

A Spiritual Ecological Study of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract

As one of the first African American women that won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, Toni Morrison(1931-2019) is one of the most influential writers in the contemporary American literary world. Through a comparative analysis of Ruby residents and Covent women, this thesis explores how the Covent women overcome the spiritual crisis as well as the root cause for the decline in Ruby, and excavates Morrison's ecological ideas embodied in *Paradise*. It also reflects Morrison's initial exploration of the establishment of a harmonious society for black people and her expectations that the black community can achieve self-identification and finally get rid of the trauma.

Key words: Toni Morrison; *Paradise*; Spiritual Ecological Criticism

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison was born in Loraine, Ohio, in 1931. She was the second of four children in a working class family. When she was a little girl, her parents often told her a lot about black people's folk culture, myth, and music, which influenced her a lot. Then under the oppression of racial discrimination, the family moved to different places to seek for survival, during that time, Morrison began to realize the hardship of black people

and read a lot of books regarding to them. She was also widely acknowledged as an outstanding African-American women writer for her concern with the gender and race in her novels. She displayed an early interest in literature and studied humanities at Howard and Cornell University. Morrison has written ten novels, her works are famous for the rich images and vivid depictions of characters and settings of black American society. *Paradise* is Morrison's first novel after she won the Nobel Prize for literature and the last one of her trilogy. Aiming at describing black people's living conditions and their spiritual world. *Paradise* includes ten chapters, each chapter is named after a women(e.g. "Seneca", "Lone"). This novel mainly narrates the contradiction between the men of Ruby and a group of women who lived in a former Covent seventeen miles away. An earlier free black town, Haven, has gone into decline, and the descendants of the original families migrates still further west to establish Ruby. Ruby is an exclusively all-black town build in 1949, created by fifteen families of African Americans whose ancestors have been in American since the mid-eighteenth century and who have had a long history since struggling to protect their freedom, including being rejected by other black townships they had wished to join. Ruby is named after Steward and Deacon's sister who dies because no medical attention is available to her. Ruby men wanted to build an all black community with no harm and discrimination after they suffered from the racial discrimination, they regard Ruby as a paradise and the utopia. However, their dream was disillusioned, although Ruby's founders embrace black nationalism as a bulwark against state-sanctioned racism, their attempts to uphold imprisoning racial and gender norms actually further the state's policing of the black community. Ruby town finally moved towards disintegration. Covent is a mansion seventeen miles away from Ruby, which is a kind of informal refuge for demand women who have

drifted there by a series of fortuities, women in Covent live freely and peacefully together, with no patriarchal and racist ideologies, so in this novel “paradise” seems to be about Ruby, but turn to be more about the Covent. In Covent, they formed a harmonious world and women in this place eventually succeeded in building their own female paradise.

Due to the advantages of region and language, researches on Morrison abroad started earlier than in China and reached certain height in terms of depth and the use of methods.

First of all, the study from the prospective of race. Linda J. Krumholz’s *Reading and Insight in Toni Morrison’s*, argues that Morrison guides readers a version of history, ideology, and desire through the construction of a process of revealing or insights the volatile conjunction of race and gender. Katrine Dalsgard in “*The One All-Black*” *Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison’s Paradise*, in this article, Dalsgard argues that what Morrison suggests in *Paradise* is that the price of Ruby’s insistence on maintaining a morally superior master may well be the sacrifice of that very narrative.

Secondly, some critics analyse *Paradise* from the perspective of trauma theory. *Channette Romero in Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison’s Paradise* points out that *Paradise* distinguished itself by making the religion and spirituality central to questions of history, it also opens up the possibilities for healing the trauma and injustice of this painful history.

Some critics analyse the novel from the perspective of black people’s identity construction, *Hybridizing the “City upon a Hill” in Toni Morrison’s Paradise* written by Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos pays attention to the issues of national and individual identity building as represented in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*.

Some critics also pay close attention to the history of the blacks and Morrison’s relationship with African-American culture and the white American literary tradition. Peter Widdowson in *The American Dream Refashioned: History, Political and Gender in Toni Morrison’s Paradise* mentioned that *Paradise* is the very complexity novel which diverts readers attention that it is a deeply polemical book in terms of race, gender and American history.

As for Chinese researchers, the studies on *Paradise* are mainly from the prospective of themes, historical narrative, narratology, black cultural criticism, feminism, trauma theory, archetypal theory, history and the identity-building, and Morrison’s writing techniques.

