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Nők áldozatszerepben Toni Morrison prózájában: Az áldozati szerep elengedése a *Paradicsom* című regényben

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ALAPSZAKOS SZAKDOLGOZAT

*Nők áldozatszerepben Toni Morrison prózájában: Az
áldozati szerep elengedése a Paradicsom című regényben*

*Victimized Women in Toni Morrison's Fiction: Overcoming
the Victim Mentality in "Paradise "*

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Abstract

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* provides an accurate portrayal of black women's victimization in the post-Civil Rights era while also showing its protagonists' inner transformation and their ability to give the town of Ruby a second chance to recover from their traumas. This essay will explore how, as opposed to Ruby's isolationist and xenophobic reaction to past traumas, the Convent women undergo a healing process through which they confront their traumas and overcome the victim mentality which has, until then, defined them. The essay will argue that although the women are hunted down by the patriarchy who feel their power threatened, they do not turn into victims: they become agents of change whose inner transformation and ability to construct a new identity provides an example for the citizens of Ruby to redefine themselves and overcome the legacy of racism and trauma.

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1. Introduction

The earliest known literary work by an African-American was written by a woman, Lucy Terry; the first novel by an African-American published in the U.S. was by a woman, named Harriet E. Wilson; the first Nobel prize for literature for an African-American was awarded to a woman, Toni Morrison. Yet, African-American women writers have been struggling to find their voice and to become part of the literary canon and critical discourse because they had to defy exclusion and misrepresentation in a historically male-dominated environment.

Black women's contribution is essential in order to understand the whole reality of slavery and racism as well as the lasting imprint it left. They are also the ones who can "sing the black girl's song" (Shange) and give an accurate portrayal of black women's existence (and victimization) in the past and in the present. Toni Morrison, one of the greatest contemporary American and African-American writers fulfills this obligation: for her, novels are "inquiries" through which she tries to "look at something without blinking, to see what it was like, or it could have been like, and how that had something to do with the way we live now" (Jaffrey).

In all her novels, Morrison examines what it means to be black in the United States at different times in history and "how to survive *whole* in a world where we are all of us, in some measure, *victims of something*" (italics in the original, Bakerman 40). In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison said that "[m]y work requires me to think about how free I can be as an African-American woman writer in my genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world" (4). This is exactly what she writes about in her novels: she looks at blacks' experience, especially those of black women.

According to Nancy Peterson, Morrison "created a new form and language to communicate African American (women's) consciousness and experience" (467). Toni

Morrison wrote her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, in order to construct the type of book she wanted to read (Interview with Andrea Sachs): “The novelty, I thought, would be in having this story of female violation revealed from the vantage point of the victims or could-be victims of rape – the person no one inquired of (certainly not in 1965) – the girls themselves” (“Unspeakable Things Unspoken” 387). There is an abundance of victimized women in Toni Morrison’s work; however, due to its length, this essay will only focus on one of her novels, *Paradise*, how it not only depicts black women’s victimization and existence in a racist and sexist society but how it also shows their inner transformation and the way they become agents of change who can give the town of Ruby a second chance to get “through the pain of a historical experience that has been haunted by race to a healing zone” (Taylor-Guthrie x).

After introducing the novel, the essay will examine some general aspects and problems associated with black women’s victimization and literary representation. Then, it will introduce the traumatized Convent women and their confrontation with the patriarchs of Ruby. The healing process through which these women lose their victim mentality will be emphasized as well as how it is reflected in the two different narrations of the attack. Finally, the essay will present how, despite their murder, the Convent women do not become victims, but agents of change who can give Ruby a second chance.

1.1 *Paradise* – Introduction

In *Paradise*, Morrison tells the story of Ruby, an all-black town, (controlled by a group of conservative patriarchs who call themselves “the New Fathers”) (194), and a former convent seventeen miles of the town, inhabited by a group of women with troubled pasts. These women represent very different values and lifestyles than the citizens of Ruby and soon, they become the scapegoat for everything bad that happens in the town. Instead of examining what

is wrong in their homes and in the town, the men decide to attack the Convent and destroy the “female malice” (4) which lives there.

