

The Significance of Interpersonal Relations in Rehabilitation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract

This study frames the emotional damage and the process of rehabilitation of Mavis in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. The writings of Morrison authenticate African-American realities and concerns. She explores complex societal, political and philosophical concerns in her novels, exposing black victimization, the psychological effects of racial and sexual persecution, and the complications that African Americans face in a society dominated by white cultural values. *Paradise*, a multilayered work, has inspired a wide range of literary criticism. However, most critics have either neglected the role and significance of interpersonal relations in the process of rehabilitation of broken individuals or have touched only marginally.

Consequently, criticism of *Paradise* needs to be a more comprehensive analysis of the importance of interpersonal relations. The present study aims to fill this gap, thereby gaining fresh insights into the artistic piece. Narratives of violence on electronic media may desensitize people to what they see and hear. However, this study emphasizes that attachment relationships are the most efficient means to regulate emotional distress. If one's world gets fractured, which is beyond one's control, resulting in denigration, then the overwhelming weight of such intrusive stress and the ever-present threat of harassment have to be lifted with someone's help. The study argues that psychological ailments should be dealt with seriously because psychological damage is not a matter of concern of individual psychopathology but a problem that touches the social and cultural dimensions of human life. The reader will be equipped with a new framework for assisting distressed individuals, which will strengthen the community.

Keywords: attachment; family; social; women

Introduction

Toni Morrison, a Nobel Laureate, made her way through the white world owing to her compelling writing, which is obviously felt in her oeuvre. *Paradise* is a part of Morrison's trilogy, which discusses the question of love in its mysterious forms. The status of interpersonal relationships determines not only the stability of familial interactions but also the psychological health of the whole community.

Paradise tells the story of lost women who find themselves at the edge of an all-black town called Ruby. The members of the town, as descendants of historical outcasts, might find standard connections with the women who find themselves living in the Convent just beyond Ruby's limits. Instead, the town leaders, enmeshed in fear of change and of the world outside of Ruby, see the women as threatening. They are so shaken by the women's presence and potential influence that they attempt to kill them rather than grapple with the realities of inevitable change. (Gillespie, 2007, 12)

Literature Review

The Role of Interpersonal Relations in Rehabilitation

In human life, besides family members, social contacts are created by the circumstances and surroundings in which one is living. Most of them are superficial and require one to be clever enough to handle different situations. With unfamiliar interaction, generally, one knows a limited history about the other person, so views are exchanged on general topics, which might lead to the relaxation of the tense nervous system. When the interaction starts, the speakers are not concerned about whether the other person agrees or disagrees with a particular point of view. Such discussions broaden the concepts, allowing each other to analyze varied aspects of life from different angles, while familiar social contacts "provide a sense of belonging to that community – a feeling of knowing and being known" (Beal, 2005, 296). It is challenging to master the skill of "small talk" (Beal, 2005, 218), which sometimes makes people avoid attending parties and joining organizations. Besides this, it is essential to know how to end a conversation and how to decrease a growing contact. Jon G. Allen complicates the relationship by saying that small interactions serve as an antidote to loneliness as they are natural anti-depressants. The advantage that small interactions enjoy over attachment relationships is that they are less threatening and more open-minded as there

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is relatively more anonymity, which allows flexibility; besides this, a smile of recognition helps "to diminish feelings of isolation and loneliness" (Beal, 2005, 217). Some people consider such interactions to be a waste of time as they consider them meaningless. Others feel awkward and fear rejection when saying something wrong or at an inappropriate time and place. The need to belong is one of the fundamental human motivations behind communication and interaction between people.

Allen thinks that though there is no substitute for attachment relationships, social contacts provide pleasure, improve quality of life, and sometimes they "function as the gateway to attachment relationships" (Beal, 2005, 219), so he favours the opinion that efforts should be employed to focus on the neglected domain of social relationships which might play a positive role in fostering hope in a person suffering from trauma. Two types of family relations are attachment figures: family of origin and family of marriage; these relations are not of choice but the ones into which we are born or married. Though a child is related to so many people, the parent-child relationship is different from his relationship with other family members. John Bowlby has also supported the idea that social contacts cannot take the place of attachment relationships. Parent-child relation remains central in the life of parents as well as children, yet "several features of the relationships usually change significantly: the level of parental authority, the extent of reliance on parents, the level of physical contact, and the level of confiding and emotional intimacy" (Stein, 2009, 294). Later in life, one derives pleasure and support from one's relationship with one's wife, her family, and children. They quickly help a person to come out of the state of psychic disorder and enter into the world which demands full participation of the individual.

