

# ***Paradise* (1997) by Toni Morrison : An Allegory of Reversal Racism**

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## **Abstract**

In the United States of America, racial discrimination and social inequalities have created a lot of frustrations within the society, especially the Blacks, whose quest for a free and equalitarian society sometimes turns into extremism. In *Paradise* (1997), Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison represents an episode of such extremist fight, through the portrayal of a black community that decides to create their own Negro towns with the hope of being free from Whites' oppressions. Ruby is the name and embodiment of this imagined community, where the awaited peaceful life finally becomes an illusion, because the earthly paradise to which it was initially destined is turned into a site of misery, intolerance and discrimination. In the context of this work, this new environment forbidden to whites and light-skinned people is a parody that we study with the aesthetic of allegory. We contend that Morrison uses this aesthetic instrument of representation to criticize the illusive demand of a significant part of freedom fighters, who have eventually surrendered to extremism.

**Key words:** ruby, reversal racism, isolation, sexism and marginalization, extremism

## **Résumé**

Aux États Unis d'Amérique, la discrimination raciale et les inégalités sociales ont créé beaucoup de frustrations dans la société, principalement au sein de la communauté noire, dont la lutte pour une société libre et égalitaire tourne souvent à l'extrémisme. Dans son roman intitulé *Paradise* (1997), le prix Nobel de littérature Toni Morrison présente un épisode de cette lutte extrémiste, en faisant le portrait d'une communauté imaginaire, dont les aspirations d'émancipation conduisent à créer des villes de noirs, dont Ruby est l'exemple emblématique. Créée pour tourner le dos à la discrimination et l'oppression, Ruby malgré le paradis auquel il était destiné est devenu à son tour un espace liberticide, interdit aux personnes de couleur blanche et aux métisses. Dans le contexte de ce travail, Ruby nous paraît comme une parodie que nous analysons sous l'angle de l'allégorie. Pour nous, Morrison fait recours à cet instrument esthétique pour critiquer cette frange importante des combattants de la liberté, dont le rêve démesuré d'émancipation a fini par céder à l'extrémisme.

**Mots-clés :** ruby, racisme inversé, isolement, sexisme et marginalisation, extrémisme.

## Introduction

« On entend par nouvelle société celle qui permettra aux inégalités de disparaître et aux vengeances de s'assouvir, soit qu'il n'y ait plus du tout d'opprimés, soit qu'ils prennent la place de leurs oppresseurs ». James Baldwin  
“[...] an unchanging paradise inevitably loses its paradisiacal nature” Linda Krumholz (2016: 21).

Over the 20<sup>th</sup> century, America has been the centre of outstanding militant demonstrations from several affiliate organizations of the Civil Rights Movement. These activisms aimed among many things to win key constitutional rights for Blacks, like the Civil Right of Act of 1964, which secured legal progress for formerly oppressed people. In spite of these legal protections, a significant category of American society remained attached to the old system of racial discrimination and continued to cause prejudices to Blacks.

The intellectual responses to these political and racial controversies have also been numerous, especially in literature where writers of diverse inspirations took them as subject of their works. The late Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison, for example, put the issue of race at the centre of her writings. Even she was interested in the questions of memory and African ancestral heritage, racial prejudice has always taken a significant place in her literary work, as it is described in her books like *The Bluest Eyes* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1988), to cite three of the most famous of these. In the present study, our attention is focussed on *Paradise* published in 1997.

Based on African-American experience, *Paradise* (1997) is the expression of a radical position against racial prejudice. Depicting the story of an all-black community, which is located distance away from white contamination in the Oklahoma region, this fiction conveys the vision of extremist activists in anti-discrimination organisations. Ruby is ironically the name of this all-black town, a symbol of dignity, freedom and independence of a self-ruled society which has assigned itself to keep its inhabitants away from white oppression and rejection. But in excluding non-black people under the pretext of questing for racial purity, and in banning cultural mixture, this new community also surrenders to the same social and racial injustice. In addition to racial issues, Morrison's book underlines the issue of gender and patriarchal inequalities, as one can notice in some of the past works.