The town of Ruby (controlled by men) carries a deep cultural shame, transmitted from generation to generation, originating from slavery and the time when African-Americans were treated as “shamed objects of contempt” (Bouson 135). The residents carry the burden of racism and discrimination imposed on them by the dominant white society, as well as their ancestors’ trauma of being rejected by lighter-skinned blacks. They reacted to this double rejection by building an idealized all-black town founded on the principles of isolationism, xenophobia, and exceptionalism. Without admitting it, they remain victims of the system and the “racial ideologies,” which they “sought to escape, follow them within their hearts and minds” (Schur 277).

The women who arrive at the Convent come from different backgrounds but they are all victims of domestic and sexual abuse, abandonment, political violence, and betrayal. They are “refugees from life” (Aguilar 514): they have run away from their lives hoping to leave the traumas behind as well, but the shame and the pain comes with them. The men of Ruby have their (mask of) dignity, and a sense of exceptionalism covering the hurt and the shame, but these women have nothing: they have lost everything, they belong to no one and nowhere, and this is exactly why they can become agents of change.

Toni Morrison introduces the characters of Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie and makes them the agents who can show the way from pain and shame to safety, to an ‘inner paradise’ free from the direct and indirect impacts of racism and trauma. As opposed to the black men of Ruby, who made humiliation and shame the core of their identity and who try to cling onto their paradise (to the ideal town) by refusing to let change (in any form) come, the Convent women show that the future of Ruby (and the black community) lies in facing their traumas and letting go of their victim status.

2. Victimized women

According to Schur, Morrison shows in *Paradise* that “racial identity is always gendered and gender identity always raced” (277). The women who arrive at the Convent all have to bear the burden of gender oppression and sexism, as well as the consequence of traumas, most of them linked to women’s underprivileged status in society. Before analyzing the Convent women’s victimization and their healing process, I will introduce some general aspects and problems connected to black women’s victimization and to the portrayal of this victimization in literature.

2.1 Black women’s victimization

Examining violence against black women is problematic because though “racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices” (Crenshaw 1242). As Crenshaw argues, black women are either examined from a feminist point of view or from an antiracist one, despite the fact that their life experiences are defined by “intersecting patterns of racism and sexism” (1243). They face double marginalization - a racist and a sexist one - and they “occupy positions both physically and culturally marginalized within dominant society” (1250). They also have higher chances of victimization than white women (Madriz 349).

However, their victimization is often dismissed or not taken seriously because they do not fit the image of the ideal victims. The ideal victims are white women since they are closer to the “gendered, racist, and classist concept of ‘femininity’” (Madriz 350). The image of ideal and non-ideal women victims is connected to the social concept of the “good” and “bad” woman: the good woman is obedient, submissive, vulnerable, and cannot protect herself; therefore, she should stay at home. The bad woman does not follow these codes, does not behave appropriately, and has to fight to protect herself (350). Women of color belong to the

bad woman category and their virtue is not as “important” as white women’s - they are non-ideal or “worthless” victims (350).

It is important to mention in connection with black women’s situation that living in a patriarchal society, and representing the “less prestigious” gender, black women often have to face oppression by men in the form of domestic or sexual abuse. Sofia, a character in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* summarizes the oppression a black woman has to suffer from men: “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles. A girl child ain’t safe in a family of men” (38). Moreover, domestic abuse in a black family is often not taken as a “serious crime”, since it does not conform to stereotypical images of victims and criminals (they are committed in the “sacredness” of the home, by someone who knows the victim) and because its victims are considered worthless ones (Madriz 353).

Writing about black women and their victimization is also problematic because black women had long been misrepresented in literature due to the use of persistent stereotypes (born at the time of slavery). Black women were excluded from the concept of “true womanhood” because they were thought not to possess the necessary virtues, such as piety and purity and because of the societal belief that internal qualities (or lack thereof) were reflected on a woman’s physical appearance (Carby 25). Their portrayal in literature was racist and sexist: as mothers, they were no more than breeders, as women, they were associated with overt sexuality and they were considered a threat to the “conjugal sanctity” of the white master (27). As opposed to the image of the Southern Belle, black women were portrayed as “prostitutes” surrounding the white mistress (Chesnut qtd in Carby 31), or as guilty victims (who survived the repeated rape instead of choosing death like a true heroine would have done), or as black matriarchs (who also violated gender stereotypes because they

were not submissive, and tender). They were not considered “worthy” enough to be depicted as victims, only if it coincided with a victim-blaming attitude.