Some scholars also analyze this novel from the prospective of cultural criticism, *From Isolation to*

Integration: the Revelation of Paradise written by Du Meichao, contends that it is unrealistic to establish an ideal utopia featuring in alienation, isolation, and exclusivist. *A Comparative Study of Two Communities in Paradise from Ecological Perspective* written by Xie Xinyue of Hunan University in 2018, making a comparative analysis of the two main communities of Ruby and the Covent, with emphasis on their different attitudes towards the relationship between man and nature, man and man, man and self and then its consequences accordingly. Zhu Zhu of Zhejiang University in 2014 published *A Study of Toni Morrison’s Late “Feminist Consciousness” Literature—Focus Works: Paradise, Love, A Mercy*, in this thesis, the author tries to explore Morrison’s female consciousness as illustrated in her latter three works, including *Paradise, Love and A Mercy*, and analyses the multi-faceted and complex relationship between the sexes and women themselves. In the conclusion, the author concludes that throughout Morrison’s works her early cry for a feminist revolt gradually weakened, which was replaced by a higher level of self-reflection and inner-strength.

1. THEORETICAL BASIS

Since the 20th century, nature has been exploited mercilessly by human beings on the path of industrialization. Human tries to conquer nature with the newest technology and the crazy ambition to transform nature. Human’s merciless exploitation has given nature numerous scars. Although the industrial economy in the United States takes off rapidly, there are appearing all kinds of mental problems, which poses a potential threat to the whole society. The spiritual crisis, such as the decline of culture, the degeneration of the spirit and the loss of humanity is partly blame for the development of modern society. The Consumerism and money worship have made people’s mental state out of balance, it also causes survival crisis for human beings.

Spiritual ecology is one of the branches of ecology, which studies the relationship between human beings and their living environment (including natural environment, social environment and cultural environment). It was Lu Shuyuan, who first put forward the academic concept “spiritual ecology”, treating ecology as a new kind of world view. In his book *Ecological Literature and Art*, Lu Shuyuan(2000) holds that spiritual ecology is “a discipline that studies the relationship between human beings as the subject of spiritual existence and their living environment, including natural environment, social environment and cultural environment”(148). In other words, ecological crisis not only occurs in the field of nature and society, but also in the field of spirit, human beings should save their souls as well as the earth.

2. THE OPPOSITE SPIRITUAL CONDITIONS BETWEEN RUBY AND THE COVENT

2.1 The Split Spiritual Condition in Ruby

Under the oppression of slavery, black slaves suffered both physical and mental devastation. For the American black people, this is a humiliating and painful national history. In Ruby, people's mind of state has been blinded by miserable colonial history, which results in severe spiritual crisis during their search for self identity. In *Paradise*, Morrison said that "it could have been over and done with. Should have been over and done with. The rejection, which they call "the disallowing", was a burn whose scar tissue was numb by 1949, wasn't it? Oh, no. Those that survived that particular war came right back home, saw what had become of Haven, heard about the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; about medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy—and recognized the Disallowing, Part Two"(Paradise194). Ruby town was built in 1949, it's an all black community whose members was once rejected mercilessly by both whites and light-skinned whites. Owing to the bitter experience of "disallowing", they choose to alienate themselves from the mainstream society which is full of racial discrimination. However, their spirit is still harassed by "disallowing"—the story of how 158 free black slaves left "Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes in 1890. They were turned away by whites at every stop for being too poor, too bedraggled-looking." "The twins have powerful memories. Between them they remember the details of everything that ever happened—things they witnessed and things they have not... And they have never forgotten the message or the specifics of any story, especially the controlling one told to them by their grandfather—the man who put the words in the Oven's black mouth. A story that explained why neither the founders of Haven nor their descendants could tolerate anybody but themselves."(13). In addition, owing to the ridiculous blood rule, the town's population is declining, and the emotional world of residents plunges into complete bareness because of the infertility permeated within the community. In the word of Ruby's Reverend Misner, "They think they have outfoxed the white man, when in fact they imitate them....How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thins human imagination became trying to achieve it"(306).