In “Hegemony in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*” (2018), Ngantu Kome Judith Go examines the issue of domination, pointing out its race-blind aspect among the Ruby community. For the scholar of American studies, the desire to dominate is inherent to man, regardless of his or her

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racial origin. It is this desire that characterises the attitude of Deacon Morgan - one of the prominent figures of the fiction story - to his wife that he cherishes for being “beautiful as it was possible for a woman to be; [and for keeping] a good home [and doing] good works everywhere”. (T. Morrison, 1997, p.112) The woman’s quality, Kome writes, is evaluated at three levels: her beauty, her sexual and reproductive abilities and her servitude. (N. Kome, 2018, p.25)

Next to Kome’s analysis is a rather historiographic perspective developed by Rob Davidson (2001), who shows how the Ruby-centered narrative in *Paradise* focused on patriarchy and emphasized a rigidly-controlled communal historiography predicated on the subordination of the individual to the group. According to Davidson, indeed, the narrative of the African-American experience is told by men who deliberately exclude women experience at that period of their history. Nowhere in the novel, the scholar asserts, are women presented as the pioneers of Ruby independence; they are just followers while men are the strong leaders. (R. Davidson, 2001, p.356).

As the reader can see from what is presented above, the critical response to Morrison’s paradisiacal environment is largely oriented to its patriarchal aspect; it has not been assessed in the light of allegory or from the stand point of separatism that has haunted the struggle for equality in the African-American community for a long time. This is, to a large extent, what has motivated this study on the following topic: *Paradise* (1997) by Toni Morrison: An Allegory on the Reversal Racism. Through this topic, our objective is to show how racial and social injustice are capable of getting to the most debased achievement in human society. Contrary to what the title of Morrison’s fiction prefigures, the imaginary environment of Ruby turns out to be one of the most desperate places, cumulating at the same time racism, sexism and patriarchy.

The questions which logically come upon reading this story are the following: (1) How do we perceive the significance of the notions of “Paradise” and “Ruby”, terms used to carry so much value and promise in Morrison’s fiction? (2) Is the idea of all-black community viable in the context of multiracial society in the United States of America today? (3) How does T. Morrison really conceive of social cohabitation, through her fiction, in a time of recurrent racial tension in America? In trying to provide an answer to these questions, we will make a critical work, conducted under the prism of deconstruction and feminism, used as tools to dismantle the idea of separatism advocated by a significant section of black activists in American society.

## **I. PARADISE, THE PORTRAYAL OF AN ALLEGORY**

### **1. The Significance of a Concept in the World of Art Representation**

Allegory is a figure of speech which has been much developed in literature. It has been analysed by many scholars who provide a lot of works to make it more understandable. Each scholar produces a critical writing to explain his/her own perception of the term.

Etymologically, as presented in *The Cambridge Companion to Allegory*, allegory “derived from Allôs and Agoreuein signifying other speaking; other than what is said or what is not said” (2010, p.266). As it is indicated in the quotation, allegory is a literary device in which one idea or a word is used to denote another thing. It is made up of symbols which convey hidden meaning. In allegorical writing, words are not analysed on their literal meanings because they embody hidden items. An allegory destroys our normal understanding of words meaning and language. In his critical book *Allegory: The Theory of a Symbolic Mode*, Angus Fletcher offers a relevant definition of the concept as he shows how it works in literature. For him,

In the simplest term allegory says something and means another. It destroys the normal expectations we have about language that our words mean what they say. When we predicate quality x of person y, y is really what our predication says he is (or we assume so) but allegory would turn y into something other (allos) than what the open and direct statement tells the reader —Allegory is properly considered as a mode: it is a fundamental process of encoding our speech (A. Fletcher, 1964, pp.2-3).

As the critic shows, allegory permits to encode the meaning we want to convey in our speech without necessarily mentioning it. In allegorical writing what is written or said does not directly mean what we usually expect because the literary sense of words is not into play.