2.2 Victimized women in *Paradise*

In *Paradise*, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas (the four women who arrive at the Convent) and Connie, “the last legitimate resident” there (Sempruch 100), have different stories to tell and carry different past experiences but they are connected: they are all lost and traumatized. In their lives, “the everyday becomes an ongoing site of violence” (Hilfrich 328): they are victims of domestic- and sexual abuse, abandonment, and loneliness. In their lives, they are “suspended in stasis, women in hiding, attempting a condition-less existence” (Aguiar 514) by running away from violence and from the memories connected to it. Their victimization and eventual healing run parallel with Ruby’s slow disintegration and descent into conflict. They show an “alternative sense of community” (Romero 416) and an alternative way of living with one’s troubled past and traumas than the patriarchs of Ruby do.

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie represent a whole variety of traumas from domestic- and sexual abuse to abandonment, always carrying the traumatic memories and the shame with them. These traumas have important consequences in their life: Mavis has paranoia and no self-esteem, Pallas loses her voice and is haunted by nightmares, Seneca is cutting herself, Gigi is a drug user and a drifter, and Connie struggles with alcoholism and depression. In their case, trauma is not the consequence of a single event but “a constellation of life’s experiences” (Erikson qtd in Bouson 123). Their traumas define their personalities, their behavior, and their future. Therefore, it is worth to look at these life experiences and find what connects Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie to each other.

2.2.1 Absence of parental care and its consequences

Most importantly, none of the Convent women come from stable, loving families and a major part of their behavior and their life choices can be attributed to this fact. Due to this, they were not protected from danger and harm, they did not experience what a real home is like, and they did not receive the support and love which is necessary to construct a strong identity and to succeed in life. They come from dysfunctional or nonexistent families and they had received little or no parental care. Generally, family is the strongest social support network one has, but it is not the case for Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie: for them, (the absence of) family is a psychic wound which marks the beginning of their traumas.

Mavis is the only one who has some contact with her mother and she decides to seek refuge at her house when she escapes from her partner, Frank. However, Mavis' mother is physically and emotionally detached: she rejects to hear about Mavis' problems and fears, and she betrays her own daughter when despite her promise, she calls Frank, tells him to "get up here fast" (32) and hides the Cadillac's keys to keep Mavis from fleeing. She does not have the basic maternal instinct to protect her child.

Connie was found on the streets somewhere in Latin-America and brought to the United States by an American nun called Mary Magna and for thirty years, she "worked hard to become and remain [her] pride" (224). Connie calls her Mother, and it clearly has a second meaning for her (apart from the religious connotation): Mother was the one who saved her and raised her, and when she dies, Connie becomes "orphaned in a way she [never] was" (247). It is after Mother's death that Connie becomes an alcoholic and starts to suffer from depression.

The other women were all abandoned by their mothers: Gigi's mother is "unlocatable" (257), Pallas' artist mother left the family when Pallas was three years old, and Seneca's teenage mother (whom she thought to be her sister) left her when she was five. The fathers are

also missing: in the case of Mavis, Seneca, and Connie we do not know anything about them; Gigi has a father on death row; and Pallas has a lawyer father who gives her everything money can give, but nothing else.

All the women react to this parental absence negatively but it is Seneca who, as a result of abandonment, “develop[ed] a scapegoat identity” (Waites qtd in Bouson 128), thinking that only if she “did everything right without being told” (127) would Jean, her sister (in reality, her mother) come back. From the moment of her abandonment, Seneca always tries to please everyone – every foster parent, her imprisoned boyfriend, and the Convent women – otherwise “[t]hey might not like her. Might cry. Might *leave*.” (emphasis added, 131). She also “incorporate[s] self-punitive behavior into [...] her self-concept” (Waites qtd in Bouson 128) by regularly cutting herself, indicating that deep down, she blames herself for being abandoned (and for being abused at the foster homes).

The others react differently: Gigi overcompensates for lack of parental care and attention in her childhood by behaving in a provocative way, trying to receive attention at all times. She constantly tries to convince herself (and others) that she is not lost and that she has “folks [...] waiting on [her]” (67) to come home. Pallas escapes from her father’s indifference by eloping with her boyfriend (Carlos) and finding her mother she had not seen in thirteen years: however, her mother betrays her when she starts an affair with Carlos and the hurt of this double betrayal is what drives Pallas away from her mother’s house.

