(Hi) Stories and Tellers: A Critical Reading of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

Payel Pal
Research Scholar
Humanities and Social Sciences Department,
Indian Institute of Technology
Kanpur
payel65@gmail.com

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) the final part of the trilogy that includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992) appropriately meditates on the processes which construct and narrate history. An account of all blacks town Ruby, *Paradise* provides an incisive critique of the town's historiography steeped inescapably with the nationalist ethos. Accordingly, the text becomes an important discourse that reassesses the underpinnings of Black Nationalism and more particularly, investigates the possibilities of a unified postcolonial history built on the collective conscience. The present essay seeks to study how by critically hinging upon Ruby's nationalist historiography, Morrison deconstructs it as a problematic discourse which is strongly inscribed with the conflictual dynamics of Western hegemonic paradigms. In so doing, the paper studies how the author uncovers the ideological faultlines at the heart of Ruby's historicity and reinforces the exploration of communal (hi) story on alternative lines that provides compelling ways to envisage the marginalized histories and testimonies.

Meditating on the pitfalls of nationhood and official histories, Morrison has relentlessly excavated the silent and subjugated voices through her literary characters. Fittingly addressing the undercurrents of different time periods of American history, she has vocalized the suppressed histories in ways that forcefully debunk the grand claims of sanctioned representations. Undoubtedly, Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) exemplifies her subversive power in espousing the psychic incarceration of the black subjects and bringing to light the problematic of contextualizing the subaltern consciousness. *Beloved* champions the plurality of slave voices and communal 'rememory' in unburdening the traumatic history of the blacks. Continuing this legacy to rethink and reexamine the debates of history and national identity, *Paradise* densely evinces the internal struggles taking place within the black community that inevitably raises the question about the ownership, production, and representation of black history in the contemporary era. As part of this, the novelist also rediscovers the changes in racial identity and affiliations that inevitably problematize the very notion of 'blackness'. Chronicling the fallouts of nationalism when suffused with ethnocentric interests, Morrison brings to surface the threat that the community faces with "a lot of neo-cons [and] a lot of activists" (*Conversations* 191). Ostensibly, the novelist is critical of the black patriarchy in power and the aggressive intra-racists who are viciously buying into the strictures of white capitalism. Accordingly, the novelist's stance remains that the re-subjectification of oppressed people like the African Americans is possible not by merely gaining political emancipation or rights but through repudiation of the Western historiography and epistemology. To add to this, the novelist furthers a cosmopolitan vision for the African Americans that claims an empathetic understanding of the histories of other migrants, dispossessed, and racially betrayed.

Predictably, *Paradise* crystallizes the complexities that arise in the decolonized situations due to monologic construction of national history and crisis of responsible leadership. The analogy with the post-colonial nationhood can be drawn powerfully, as Morrison here depicts the emergence and workings of an independent black township after the official abolition of slavery. Dramatizing the animosities that crop up from the overarching patriarchal rule, the novel warns about the hazards of male solipsism and erroneous fanaticism of nationhood. Set in the intervening years of post-Reconstruction period, *Paradise* narrates the tale of a group of nine ex-slaves trying to find a settlement for themselves. Rejected by the light skinned blacks in many towns such as Mississippi and Louisiana, the ex-slaves finally reach the plains of Oklahoma and found a new town named Haven comprising exclusively of the nine black families. Over the course of time, following Haven's fall the fifteen families with a fierce pride in the racial purity of their progenitors establish another town Ruby, named after the Morgan twins' only sister. Notably, the event of Haven's foundation tainted with the feelings of disowning and exclusion is constituted and transmitted as the nationalist historiography of Ruby. Reifying this foundational 'story', the men in Ruby mythify their forefathers as 'national heroes' by calling them Big Papa, Big Daddy, and Old Father.

Obsessed to preserve the freedom and sovereignty of the town, the Ruby men reiterate this ancestral history as a "controlling one" (*Paradise* 13) that vindicates the perpetration of male prowess in the social system. Similar to many other nationalist narratives, this (hi)story unabashedly champions men as strong leaders and the legal guardians of the newly found community. However, the glorification while positing the men as actors and signifiers in the national history underscores a gendered notion of nation. It is discernable in the naming of the town as Ruby, that at one level highlights the Morgan brothers' profound love for their dead sister, and at another masks the phallic desire to legitimatize their claim of ownership. Ruby's death, as the text witnesses, leaves an indelible mark of their failure to affirm power. Ruby, "the sweet modest laughing girl whom [Deek] and Steward had protected all their lives . . . died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her" (*Paradise* 113). The remembrance of Ruby as a figure of tormented motherhood therefore conflates with the nationalist desire to endorse violence and manhood. No wonder, though the real predicament of women in Ruby is terribly miserable, the men in the town boast of the fact that they had liberated the black females from working "in a white-man's kitchen or nurs[ing] a white child" (*Paradise* 99). Morrison's text echoes the concerns of many other post-colonial women writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo and Buchi Emecheta who depict the victimization of women at the hands of indigenous patriarchy.