In addition, allegory is a kind of metaphor which implies many levels of meanings. This idea is well developed by Peter Crisp, who gives a pertinent explanation about this definition of allegory in relation to metaphor. He defines it as “a form of metaphor developed so continuously as to make its surface meaning, the meaning associated with its source domain, independent, autonomous and so obviously metaphorical.” (P. Crisp, 2001, p.7). As shown in the quotation, allegory does not refer to what it stands for, it is a metaphor which embodies hidden meanings.

Allegory has also a satirical function; as such it is used by many writers to denounce, to criticize or to make a comment on a social, political, religious or cultural system. This function of allegory is present in the postcolonial writing and has been a means by which postcolonial authors express their discontentment, anger and deception toward the colonial system. It is in

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this context that Stephen Slemon offers a critical analysis on the significance of the concept. In his article “Monuments of Empire: Allegory/Counter Discourse/Postcolonial Writing”, he contends that “Allegory becomes a site upon which postcolonial cultures seek to contest and subvert colonialist appropriation through the production of a literary and specifically anti-imperialist, figurative opposition or textual counter-discourse” (S. Slemon, 1987, p.11). In the spirit of postcolonial writing, thus, allegory is an instrument of denunciation and criticism of the abuses of colonization.

Similarly, in his analysis on allegory, MacQueen is concerned with the relationship between allegory and satire. For him, allegory and satire “are connected”. He argues that if we want to have a better understanding of an allegorical text we have to “consider it as a satire and vice versa” (MacQueen, 2018, p.56). From the above explanation, it is clearly shown that allegory and satire may be used interchangeably because they have the same meaning.

The concept of allegory has been of great interest in the circle of scholars to the point of becoming a writing style for many writers among whom we have George Orwell, first with his *Animal Farm* (1946) meant to criticize the corrupted system of communist Russian society, and second with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), written to prefigure post-industrial surveillance and ant-liberty society.

Other than the mere literal and aesthetic significance, allegory is loaded with heavy political significance. Thus Lynette Hunter (1989, p.136), a specialist of cultural studies, highlights its link with life in society in reference to Todorov who, she says, “connects allegory with fable because they are all involved with morality”. This function is highly developed in literature because allegory is generally used to educate people.

Whether it is used as a literary device or an instrument to communicate an idea, allegory is a recurrent tool of representation in literature. Now how the reader perceives it in Morrison’s *Paradise* (1997) is what is of interest to us in this work.

### **2. The Allegory of *Paradise*: A Microcosm of America’s Racial Problem**

In her critical assessment of Morrison’s *Paradise*, the teacher of Native American literature Channette Romero (2005, p.420) describes Ruby as a “microcosm of America” in reference to the system of exceptionalism and racial purity put into place<sup>1</sup>. It is important to

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<sup>1</sup> - The critical work of Channette Romero is entitled “Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*”. It was issued in *African America Review*, Vol 39, No3, pp.415-430.

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note that the notion of microcosm of America used in this work is meant to make a parallel between the structure of social/racial system that prevails in the imagined town of Ruby and the structure of American society marked by a systemic racial ruling. This notion of “microcosm” alone suffices to characterize Morrison’s fiction as an allegorical piece.

As microcosm of American society, Ruby was founded by the “New Fathers”, a name used to refer to the descendants of a group of Blacks, commonly known as “Founding Fathers”. “New Fathers” and “Founding Fathers”, as we can notice, are rooted in the early history of European migrants who colonized the New World. Like the American Founding Fathers, Morrison’s are composed of one hundred and fifty-eight (158) ex-slaves who first founded Haven, named for a territory “west of [some] unassigned lands, south of Logan County, across the Canadian River into Arapaho territory” (p.14). They created this town in the 1890s after wandering for space in vain in the time that followed the abolition proclamation. Undesired freedmen who were “turned away by rich choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs upon leaving the South, this group of early 158 ex-slaves, which in fact composed “intact nine families” (p.193) saw in Haven a place to achieve their dream of freedom and social progress. Later though, this ambition of a fair society becomes corrupted by persisting racial exclusion and lack of opportunity for underprivileged Blacks. This situation leads the descendants of the early settlers to move out to Oklahoma in order to establish a new Haven, which is eventually baptized Ruby after the name of the deceased sister of the Morgan twins, leaders of the group.