For all of these women, the absence of family, the most basic and vital social support network, influences their life deeply and explains their inability to develop roots instead of drifting. Without a family, they try to find men to fill the void (and to love and support them) but these relationships end up maiming them instead of making them feel “whole”.

2.3.2 Abusive relationships

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie are alone: they spend their days in “extreme isolation” (Rothenberg 775) and without a family or friends to support them, they desperately try to connect to others (mostly men) who would take their “seriousness seriously” (257). But the men they find, instead of loving and protecting them, either cheat on them, abandon them, or abuse them and further contribute to the women’s traumas. Also, most of the women become victims of rape at some point in their lives and/or experience physical abuse from men which further contributes to their victimization.

Mavis, the first one to arrive at the Convent, escapes from an abusive relationship which could be a textbook example: she raises kids with an aggressive, alcoholic partner called Frank, who makes her life a constant terror. In Mavis’ life, marital rape and physical abuse are “familiar fright[s]” (25) and Frank ensures Mavis’ helplessness by further isolating her from prospective friends (27) and by psychically shaming her. After her twin babies die, (“the only ones who enjoyed her company and weren’t a trial” 25), Mavis starts to feel that she is constantly exposed to danger (27) and that Frank and the kids set up a trap for her and want to kill her. This paranoia and mortal fear is what triggers her escape and consequent abandonment of her family.

Gigi arrives at the Convent after she was betrayed by her boyfriend: in order to forget the hurt and the humiliation, she starts an affair with K.D. (a resident of Ruby) which lasts for years and contributes greatly to the Convent’s reputation as a “brothel” without a “red light in the window” (114). Their affair ends badly, with K.D. physically abusing Gigi (later, he participates in the attack against the Convent women).

Seneca’s cutting is connected to the moment when she is first sexually abused by one of her foster brothers. Soon, she realizes that the problem is with her, that “there was something inside her that made boys snatch her and men flash her” (261). She is constantly

molested by men and when she tries to find “refuge with boyfriends” and tell them about the molestation she experiences by their friends, their “fury [is] directed at her” (261). Seneca tries to execute the orders of her latest (imprisoned) boyfriend, who knows “how hopeless” she is (131), when she is offered a “complicated and easy” job by the mysterious Mrs. Fox (136). Seneca becomes Mrs. Fox’s sex slave by choice, enduring “the pain that framed the pleasure” and the humiliation for weeks (137).

Pallas becomes a rape victim when some boys in a truck “force [her] off the road” as she is running away from her mother’s home. After this, she has to hide in a lake from her rapists. The “nightmare event” (179) leaves her traumatized and she loses the ability to speak, until she meets Connie. But even after her voice returns, “the words to say her shame clung like polyps in her throat” (179). Pallas becomes pregnant but it remains unclear whether the baby is from her ex-boyfriend (Carlos) or from the rape.

Connie, after being subject to sexual abuse at the age of nine, lives like a nun for thirty years, until she meets “the living man” (225). He is a married man from Ruby and Connie has an affair with him (later we find out that the man is Deacon Morgan, one of the leaders of the town and of the attack against the Convent). The affair ends abruptly and Connie only finds solace in Mother’s company but carries the pain of abandonment with her.

These relationships and encounters leave a lasting imprint on the Convent women’s identity and behavior. The most obvious is the lack of self-respect and confidence Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie have. They are “doubly defined as failures and outsiders” (Davis qtd in Aguiar 515) by the public because they do not fulfill the gender role they were assigned (Mavis is a bad mother who abandoned her family, Gigi is a temptress, Seneca is a drifter, Pallas is a runaway teenager, and Connie is an adulterer) and because they have no home: they belong nowhere and to nobody. They have internalized the judgments and the humiliation they have received in their lives and they have incorporated them into their self-

concept and self-representation. They live with a constant feeling of shame, and as “shame sufferers”, they “feel in some profound way inferior to others” (Bouson 130): they have a “sense that the self is ‘weak, dirty, and defective’” (Wurmser qtd in Bouson 131).

Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas are not agents of their lives but helpless objects, suffering and drifting. They are not able to move past the victim role they always had to take and the “learned helplessness” they had acquired during the years (Walker qtd in Rothenberg 776). Lenore Walker, a well-known advocate for battered women, argued that “society, through its definition of the woman’s role, has socialized her into believing she had no choice but to be such a victim” (qtd in Rothenberg 777). From this point of view, it is understandable that Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, and Pallas cannot let go of their victim status, even when they are not subject to immediate danger: apart from the traumatic past which holds them hostage, they simply do not know how to become agents of their lives. They continue to be haunted by their “traumatic and humiliated memor[ies]” (Bouson 124) and until they confront them, they cannot let them go.