The socialist vision in *Paradise* indicts this aspect of heroism in national (hi) stories which as Morrison emphasizes is suffused with sexism and engenders internal hierarchies. Framed and delivered by men, the particularized (hi) story turns to be the prime epistemological weapon for justifying their ideals of totalitarian governance. No wonder, the children in the Ruby are also indoctrinated with a segmented version of the black history. While the assertion of a separate national history is unmistakably a part of their endeavor to enunciate legitimacy as a political entity, it ensnares them into the asymmetrical logics of Western structures. Pertinently to consolidate the nationalist sentiments, the Ruby men adhere unflinchingly to the account of black heroism and

enforce other citizens to abide to its truth claims unconditionally. As evident, though the Morgan twins "were born in 1924. . . but they heard for twenty years what the previous forty had been like" (*Paradise* 16). Intriguingly, "they listened to, imagined and remembered every single thing because each detail was a jolt of pleasure, erotic as a dream, out thrilling and more purposeful than even the war they had fought in" (*Paradise* 16). The "specifics of the story" (*Paradise* 13) i.e. the recorded version of the past is attributed religious afflatus and is unfortunately 'passed on' in a monolithic fashion to the next generation. Infact, the desire to manufacture social cohesion drives these men to perpetuate the story of 'Disallowing' and the charismatic accomplishments of the ancestors as the only authentic testimony of racial betrayal, trauma, and moment of honor for the Ruby population.

In so doing, the Ruby men unwittingly comply with the Eurocentric definitions of nation, nationhood, and national history as homogeneous phenomena. Notably, Morrison lines with the contemporary postcolonial and subaltern thinkers in analyzing how the discourses of nationalism and nationalist history are 'derivatives' of the Western epistemology. To begin with, Bhabha envisages nation as an apparatus of disciplinizing and controlling the potentialities inherent in hybrid identities such as the immigrants and generally displaced masses. In *Nation and Narration* (1990), his study unravels the 'ambivalence' that resides at the core of nationalist representations. Similarly, the subaltern group of thinkers contend 'nation' as a mechanism that justifies the project of Western modernization and bourgeoisie dictums. As expressed by Partho Chatterjee, "[nationalism] produced a discourse in which, even as it challenged the colonial claim to political domination, it also accepted the very intellectual promises of modernity on which colonial domination is based" (Chatterjee 30). Seen in this context, the nationalist mantras in Ruby to set up a utopian state freed from all evils also buys into the Western projects of perfect state.

The Ruby patriarchs are not only faulty of their unstinted faith in nationalism, but more disastrously of canonizing it in an authoritative way. Sadly, as the novel shows, the dominant historiography in Ruby is rendered in fixed and ossified manner that restricts any form of inclusion or reinterpretation. With its sacramental credo, the Ruby elders institutionalize it as unalterable and unchallengeable. Indifferent to the flaws inherent in their conceptualization and narration of (hi) story, the Morgan brothers thrive as the dogmatic historians of the town. Accordingly, they disapprove any sort of tampering, and thereby put censor on reimagining of the prevalent discourse. So, the common people can mutely listen to but were not allowed to interpret or participate in narration. Richard Misner, the Methodist preacher in the town identifies the redundant nature of the archived (hi) story:

> Over and over and with the least provocation, they pulled from their stock of stories tales about the old folks, their grands and greatgrands; their fathers and mothers. Dangerous confrontations, clever maneuvers. Testimonies to endurance, wit, skill and strength. Tales of luck and outrage. But why were there no stories to tell of themselves? About their own lives they shut up. Had nothing to say, pass on. As though past heroism was enough of a future to live by. As though, rather than children, they wanted duplicates. (*Paradise* 161)