Now contrary to its habitual perception as heavenly place, free of injustice and inequality, where people live in harmony and everything is perfect, Morrison’s book presents the paradise of Ruby as an illusion because it is totally different from what people experience. Created and ruled on the basis of strictly black criteria, Ruby ultimately becomes an illusion and a disappointment because inside of it, people were rather victims of segregation, racism and sexism. It is in the whole an obstacle to the realization of that heaven.

Retrospectively, Morrison’s paradisiacal city of Ruby is perceived as the projection or rather the rejection of the vision developed by a significant category of disenchanting anti-racist African-American activists, who ended in extremism in the black revolutionary period of 1960s. Unsatisfied by the persisting racism in the American society, these black activists advocated the emergence of a separate nation, as reflected in the idea of the Nation of Islam, which is proposed by Muslim affiliates as alternative of the intolerant ruling of the Christian mainstream. We will sure come back on this subject; for the moment, it is important to note that the main

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topic in *Paradise* (1997) reads as the expression of a “deferred dream”, to speak like African American essayist Shelby Steele, who uses this notion to criticise the politics of Affirmative Action implemented in the 1970s and 1980s to bring corrective actions to racial prejudice experienced by people of African descent in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>.

In the whole, the link between the city of Ruby and the U.S. society is indicated by the radical colour politics which takes the form of an all-black code that keeps people of different skin colour off from the community.

In addition to its strictly aesthetic character, the allegory of Morrison’s *Paradise* and the description of the trajectory of the early settlers of Ruby and Haven, the first town that preceded it are evocative of the historical migration that took place in the immediate moment that followed the proclamation of Abolition in 1863. Together with the reference to the migration, *Paradise* can be read as a compilation of the aspects of American history, whose key items are the subject of the following sections of this work.

## **II. THE PARADISE OF DISILLUSION: DECONSTRUCTING WHITE DOMINANT RACIAL ORDER**

### **1. All-Black, Eight-Rock Blood Line: A Rhetoric of Reversal Racial Politics**

It all takes place in Ruby, a town the reader discovers in tragedy, as it is the site of an assault, at least a section of it—the Convent as it is called. As one might guess from its name, Ruby denotes a paradisiacal place since it has been created for the best of its inhabitants, after what they negatively experienced in Haven, their former living place. Created to replace the growing racism and corruption of this early place after slavery abolition, Ruby is in turn ruled on the basis of a radical politics of ethnic survival, lied on a rhetoric of colorline. This is a paradox that shapes the allegory, that’s to say the contrary of what a ruby really represents. The rhetoric of racial ostracism is grounded, as it were, on a distinctive code described by Patricia,

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<sup>2</sup>. The notion of “Dream Deferred” was first a segment of one of L. Hughes’ poems and then the title of the well-acclaimed essay by Shelby Steele entitled: *A Dream Deferred: The second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1998. This collection of essays covers outstanding papers like “The New Sovereignty”, “Wrestling with Stigma”, and culminates with a relentless criticism of the politics of racial justice informally known as “Affirmative Action”. In essence the Affirmative Action is meant to bring corrective public action to the system of racial inequality which has kept the black community under privileged for a long time. For Steele, this politics of racial justice was a betrayal because it wasn’t really implemented to help the racially underprivileged. It rather encouraged laziness and unaccountability in the Black, while giving the impression of cleaning away white guilt for the historic ill-treatment of the Black. For further details, see Shelby Steele, 1998, *A Dream Deferred: The Second Betrayal of Black Freedom in America*, New York: Harper Perennial.

