also appears to be very successful, but it is not really so because Deek, despite of his love for his wife, is not faithful towards her. However, in spite of many difficulties they pull on quite successfully. Deek too is a loving husband like Steward, but he has a clandestine extra marital relationship as well, which breaks the relationship between the two brothers apart from blemishing his otherwise positive marital relationship with Soane. This couple has also patiently borne the worst setback in their marital life like Steward and Dovey – they too are childless. Their case is even more tragic because they had two sons, and both of them they have lost in war. Soane often fondly remembers her sons. Deek often gets out of bed at midnight and goes for hunting; all alone. At such moments Soane is wrapped up in the memories of her sons. She feels lonely not only at present but also from the time when her son Scout was killed two weeks later. Even before Scout's body had been shipped, they were informed that Easter (another son) too was dead, one was nineteen and another twenty one. She was in fact very proud when they were enlisted as soldiers and she always encouraged them to do so because she foolishly thought that the war was safer for blacks than any other place in the United States. She has not come over this tragedy. Her husband, no doubt, is proud and traditional like his brother Steward and seems to have compromised with his fate. Their love, however, keeps on growing. Soane loves the very smell of her husband and they share enumerable moments of mutual trusts, faith, love and togetherness. Soane finds him as young and energetic as at the time of their marriage, "She just looked at his face. Smooth, still handsome after twenty six years and beaming now with satisfaction."(107).

However, Deek is quite uneasy about Soane. He shares her sadness and he himself also feels the loss of the sons precisely and keenly as she does. In fact, he knows more about his sons and their tragic end more than she knows. He has not told her that the graves do not contain their bodies. Most often their bodies flow apart and what has been shipped to them in those boxes was a collection of parts that weighed half of what a nineteen year old would. He simply assured that all the parts in the coffin were black i.e. of a black soldier and not a white. But he has not told Soane anything as it would

have multiplied her sorrow. Deek is worried that the sense of loss still continued haunting her. Surprisingly enough, her behaviour towards her husband is normal and even more caring:

There was nothing in her behaviour he could fault. She was as beautiful as it was possible for a good woman to be, she kept a good home and did good works everywhere. Was, in fact more generous than he would have liked (112).

The most important man woman relationship in the novel is between Deek and Consolata – Connie, the senior - most woman at the convent after the death of Mary Magma – the mother superior. With the history of Consolata, one gets the history of the convent also as it came into existence. Consolata, an orphan girl, was brought up by Mary Magma. For thirty years, Consolata worked hard to become and remain Mary Magma's pride, one of her singular accomplishments in a lifetime of teaching, nurturing and tending. Consolata worshipped her as if she was a goddess. In order to prove worthy of her love and protection she did everything: she slept in pantry, scrubbed tile, fed chickens, prayed, pleaded, gardened, canned and laundered. She learned cooking skills from Sister Roberts and got enough to take over the kitchen and the garden. For thirty years, she offered her body and her soul to God's Son and his Mother as completely as if she had taken the veil – responsibility of the convent – herself.

In 1954, Mary Magma and Consolata saw the group of thirty people about the business of making a town. Young men and boys swung their hats, chased horses and wiped their brimming eyes. First time in her life, Consolata heard the call of love and so her heart defeated her soul. A young man invited Mary Magma and Connie to his house. Connie saw Deek for the first time, "Connie saw his profile and the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach." (226) She felt a deep feeling of love for him and became desperate to see him again. When the relationship began he was twenty nine and she thirty nine. But she completely lost control over her senses when he said:

"your eyes look like mint leaves. Is it all right if I disturb you?"... She did not remember saying anything to that, but her face surely told him what he needed to know, because there he was in the night and she was there too and he took her hand in his." (227)

Their attraction increases and they frequently meet clandestinely as he often takes her in his truck during nights. It was during one such meeting that she accompanies him in the truck. In the middle of grassland, he slows down the truck, takes her in his arms and they enter in physical relations. On their way back they are speechless but the desire to meet again increases and they decide to meet each Friday:

She had not seen him during the whole night. But Friday Noon, they would do it in day light. She hugged herself. Sank to her knees and doubled over. Her forehead actually tapping the ground as she rocked in... pleasure. (229)

Every Friday she waits for him as a routine. She very well knows that he is married but the courtship goes on. Once she asks him if his wife or anybody else knew about their relationship and he tells that he has twin and so people get confused and often take him for Steward. Even Connie is once confused and takes Steward for Deek. It is only after she recognises him by smell that she jumps out of the truck in a state of total confusion.

The regularity of their meeting before his twin shows up smothered her hunger to a blunt blade but the irregularity after the episode sharpens the hunger. She is very restless to meet him and now they decide to meet in the cellar room of the convent and she waits eagerly for him but instead of Deek

there comes Soane, his wife. Consolata's fear came true, Soane has known about their illegitimate relationship. Soane does not create any scene but she simply meets Consolata and expresses her desire to abort her third child as a sacrifice of her husband's evil relationship with Consolata.

The romance stretches to the breaking point as commonsense prevails. Consolata's soul dominates her heart and she simply bends her knees and prays to God. Mary Magma comes and putting her arm around her shoulders to console her at her confession and advises her never to speak of him again. The relationship is broken but her bond with Soane proves stronger year after year. The two women instead of having an animosity for each other become friends and this relationship is further strengthened as Consolata is believed to have saved the life of K.D.

To conclude it can be said that in *Paradise* presents various kinds of man woman relationships apart from the numerous unsuccessful relationships that the convent inmates had with their male counterparts.

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