Ruby men's isolation from nature also cause the imbalance of their spirit. They gradually lose their responsibility for nature, "The women kept on with their vegetable gardens in back, but little by little its produce become like the flowers—driven by desire, not necessity"(90). Gradually, they lose their gratitude towards nature. People in Ruby have disconnected with the nature physically and mentally, which leads to the distortion of

their self-identity. Just as Kristin Hunt puts it, "As the novel progress, Morrison illustrates how this patriarchal mentality eventually fails to nature a permanent bond between the townspeople and the land. Trying so desperately to pursue the American dream, the forefathers of the town set up boundaries between themselves, their wives and daughters, and the surrounding land... But the founders of Ruby are determined to avoid any outside influences that may harm them, including those of nature itself. Ultimately, it is the refusal to accept nature's course and to form bonds with the environment that brings about the demise of the clan's descendant"(Hunt, 2000).

Morgan brothers, who remember almost every detail of their ancestors' glory past and consider it as the symbol to prove the truth that they are the chosen people, they refused to integrate with the white culture because of what the white had done to them. They refused to change, they think that Ruby was "immortally" frozen in its own stasis, has no politics because the the very conception of change is a contradiction in terms: the town is ideal because it cannot change, and it cannot change because it is ideal. When the youths claim that they want to change the motto to read "Be the Furrow of His Brow", the Morgan brothers said that "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake"(87). With the gaining of economic and social status in Ruby, Morgan brothers regard themselves as the leader of Ruby town, their vanity and selfless increased with the accumulation of power and wealth. The twin brothers lose their sympathy and humanity, they are tortured by the internalized colonial memory, which made them the initiator of violence. They attack the unarmed Covent women to prove that they are correct.

2.2 The Harmonious Spiritual Condition in Covent

Different from the Ruby community, in Covent, Morrison depicts a group of marginalized women who preserve and nurture themselves here, through the conscious and unconscious dialogue instructed by Consolata, these marginalized women successfully recognized the importance of their self-identity and reunite their body and spirit. In other words, these women can find empowerment regardless of whether society takes notice of their presence.

In *Paradise*, women in the Covent are confronted with different difficulties. Connie, the oldest of the Covent's long term residents, was brought to the Covent as a child by some nuns who rescued her from the street of Brazil. Mavis used to be treated by her husband as "the dumbest bitch on the planet", and has suffered violent sexual abuse by her husband. Her four mouth twins, have suffocated in the family Cadillac. She even couldn't defend herself against an eleven-year-old girl. Gigi is a sassy sixties girl has a father on death-row, a grandmother, "in a spiffy

trailer in Alcon, Mississippi and a boyfriend who is in jail.” She is wandering the country, afraid to return to her grandfather with nothing and haunted by her memory of a boy shot at a march in which she participated. Seneca, who was abandoned by her mother, a woman she had thought was her sister. Then she was sexually abused by her foster father, and sexually exploited by a wealthy woman who treats her “like a pet you want to be with for a while...but not keep. Not love. Not name”(137). Pallas, who is the daughter of a wealthy father and an artist mother. When she visits her mother with her older boyfriend, the two older adults begin an open affair. During her escape from her mother’s home, she is raped by a gang of young men. In *Paradise*, each of the women is suffered from traumatic memory of violence and betrayal. They stay at the Covent because they have no place to go and no one to turn to. Connie once felt imprisoned in her body when the Mother Superior died, but she eventually recognized that spirit “is true, like bones. It is good, like bones.” What Connie has realized is that spirit and body must be valued equally. So she said to the women, “Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve”(263). After the “loud dreaming”, each woman reclaims her past and faces it without feeling threatened or paralyzed. They lie naked on the cellar floor freely. “Seneca lay on her stomach at first, then changed to her back, hands clasping her shoulders. Pallas lay on her side, knees draws up. Gigi flung her legs and arms apart, while Mavis struck a floater’s pose, arms angled and knees pointing in”(165). When they find the most comfortable position, Consolata paints their silhouette on the floor. During that process, everyone tries to abandon their original identities, try to accept the miserable past, and reconstruct a new relation with the world. So at the end of the novel, Mavis has breakfast with her daughter, who she thought had been trying to kill her; Gigi sees her father after the communication of his death sentence; Seneca begins to draw cuts on her image’s skin rather than slicing her own and sees her mother in a parking lot. Pallas and her child visit her mother.