The fact that they defy traditional gender roles and behave strangely, inevitably leads to a conflict with the town of Ruby: they show an alternative to the conservative and patriarchal values Ruby was founded on, and with that, they threaten the status quo and the legitimacy of the men’s power.

3. Ruby men

Many times in novels we only get to see the feelings and character of the victim, but not the aggressor. In *Paradise*, we get a detailed picture of the men who decide to attack the Convent: their character, their insecurities, their motives. Without understanding these men, we cannot

understand the attack and why Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie did or did not become victims.

Ruby is a conservative patriarchal town, led by the Morgan brothers, Steward and Deacon (Deek). Their ancestors led a group of ex-slaves from Louisiana to Oklahoma and established Haven, on the principles of isolationism, xenophobia, and exceptionalism. The Morgan brothers took these principles with them when Haven started to decline, and they moved further into Oklahoma to establish Ruby based on the ideal of Haven. The town is characterized by a rigid social order dominated by internalized racism (discriminating against those who violate the racial purity of Ruby) and an almost pathological fear and hostility towards the outside world and change. Not surprisingly, this mentality leads to conflicts with the younger generation who would like to open to the outside world instead of living in seclusion.

The Convent women are the perfect scapegoat for the patriarchs who cannot admit that times have changed because nothing is better than “other folks’ sins for distraction” (159). Instead of doing a thorough self-criticism, they cast the blame on a group of women who represent the opposite of what the patriarchs (and therefore Ruby) do: they live on their own according to their own rules, they “don’t need men and they don’t need God” (276), they dress strangely, behave unusually, and they do not obey anyone. In opposition to Ruby’s rigid hierarchy, patriarchy, Protestantism, and xenophobia, the women represent openness, spirituality, equality, and a non-institutionalized religion with emphasis on the body, soul, and the elements.

Also, these women desecrate Steward and Deek’s memory of the nineteen Negro ladies in pastel clothes they saw as children and who represent the ideal woman for them: delicate, elegant, graceful, and moral. However, now these ladies are “doomed to extinction” (276) by the Convent women, by “this new and obscene breed of female” (276). As Wood

notes, these women “represent a mockery of this memory” and that is the reason “they have to die” (177). For the Ruby men, these women are the witches who live outside of town (therefore, outside of civilization) and they “lure” the citizens of Ruby there to give them secret potions (Soane’s tonic) or to subject them to dark practices (eg. they are accused of performing an abortion on Arnette, Sweetie thinks they tried to poison her 275). In this sense, the attack on the Convent is nothing more than a modern witch hunt.

It is worth mentioning critical race theory in connection with *Paradise* and the Ruby men, as according to Carlacio, Toni Morrison could “be called a critical race theorist insofar as her work probes the social construction of race and the politics and practices of racism in American culture and literature” (xv). In *Paradise*, the Ruby men embody the concept of internalized racism and gendered thinking, while the Convent women represent an inclusive and tolerant community with members from different class, race, and ethnicity. Schur argues that racial purity is pivotal for Ruby men and cannot be tampered with because it would result in questioning the “meaning of gender and sexuality as well” (289). The Convent women represent danger for Ruby because they go against the strategies Ruby’s citizens use to counter past traumas: instead of internalizing the shame and the trauma, repeating it, and isolating themselves, they start to “decolonize” their minds (291), to share their pain, and to redefine themselves. The men attack the Convent because that is the place where all their fears “materialize” (295) and also because the women’s presence threatens the status quo.

By providing the reader a detailed portrayal of the nine men who attack the Convent, Morrison helps the reader understand the forces which work against these women. She also emphasizes the importance of the women’s healing, by contrasting them with the nine men and showing the reader where the men’s (non) coping methods lead: they are not able to talk about their traumas and to heal their emotional wounds, and, feeling helpless, they assault a group of defenseless women.

4. Healing

Morrison's *Paradise* moves past only portraying victimized women and shows the healing process through which these women redefine themselves, learn to accept their bodies, confront their traumas, and move on. The fragmented selves become whole after unspeakable things are spoken and shame and humiliation do not haunt the women anymore. They become strong and confident and in a way, feel untouchable by harm: this is the reason why at the end, they ignore the warning about the attack and do not escape.