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one of the protagonists of the book from whose point of view the story is told. “Pat” as this female narrator is presented to the reader, Patricia is the grand-daughter of one of the early Founding Fathers. In the narrative, she presents the racial code as follows: “... each and every one of the intact nine families had the little mark she had chosen to put after their names: 8-R. An abbreviation of eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines” (p.193).

The characteristics of this notion of “eight-rock”, which in fact stands for the distinctive mark of blackness is “Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren’t 8-rock like them” (p.193). Used as a genetic principle, this eight-rock bloodline code serves to determine one crucial aspect of social categorization in the town of Ruby: the social categorization of race. According to this racial code, it is only Black which counts. Not only has this criterion served as basis for categorizing and determining the sense of belonging of the early inhabitants of Ruby, but it has also and more importantly made cohabitation impossible. As Dana Williams writes “Ruby depends upon isolation and insulation in order to maintain their black utopia, and it is its obsession with exclusion and purity that offers no liberation from colorism”. (D. Williams, 2007, p.185)

Because dark skin color is sacred, the founders of Ruby are intent to do everything to preserve it, even if this implies doing intra-blood marriage. This obsession of colorism is exactly what has dwindled the early fifteen original families of Ruby to nine, and then to seven. Some of the key members of the early fathers having merged their lines into other colors, they have to get to the margin of the society. In the book, the family of Roger Best, one of the descendants of the Cato family—Cato is one of the Founding Fathers of Haven—goes through this bad experience of ostracism. Patricia Best, Cato’s daughter and Billie Delia, his grand-daughter suffer because they bear a lighter skin tone than the other members of the Founding Father. In a letter, Patricia explains why people hate them:

Daddy, they don’t hate us because Mama was your first customer. They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passed the skin on to my daughter, as you and everybody knew I would. (T. Morrison, 1997, p.196)

If the relation of Ruby people to race had no damaging effect on their image, the rigor of their principles would probably not have been considered as a bad thing; at least as far as their attachment to moral rules is concerned. Indeed, they are intolerant to those who infringe rules, and they must do everything to safeguard the moral—and racial—survival of their community. This obliges the community to organize a marriage of K D to Arnette in order to

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expiate his fault for having sexual relations with a 15-year-old girl, and obviously to consolidate the racial tie and give chance to the eight-rock rule. It is the same sense of rigor and respect to moral principles which also makes the people in Ruby frown at the women's untidy dressing style during the wedding ceremony. Here too, the town women are not ready to tolerate the careless and provocative dresses of the women in the Convent during the wedding celebration of these two descendants of the Founding Fathers. They criticize and insult the careless women whose bold dressing is shocking to their moral values. As narrated in *Paradise* "none of them was dressed for a wedding. They piled out of the car looking like go-go girls: Pink shorts, skimpy tops, see-through skirts, painted eyes, no lipstick, obviously no underwear, no stockings" (T. Morrison, 1997, p.156). If the people who expressed this attitude of disapproval were not in great majority women, their criticism would be qualified as motivated by gender considerations. But women also joined in the hostility towards their counter parts from the Convent; this, to a large extent, shows that their rejection of the dressing style is more motivated by an attachment to moral principles than by gender requirements.

Whether it is a question of moral, racial or gender ethic, what is important is that the attitude of Ruby people epitomizes a more serious controversy in American society, in connection with the struggle for racial equality. Indeed, in the same way as the creation of the town is the consequence of community exclusion in the former city of Haven, Ruby is also ironically the place where more severe discrimination occurs. The eight-rock ruling is nothing but the manifestation of a strict racial ethos, which consists in banning people who do not comply with the black skin criteria from the community of the descendants of early 158 freedmen wanderers. Although they have vowed to create the most peaceful place in the world, Ruby remains the furnace of racial exclusion. In doing so, this all-black town becomes the representation of the typical black land that some African-American activists had claimed for their community. it was a claim that leaders like Malcolm X, or Elijah Mohamad from the Nation of Islam movement, or even Marcus Garvey before them had held for the black community with the unending racial exclusion in American society.