The harmonious relationship between nature and the Covent women are of great benefit to their mental and physical health. There is a description of nature’s healing function in *Paradise*. “The rain’s perfume was stronger north of Ruby, especially at the Covent, where thick white clover and Scotch broom colonized every place but the garden. Mavis and Pallas, aroused from sleep by its aroma, rushed to tell Consolata, Grace and Seneca that longer from rain finally come. Gathered in the kitchen door, first they watched, then they stuck out their hands to feel. It was like lotion on their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their shaved hands and upturned faces... If there were any recollections of a recent warning or intimation of harm, the irresistible rain washed them away”(222). When the purifying rain comes, they

enter a state of ecstasy which heals their sorrow and pain. After the rain, they feel that their miserable experience has washed away. “Morrison’s novel, by contrast, emphasizes that the Covent women are washed clean in the redemptive rain only after they have collectively immersed themselves in the salty brine of their histories. If the body is a page that can be reinscribed, *Paradise* draws crucial attention to the quality and distinctiveness of the paper to the specific materiality and concrete effects of inhabiting a particularly marked body”(Grosz 191). The close connection between Covent women and nature has helped Covent women acquire the authentic freedom from spiritual to flesh.

Shortly before the men of Ruby invade the Covent, Connie leads the Covent women in a collective, ritualized healing process that resulted in their embodied, earthly redemption. After the attempted slaughter, all five Covent women disappear, including two whom the men apparently killed. Reverend Misner and Anna Flood sense the presence of a door or window in a field near the Covent, and their question, “what on earth would be? What on earth?”(*Paradise*305) suggests that the women have escaped to an alternative realm, a sort of paradise on earth. The novel does not suggest that the Covent women achieve immortality. In fact, the slaughter initiates a seismic shift that brings mortality to the town of Ruby.

3. THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SPIRITUALLY BALANCED COMMUNITY

3.1 Black People’s Returning to Nature

Toni Morrison expresses her deep concerns about the spiritual crisis faced by blacks in *Paradise*. The author points out that only by returning to nature can black people seek spiritual supports and obtain a wholesome state of mind. “Thanks to modern labour-saving household appliances, they have won ‘the garden battles,’ turning their dirt yards into gardens full of flowers and vegetables. The childless and passive Dovey Morgan prefers staying in the house in town on her own rather than returning to the farm with Steward”(276). For women in Ruby, nature can offer them consolation, only by returning to nature can they forget these difficulties.

3.2 Ruby Men’s Self-Examination

In *Paradise*, Deacon changed a lot after the attack, he walks barefoot towards Richard Minster’s house to confess what he had done to Covent. He sees that he has “become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy, the needy, the defenseless, the different”(302). Deacon has made a great process and he began to reconcile himself and the society, which is an important step to realize recovery.

In addition to Deacon Morgan, Minser finally decided to stay in the town, “among these outrageously beautiful, flawed and proud people”(306). The ending suggests, perhaps, that there is hoping yet for Ruby—that the town has indeed been granted a second chance, as Lone Gussed. The death is a new thing for Ruby, in Minser’s eyes, he has seen the future of new Ruby. “The future panted at the gate. Roger Best will get his gas station and the connecting roads will be laid. Outsiders will come and go, come and go and some will want a sandwich and a can of 3.2 beers. So who knows, maybe there will be a diner too. K.D and Steward will already be discussing” (306).

CONCLUSION

This thesis applies spiritual ecocritical approach proposed by Lu Shuyuan to make a comparative study of two communities in *Paradise*. Morrison portrays the mental imbalance of the Ruby community, the internalized colonial memory makes them feel resentful and desperate to the mainstream society and the infertility permeated through the community made the residents in Ruby plunges into complete barrenness. At the same time, the women in Covent who have lost themselves after the experience of violence, discrimination and betrayal, unite their body and spirit through realizing the beauty of their body. They used to be self-pitying for their terrible experience, but they have rescued themselves by facing their past, speaking out the unbearable pain, and finally realizing the spiritual relief, gaining spiritual freedom. What Morrison tries to explore is to reconstruct a harmonious world between the whites and blacks. Human being is an inseparable part of nature rather than the master of nature, only by return to nature can human beings survive and develop better in the world, any action

that separates men from nature will incur disaster for themselves. Black people must step out of the historical shadow and realize the importance of traditional culture and construct self-recognition and self-identification.

In summary, It is necessary to reiterate the importance of good natural environment for shaping a complete and independent personality, only in this way can black people step out of the historical shadow and realize a correct self-recognition and self-identification.

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