The first step in their healing is the fact that they find refuge in the Convent. A place where they are safe, left alone or taken care of, in the company of Connie, "who listened" and "accepted each as she was" (262). Although there are conflicts and quarrels between the women (mainly between Mavis and Gigi) and they all come from different backgrounds, the love and trust for Connie connects them. Connie is the first one who compliments Mavis, who calls Gigi by her real name (Grace), and in whose magical presence Pallas finally finds the voice to tell what had happened to her.

Although they feel safe, they are not healed: deep down they remain "broken girls, frightened girls" who have "no plans to do anything" only "babygirl wishes" (222). The real change starts when Connie, after years of alcoholism, sleeps herself "into sobriety" (250) and has a vision where a man with eyes "green as new apples" (252) visits her: after this, she tells the women to leave if there is a place "that you should be in and somebody who loves you waiting there" but if not, stay and she will teach them what they "are hungry for" (262). The healing process which then starts has three components: the "template" (263), the "loud dreaming sessions" (Romero 417), and a new lifestyle which connects the body and the soul.

4.1 Parts of the Healing Process

By drawing “templates”, the silhouettes of their body, the Convent women are able to project their pain onto it and “reinscribe their histories” (Hilfrich 330). They color it and draw things on it that express their pain and suffering (like the cuts on Seneca’s body, or the baby in Pallas’ stomach) as well as the things lost or regretted (Gigi’s heart locket drawn onto her silhouette’s neck, 265). They are able to draw things which haunt them, even if they are not ready to talk about it (for instance, the woman with fangs drawn by Pallas, 265). By drawing the silhouette of their body, they are also able to see it differently, examine it from the outside as well as from the inside (when they lie on it) and become one with it. Seeing their body both from inside and outside helps them to accept the things which happened to it and to start to love it: Seneca, for example, is able to draw cutting marks on her template, instead of cutting herself in reality (265).

Apart from this, they hold loud dreaming sessions while they lie on their templates: each of them narrates stories and dreams and the others “step easily into the dreamer’s tale” (264). They “inhabit each other’s suffering” (Smith 93): they feel the heat in the Cadillac and Mavis’s reluctance to admit that her babies are dead; they are in the lake with Pallas, in the cold, black water while the rapists are searching for her; they gag from tear gas with Gigi during the Oakland riots and see a little boy getting shot; and like Seneca, they put away the five hundred dollars which they got for submitting themselves to sexual exploitation (265). Instead of denying their past traumas, they face the pain, suffering, and trauma by narrating and confronting it collectively (Romero 418). They might be too weak to do it alone, but together, they can “bridle [...] the monsters that slavered them” (303).

The third important element of their healing is how their lifestyle changes under Connie’s guidance. At the beginning, they are told to eat as she says, sleep when she says, and do what she says (262). As part of this new lifestyle, they eat bloodless food and drink only

water (265). They awaken at dawn and get ready for the day, making dough, collecting vegetables, lighting the stove (285). They shave their heads, indicating purity and a new beginning in soul and in body. Also, Connie tells them of Piedade, a woman “who sang but never said a word” and of a place “where white sidewalks meet the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children” (264). Some of them change their names in the process of redefining themselves: Gigi is called by her real name, Grace, and Pallas is called Divine. Most importantly, Connie tells them not to separate their body from their soul or “put one over the other” (263) and after a while, the women have to be reminded “of the moving bodies they wore, so seductive were the alive ones below” (265). She also emphasizes the importance of not separating women into categories of Bad Woman/Good Woman when she says “Eve is Mary’s mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve” (263) and thus confronts the traditional Christian separation of women (Romero 417).

These changes - facing their traumas and accepting their past with the healing power of a community, connecting their soul with their body (and accepting both), as well as finding spirituality - help them in the healing. The Convent “undergoes a spiritual metamorphosis” (Sempruch 103): they collect the fragmented pieces, they learn to accept their past, and to redefine themselves. They change so much that if a friend came over, she would be annoyed “being unable to say exactly what was absent [...] [t]hen she might realize what was missing: unlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266).