When attachment figures fail to normalize the person who has undergone trauma, then the therapist intervenes to normalize the psychotic disorders; a therapeutic alliance between the two should be based on trust and compassion. The psychoanalyst feels that his work becomes easier if the sufferer is in a "collaborative frame of mind" (Gabbard, 1998, 697). Improvement in the behaviour of the victim can take place if proper rapport is established between the two. On the other hand, "perceived failure of empathy or lack of attentiveness on the part of the therapist may result in gross distortions of the therapist's intentions and abrupt termination of the treatment" (Gabbard, 1998, 700). Trauma should

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be treated either by attachment figures or by a psychiatrist because trauma, when accumulated for a long time, results in significant psychiatric as well as medical morbidity. It is assessed that physical and sexual assaults result in life-threatening illnesses. They are equivalent to traumatic deaths. The survey reports confirm that the majority experienced "intense fear, helplessness, or horror when the most distressing traumatic event occurred" ("Reliability and validity", 2015, 194).

Allen gives the overview of what Bowlby has proposed, that attachment evolves in mammals to protect the young ones from physical threats, but in the case of human beings, they are concerned about not only providing food but they are worried to provide a sense of security to the young ones. Now, a shift has taken place as recent research focuses more on how attachment relationships function primarily to control and regularize emotional turmoil. Attachment relationships are considered the most efficient and powerful means to regulate emotions. Paradoxically, just as they help traumatized people recover, in the same way, "attachment relationships also constitute the most potent source of emotional distress, as exemplified most problematically in traumatic childhood attachments—a source of the most pernicious transferences" ("Commentary on Transference", 2014, 31). Allen appreciates the concept of transference as presented by Clara Thompson, who considers that human relations have irrational elements. He says that psychologists have grounded their work in science. However, we must not lose sight of "plain old truths" ("Commentary on Transference", 2014, 34) that all interpersonal relations play a functional role in relieving the mental turmoil of a person.

Allen believes that nothing is more fascinating than to observe the way the human mind works in relation to attachment relationships. The moment the listener starts listening to the painful narrative "responding contingently" ("Introduction", 2001, 293), the distressed looks start disappearing from the face of the sufferer, and he calms down. When the attachment relations fail to provide consolation, the therapist's "optimally contingent responses—what we ordinarily call empathy, attunement, or mirroring—are rewarding because they give [his] patients a sense of efficacy through their[patients] influence on our [psychotherapist] emotional states and expressions" ("Introduction", 2001, 293). The emotional responses and facial expressions of the listener are non-conscious but are absorbed by the speaker while relating the discourse. The capacity to

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perceive contingent responses in others is present in an infant also who expresses or understands the expression of the mother without knowing the language. It is through his expression that the child expresses his unease, while the mother, on the other hand, conveys her understanding through her facial expressions, which promotes a sense of relatedness in the child to self and others. This, in turn, helps in providing a solid foundation of secure attachment, which is necessary for a balanced personality. If a mother fails to resolve the worry of the child, then it may result in disorganized attachment. Likewise, if a mother has some mental disorder, it may also result in disorganized attachment. The instability of the attachment figure adversely affects the personality of a child. So, it is not only genes but psycho-social factors that contribute to the personality development of a child.

There is considerable evidence that the mental and physical health of a person drastically improves if his relations with family members are improved. Troubled relations force people to look outside their homes – towards the help of a psychiatrist to diagnose a specific ailment. Interpersonal relations are significant in producing successful performance at the workplace as well as in social adjustment. Psychoeducation is done as it helps the patients to “reflect on their functioning in various roles and relationships in adult life, observe persistent patterns, and consider the possibility of change in light of greater self-reflection” (Stein, 2009, 283). It is observed that psychoeducation of patients as well as family members contributes to improving the health of people who have undergone trauma. They have imparted knowledge about their illness and different aspects of treatment. These intervention techniques help the individual as well as his caregivers in bringing improvement in the behaviour of a person who has undergone trauma.

Methodology

I intend to add a new methodological dimension by analyzing the selected work of Toni Morrison from the perspective of the significance of interpersonal relations in human life. I analyze how attachment figures, as well as social contacts, may help a person in the process of rehabilitation who is suffering from trauma. Dealing with a depressed person is more of an ethical endeavour and less a clinical practice. Feelings of anxiety can be reduced by listening empathetically to the painful narrative of the victim.

Discussion

It is highly tragic when Mavis loses her twin children on the same day, but it is more traumatizing that the neighbours who were jealous of having them "mint green Cadillac" (21) are now relieved that it is the same Cadillac in which she lost her babies. Apparently, they share her sorrow by bringing in food, getting up a collection, and telephoning her, but "the shine of excitement in their eyes [is] clear" (21). This is the situation of the people of the community, but when she looks inside her house, the husband is drinking wine, oblivious to the sorrowful situation. The writer also highlights the curse of yellow journalism. The mother loses her two children, but the journalist, along with the photographer, wants to make it breaking news for the public. Her broken state of mind is evident as she is not sure "whether to scrape the potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic cover or tuck them further in" (21). However, the journalist, ignoring her trauma, just forces her to sit in the centre of the sofa for the photographer to take the picture. Her anguish is further aggravated when her daughter is pinching her hard at her back. It is not that the daughter is nervous in front of the camera, but her long and pointed pinch is to control the weakest person in the house who has lost all her willpower and strength to make independent decisions. On finding her mother weak, the daughter has taken a stronger position as she is pinching the mother so hard that it appears as if blood will come out of her back. The questions the journalist asked hurt her like arrows when she asked her to tell the public about her negligence, which made her bear such a heavy loss. No mother can be negligent in taking care of her children to the extent of taking their lives. She does not know how to answer the journalist's query, what to say in reply to such strange questions, or how to convince the world that she has never been negligent in her duties. It is, in fact, in fulfilment of her duties that she has lost her children. They probe her to tell more for the public as people are interested in knowing about how a mother lost her twins by locking them in a car. The people are least concerned about the tragic consequences of the death of the two children and how severe must be the feelings of the sorrowful mother, but they are only interested in how and why it happened. As she is forced to tell the causes and the background of the tragic incident, she takes the whole blame on herself, leaving the husband innocent, as he has no responsibility for taking care of the young ones. She says that when he came home, he