The urge to valorize the communal (hi) story on a single frame is evidenced in the building of the 'Oven' initially for utility purpose and then as retain it as a mark of unification and religious historicity. Meditating on its 'real value' (*Paradise* 103) of the 'Oven', Soane Morgan, Steward's wife introspects that "the women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved . . . [in course of their journey from Haven to Ruby] But privately they resented the truck space given over to it- rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child's crib" (*Paradise* 103). Interestingly, Soane's counter-personal imagination decanonizes the grandeur of the overriding historiography. Ironically, the few dilapidated inscriptions on the 'Oven' stand as the only scripted form of past glory in the present time. With its missing letters, the 'Oven' both triggers and embodies the differential perceptions which puncture the desperate attempt to "nail down" and "specify" the historical significations. A symbolic artifact of the past, the Oven exemplifies the process of 'standardization' that the national histories undergo and stimulates a "deep, horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 7) in the masses. However, instead of solidifying mutuality and harmony, the symbolic value of Oven comes under the scrutiny of the commoners. Such revisionary attitudes by the Ruby citizens exemplify the 'performative aspects of nationalist discourses . . . [in which] difference returns from within to challenge the homogeneous nation with its unified people and myths of origin" (McLeod 119). No wonder, Ruby's social fabric is threatened due to excessive pressure to affiliate with the "continuist, accumulative temporality' (Bhabha 145) of historiography. So, when a conflict arises regarding the missing letters on the 'oven', the elders find it dishonorable to rethink and belligerently dismiss the youngsters, "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" (*Paradise* 87). The inner factions and intergenerational conflicts testify to the resistance against the centralization of epistemological and political power one-dimensional narration vis-à-vis.

It must be remembered that Morrison at the same time accentuates that a keen knowledge and sharing of history is fundamental for any community. Naturally, as she implicates the modes of representation, particularly the act of narration, bear enormous importance. The teller of the (hi) story has a cultural responsibility, a role that she tellingly embraces through her fictions. For her, the process of retelling should accord multiplicity and renew experientiality, so that every version is an act of resignification. Disastrously, what the Ruby men do is, segregate the townspeople and dismantle their role as 'subjects' in the historical narrative. For Morrison, fissures exist at the heart of these men's conceptualization of history as a closed referential system. A legacy of Western Enlightenment, this belief negates the circular and polymorphous vision that characterizes the African traditions of oral history. While speaking to Elissa Schappell, she says: "History should not be a straitjacket, which overwhelms and binds, neither should it be forgotten. One must critique it, test it, confront it, and understand it in order to achieve a freedom that is more than license, to achieve true, adult agency" (*Conversations* 83). So, in the author's worldview the history as a construct should engage with the unspeakable brutalities of the past, and simultaneously negotiate with the ongoing happenings, social changes, and individual testimonies. The figure of the baby ghost in *Beloved* encompassing more than sixty million black voices and at the same time incarnating Sethe's dead child characteristically substantiate the author's stance. Morrison's

ideological position echoes that of Fanon who emphasizes on "a more dynamic and vacillating relationship between past and present" (McLeod 84) to denaturalize the colonial impact.

In *Paradise*, the idealization of national (hi) story blinds the Ruby males to the subsequent transformations in the social sphere. Bolstering on a spectacular concept of past, national history for them is redundantly the miraculous adventures of their forefathers. Surprisingly, they do neither assert the factuality of the 'middle passage', brutality of slavery and displacement, nor acknowledge the contemporary causes of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s. Mistakenly ascribing national legitimacy to the event of 'Disallowing', the men actually exhibit a denial of the heterogeneity of African American experiences. Steward Morgan's contempt for "the schoolchildren sitting . . . in the drugstore in Oklahoma City" and his hatred for Thurgood Marshall (*Paradise* 82), one of leading black thinkers are such cases in the point. Tragically, this myopic vision of cultural history cuts the Ruby population from knowledge about their African origins. For instance, all that Soane Morgan knew about Africa "was the seventy- five cents she gave to the missionary society collection. She had the same level of interest in Africans as they had in her: none" (*Paradise* 104). A similar discord is traced when Patricia Best, the local schoolteacher, states to Richard Misner that "[Africa] doesn't mean anything to her" (*Paradise* 209). Misner's reiteration of Africa as "our home" annoys Patricia, as she vents out: "I'm really not interested, Richard. You want some foreign Negroes to identify with, why not South America? Or Germany, for that matter" (*Paradise* 210). Naturally, though endowed with a unique 'emotional distance', Patricia's limited vision finally collapses her project of reconstructing a genealogical history from the unofficial details and the untold experiences. No wonder, she meets with extreme indifference from the public who like her have been disenfranchised to be subjects of their own histories. To simply state, the imposition of singular historiography has obliterated the "will to remember" (Akoma 5) and thereby denotes a severe loss of cultural consciousness.