The final act in their healing (or rather, the first step in their new life) happens on a July night, when the “longed for rain” finally comes (283) and the women go out, dancing in the rain, “let[ting] it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces” (283). In this moment of spirituality and enchantment, each of the women finally let go of their traumas and the terrible memories they carry: Seneca leaves behind the abandonment she experienced, Gigi the memory of the shot little boy, Mavis the death of the twins, and Pallas the sexual

abuse she suffered. This magical scene of “holy women dancing in hot sweet rain”, the ultimate purification of the soul and the body, marks the beginning of the women’s new, no longer haunted life (283). And with perfect timing, the patriarchs of Ruby decide to raid the Convent that night.

5. The Attack

Paradise starts with the narration of the attack on the Convent (from the men’s point of view) and it is repeated at the end of the novel. On the one hand, it provides a frame to the novel; on the other, it has an important function within the story as the happenings in the two narrations are different. The Convent women, who have been victims of physical and sexual abuse and abandonment, become victims in the primary meaning of the word, when the men hunt them down and murder them. Although they are killed in both descriptions of the attack, in the first one they are helpless victims, but in the second they fight to protect themselves and the novel’s ending leaves open the question whether these women have been murdered or if they escaped death and left for a kind of ‘spiritual realm’.

5.1 The First Description of the Attack

In the first description of the attack, the men are not named and we do not know them yet. They are more frightening because they do not have an identity: they are not presented as nine individuals, but as a collective body, as *the men* hunting down *the women*. As a matter of fact, Morrison has been accused that she “mechanically pits men against women” in *Paradise* (Kakutani), but since the major part of the novel elaborates who these men and who these women are (and makes it clear that not all men were involved in this action, in fact, many are ashamed of it), it is useless to interpret *Paradise* as only a war of the sexes.

The first time the attack is told, it is narrated only from the men's point of view, and it is described as a military operation: they are prepared with "clean, handsome guns" (3) and the "nature of their mission" (4) is to "stampede or kill" (3) the women who live at the Convent. They even use military signals ("raising his left hand to halt the silhouettes behind him" 4) and language ("the target" 4). They are effective and ruthless: after blowing open the Convent door, they shoot a girl without hesitation and at the end, when they see the remaining women running away through the garden, they "take aim. For Ruby" (18).

The women in this attack are the "prey", hiding and fleeing from the men (from the hunters). They are vulnerable and passive, not trying to resist or protect themselves. Ironically, the women are hunted down by the leading patriarchs of a town where a "sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. [...] *Nothing* for ninety miles around *thought she was prey*" (emphasis added, 8). Evidently, this is only true for good, virtuous women, not for a group of "black Eves unredeemed by Mary" (18). After all, the men conduct the raid in order to "protect the 'ladies' from the 'whores'" (Hilfrich 325).

5.2 The Second Description of the Attack

The second time the attack is told, however, the events are different. First of all, the women know about the planned attack (they have been warned by Lone) but they ignore it because they have just let go of their traumas and if "there were any recollection of a recent warning or intimidations of harm, the irresistible rain washed them away" (283). Most importantly, the women in the second narration of the attack start to fight.

They fight valiantly despite the fact that the men are armed and they are not: they slam an ashtray "into Arnold's temple", they break Jeff's wrist and jaw with a cue stick, they swing

a skillet into Harper's skull, and they stab Menus in the shoulder with a butcher knife (286). The others, Wisdom, Sergeant, Steward, Deacon, and K.D. understand that "the women are not hiding. They are loose" (287). As Shoko observes, "these re-narrated women are the opposite of helpless 'victims'": they "adamantly refuse to be victims and they fight back (40).

This difference in the attacks is crucial because it is the only major interaction with the outside world in which the women's inner transformation is reflected in their behavior. The women who arrive at the Convent are lost: they all run from their lives and from the memories they want to bury. They would not try to fight nine armed men. But the "new" Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie feel strong and "impenetrable" (Morrison, "This Side"): they do not run anymore, and they protect themselves and their home. Shoko argues that "the narrative between the two scenes of the raid seems to describe the process in which each of them changes into an autonomous individual who can battle for her own life" (46). Indeed, while in the first narration of the attack the women become victims even before we get to know them, their transformation is able to alter the events when those are told for the second time: in a way, the women are able to change the past. Although the women's deaths seem to suggest that the men, (the hunters) "won", the bodies disappear, suggesting that they cannot be destructed or hurt anymore, not even by death.