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had a headache because he must have been tired after a day's hard work so that she could not leave the infants in his care. In order not to disturb the husband, she decided to take along the twins to bring fresh meat from the shop because she had already cooked spam, which is canned meat, for the rest of the family; the husband would object to it and would like to have fresh sausages to be presented to him. The aggrieved mother is probed further that it does not take long to buy one item, so how is it possible that the babies suffocated in five minutes? She replied that she had to go to the dairy section also, and without looking at the price, she immediately bought two packets as she was in a hurry. The questions made her realize that she had been a careless woman. She knows that her husband comes home daily for supper, so she should have pre-planned the husband's meal rather than running to the store and thinking about the food after he came home.

She thinks about her lost babies, whom she can never view because she has no picture of them. She is so afraid of her husband that she thinks of cleaning potato chip crumbs from the seams of the plastic covers because her husband has told her that the car belongs to him, not to her. She has no right over it. Being his wife, she probably liked it more than him, but she could not claim any rights. The husband has strictly forbidden her to touch it, so she could not even imagine using it on her own will. She wishes to sleep in the back seat of the car, a place where the twins slept for the last time. They were the only ones in this world whose innocent company she enjoyed and who was not "a trial" (25) for her, like the rest of the family members and friends. She has already stolen the second set of car keys, as day by day, her survival in this house is becoming difficult. On this, she decides to run far away from them in search of peace of mind. She goes to her mother but "leaves her mother's house within a week once she overhears her mother telling Frank to drive up and get her" (Gillespie, 2007, 131). Heading towards California, she comes across a convent where she takes refuge. She finds it more peaceful than her own and her mother's home. So, with no restraint from their husband and expectations of society, Mavis grows into a confident person who can dare to fight with Gigi or anyone who hurts her. Her quarrels are frequent, and she abuses, punches and scratches the other women. Connie has allowed them complete freedom. Everyone lives in the Convent, the way in which she wants to live. No one asks questions or interferes in

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anyone's life. They stop fighting only when they are tired of hitting each other. Gigi knows two weak points about Mavis; one is that she cannot tolerate someone talking against Connie, and the other is if someone mentions her fugitive state. Mavis has become so bold that she fights with Gigi right on the road without caring who is looking at them. She is the same "battered wife who escapes from her husband and eventually develops strength and courage in the Convent, a house inhabited by equally troubled, eccentric women . . ." (Aubry, 2006, 52).

The principles prevailing in the Convent are the ones which help the troubled souls to normalize themselves as the people living there boost up each other's confidence and, at the same time, give space to the other person to think and relax without restraining the influence of people. As described by Billie, who does not live in Convent but spent some time there: "A little nuts, maybe, but loose, relaxed, kind of . . . you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They will take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it" (175-176). On the contrary, for some Rubyites, it is "a place where abortions, lesbianism, and other supposedly unspeakable horrors are committed, a place that is responsible for the tensions and disharmonies within Ruby" (Page, 2001, 638). They cook food together which they have grown in the place surrounding their house and enjoy "glass after glass of wine" (179) to soothe themselves. Krumholz considers that "[t]hroughout *Paradise* the men are associated with phallogocentrism, with fixed authority, unitary meaning, and individual acquisition and control, while women are associated with movement, multiple meanings, and shared labour and goods" (2002, 25).

Conclusion

Interpersonal relations play a significant role in Mavis' rehabilitation. The Convent is such a place that gives protection to girls of all races. The whole house is like a protected domain, having a feeling of "blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too" (177). Here, Toni Morrison explicitly describes the characteristics of a home where a woman feels protected and comfortable. It is not that state where a woman wishes to live alone, but she wants to live in the company of a male partner, where his presence may become a source of blessing for her. The reason why these women have to run away from their homes is because they get the feeling as if

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their near and dear ones are hunting them. The male members of families are victimizing their wives and close relatives. It is only the love and protection of the male members of the family who make life exciting for the vulnerable members of the family, who will never think of escaping or running far off from their homes to find protection in the abandoned palace where there is no electricity and which is devoid of any other facility of modern life. They have had such bad experiences back in their homes that they find the atmosphere "cool" (177) and comfortable as it allows them to think about their true selves to meet their "authentic sel[ves]" (177).

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