Centralizing the role of culture, Fanon had argued in his *The Wretched of the Earth* "a shattering [of the old strata] becomes increasingly fundamental" (Fanon 197) for resisting the fetters of colonial domination. Crucially dismantling the ideational aspects propagated by the Negritude movement, Fanon enunciates that there "can be no return to an idealized notion of culture" (McLeod 88). In *Paradise*, the Ruby men's celebration of an inert past typifies their inability to forge the "necessities of the present" (McLeod 88). As a result of which, they rear up as neo-colonial heads or more as, carriers of capitalist ethos formidably "stepping into the shoes of their former rulers" (Fanon 122). Contemplating on the many ills of manifestation of national consciousness, Fanon warns about the "national middle class. . . [who] turns shockingly . . . stupidly, contemptibly, cynically bourgeois" (Fanon 120-1). It is instructive to note that while the Ruby men fight against the white capitalist structures by developing economic self sufficiency and obstructing the technological advances but they appropriate the role of native middle class or whom Fanon calls the 'native intellectuals' by mimicking the Eurocentric ideologies and subjugating the citizens of the Ruby as inferior and voiceless.

Morrison's deconstruction of nationhood and history in *Paradise* thus provides a critical foray on the neo-capitalist affiliations in the African Americans. Sethe's contemplation that "freeing

yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (*Beloved* 111-12) reverberates strongly in *Paradise* as the white colonial master is now replaced by hegemonic black authorities unleashing new methods of repression. The novelist in many ways attacks the ethnic essentialism that perpetuates skewed definitions of race and nationality. 'Blackness' being the defining metaphor of Ruby's history lends to essentialist perceptions of blacks / non-blacks. Instead of consolidating the political fellowship, the reductive emphasis on 'blackness' as a pan-national mark dismantles the vibrancy of the community as well escalate hatred for other racial identities. Tragically, several characters in the novel who fail to absorb the paradigms of 'blackness' are castigated as hyphenated identities. So we have a group of people such as Patricia Best, her daughter Billie Delia, and Menus who are tabooed as outsiders by the Ruby men. The agenda to legalize a free survival for the blacks eventually aggravates discrimination and divisiveness. By presenting the case of freed blacks running their separate town, the novelist crucially throws into the question if 'blackness' can be the defining norm of the African American community, nationhood or their history. Analyzing Morrison's critique of exceptionalism, Dalsgard correctly observes that her "deconstructive approach, in contrast, implies skepticism toward any national historical narrative" (238). Significantly, the novel not only demonstrates the pervasiveness of Western tools in conceptualizing history but alarms about the growth of a community trapped in essentialist thinking as a consequence of this.

To put in other words, the novelist here obliquely comments on the aspirations of Black Nationalism as well as the political responsibilities of the black nationalists who in their task of mobilizing the enslaved African American consciousness claimed for economic liberation and social development. For Morrison, the duty of the black leader extends beyond gaining the political and civil rights. Evidently, it is to rehistoricize the community by dismantling the hierarchy within the community that often segues from the internalization of the Eurocentric episteme. Overall, her conflict with the male-defined history and leadership is outpoured in *Paradise*, as it is in her other novels too where she draws upon spirited women nurturing, nourishing, and educating the community. Pilate in *Song of Solomon*, Baby Suggs in *Beloved*, and L in *Love* typify this activist status by sustaining the ancestral glory as well empowering to combat the capitalist blows. To conclude, Morrison's *Paradise* operates as a signal of the dangers of neo-colonialism, parochial leadership, and the symbolic violence that are stemming within the African Americans and rampant in the global sphere. Importantly, as part of such critique the author disavows any form of controlled history as a mechanism of insidious Western capitalism. Looking through the lens of blacks and simultaneously bringing the community under scrutiny, Morrison's point is to envisage beyond the textual parameters of dominant (hi) story and celebrate differences and discursiveness as way to resist the objectification.

Works Cited

Akoma, Chiji. "The 'Trick' of Narratives: History, Memory, and Performance in Toni Morrison's Paradise." *Oral Tradition* 15. 1 (2000): 3-25. Print.

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. New York: Verso, 1991. Print.

Bhabha, Homi. The Location of Culture. New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Chatterjee, Partho. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. Print.

Dalsgard, Katrine. "The One All Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationhood in Toni Morrison's Paradise." *African American Review* 35. 2 (2001): 233-248. Print.

Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. London: Penguin Classics, 2001. Print.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. 1987. London: Vintage, 1997. Print.

---*Paradise*. London: Vintage, 1999. Print.