6. After the Attack

The question arises how Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie can become agents of change when they are literally hunted down and they become victims in the primary meaning of the word. Although they are murdered in both versions, it shows Morrison's genius that despite this, we no longer think of these women as victims: they cannot become real victims because they let go of the victim mentality. The disappearance of their bodies supports this

too, that due to their inner transformation they can no longer be haunted or hunted down: instead they become “warriors for another form of communal life” (Hilfrich 340). Apart from this, they become agents of change in Ruby because they show an alternative way of living and dealing with one’s traumas; in the end, the attack and their disappearance changes the static order of Ruby.

The Convent women affect the citizens of Ruby as they show an alternative to isolationism and xenophobia: they take people in, “lost folks or folks who needed a rest,” (11) they are open and accepting, showing tolerance and selflessness. During the years, many Ruby citizens appear at the Convent when the town is too suffocating for them, showing their vulnerable side and becoming (in one way or another) indebted to the women. As opposed to Ruby’s rigid patriarchy and color-caste hierarchy (Bouson 125), at the Convent everyone is equal, regardless of their ethnicity, class, or background. Also, the women do not conform to anyone and that is liberating for many who come from Ruby’s rigid order; however, it is scandalous for those who created and who perpetuate that order. Billie Delia makes the decision to leave Ruby and its oppressive atmosphere after she stays at the Convent: the experience teaches her that there are other ways to live one’s life, not just what Ruby imposes on its citizens.

Apart from showing another way of living, the attack and the women’s subsequent disappearance gives Ruby a “chance to reconstruct their history before it is lost” (Shoko 45). Without bodies, there is no crime; however, guilt and punishment remains for the nine patriarchs, as well as an inevitable change in their status. They no longer hold Ruby in an iron grip and they cannot prevent change: roads will be built to end isolation and outsiders will come, diners and gas stations will appear. Four months after the attack, the town gathers for its first funeral. On the one hand, the funeral is a powerful sign of change: death enters a town in which no one ever died before. On the other hand, the funeral is “an iconic symbol of

redemption and hope” (Aguiar 518), a hope for Ruby to use this second chance to change things that need to be changed and to end the isolation which almost led to the town’s destruction.

As to what happens with Mavis, Gigi, Seneca, Pallas, and Connie: the ending (when they revisit their family members) and the epilogue seem to suggest that death is not the end, that “they will live/and they will not die again” (1) and they will start “the endless work they were created to do down here in Paradise” (318). The epilogue, for Wood, is “a vision not of loss but homecoming” (178). Indeed, Piedade’s song is about a homecoming none of the women has ever felt but the song carries the possibility of a second chance for them too, of being able to experience “reaching age in the company of the other; [...] speech shared and divided bread smoking from the fire; the unambivalent bliss of going home and to be at home – the ease of coming back to love begun” (318).

7. Conclusion

Toni Morrison stated that “[c]ertain kinds of trauma visited on peoples are so deep, so stupefyingly cruel, that [...] art alone can translate such trauma and turn sorrow into meaning” (Peterson 262). In *Paradise*, everyone is haunted by traumas and shame to the point that it defines their lives, permeating their past, their present, and their future. The men who founded Ruby believed that if they isolated themselves from the world, they could keep the traumas out; the women who arrive at the Convent thought that if they ran away from their lives, they could leave the traumas behind. In *Paradise*, both the men and the Convent women are victims; however, the women are victimized more because they have lost everything, while the men have built a town for themselves and they hide their victim status behind the mask of exceptionalism. The women have the ability to change the victim mentality because they have nothing to lose. Through them, Morrison shows that healing is possible only by confronting and accepting one’s traumas and finally, letting them go. The Convent women fight their demons collectively and they succeed in putting together the fragmented pieces and in redefining themselves. With their healing and with their alternative lifestyle they threaten the legitimacy of the patriarchs’ rule in Ruby and this conflict results in an attack. In spite of the fact that the women are murdered, they do not become real victims because they have already let go the victim mentality and it no longer defines them. They become agents of change because they show an alternative to Ruby’s oppressive patriarchal order and because the aftermath of the attack gives a chance for Ruby to start over. *Paradise* is an important novel not only because of its literary merits but because it provides an accurate portrayal of female victimization while also showing the women’s inner transformation and their ability to give the town of Ruby a second chance to recover from their traumas.

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