When we consider the sentiment of hatred the people of Ruby have towards white and light-skin color people as it resonates in the principle of eight-rock bloodline, we cannot but think of a politics of reversal racism. What is at stake in this fight against racism is not simply the end of injustice, but also the creation of a whole land for the Black to be free and evolve in a self-governed community. One relevant reference to this separatist ideology is the back-to-

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Africa campaign of the 1920s led by Marcus Garvey. As its name indicates, this ideology advocated a return to Africa for black people in order to organize their autonomous land and community, guided by their common experiences of racism in the U.S.

Reacting to this ideology in their literary and political careers, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Percival Everett often published critical items. In his literary work, Percival Everett, for example, points out the absurdity of a return-to-Africa campaign. In *Suder*, his novel published in (1999), the eponymous protagonist endorses the myth of the flying African and says what follows, as he falls down after an unsuccessful attempt to fly back to his homeland:

I free-fall for about fifty feet with my wings doing everything except what I want them to do and I pee because I'm so scared and all of a sudden I'm gliding....My wings are full of the wind now and I'm a little dizzy because I'm flying in tight circles. I'm catching glimpses of figures in the woods far below. Then all hell breaks loose. I'm in a poor dive, heading straight down, and let me tell you, there's plenty of down to head into. The lake is still, like a mirror beneath me, and I can see my speck of a reflection. I think about that osprey pulling out of a dive and I pull up on the front of the wings and hold them as stiff as I can. And this ain't easy because the wind is stretching my face around my head. ...I realize now that there's a lot I don't know about air currents. Well, I'm starting to get the hang of it, but every now and then I find myself upside down or flying backwards. Now I'm making big circles and I'm pretty much in charge and I'm slowly going down... (P. Everett, 1999, p.171)<sup>3</sup>.

Even if the reference to Africa is not clearly mentioned in the statement, Everett's protagonist is drawn in the myth of flying Africans, which stipulates that some Africans deported into slavery in America flew back to freedom in their homelands. Here, this myth which is used to communicate the separatist ideology is the object of criticism, at least the vision of autonomous and racial intolerance it entails.

## **2. Racial Hierarchization and Female Consciousness**

Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) is drawn in tension, the extreme signs of which open the plot of the book as a war scene where nine men, representatives of the patriarch of the failed town of Haven assault the women in the neighbouring Convent. The first source of the tension is racial, as we saw in the above survey, with the ideology of eight-rock bloodline used as

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<sup>3</sup> Everett's novel was initially published in 1983. The 1999 version was edited by the Louisiana Univ. Press. For further details, see Percival Everett, *Suder* (1983), Baton Rouge: The Louisiana Univ. Press, 1999

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criteria for eligibility among the people of Ruby. In this section, we are concerned with the gender and sexual aspects of this tension.

It is important to mention that gender and sexuality evolve within a philosophical paradigm marked by a rigid binary relation. Gender, as it is generally assumed in the society, is related to a person's belonging to the category of man or woman; and as for sexuality, it has to do with one's being male and female. This binary identification is overtly rejected by feminist scholar Judith Butler who provides the following formula: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" (J. Butler, 1990, p.34) By this statement, Butler considers that the traditional feminist classification of gender is built on a static format, socially admitted but not necessarily pertinent to human life. Termed as "heterosexual matrix", this social classification entails that "sexes, genders and desires are maintained and naturalized under a binary heterosexual logic" (McCann and Monaghan, 122)<sup>4</sup>. This assumption generally causes tensions, since it reinforces the inequalities between men and women on the one hand, and between homosexuals and heterosexuals on the other hand, because in these hierarchies, men and heterosexuals are the privileged.

In the context of this work, we will use these two notions of gender and sexuality interchangeably; because what is at stake is mainly the patriarchal perception of domination, mostly of man over woman. Precisely in Morrison's *Paradise* (1997), this relation of domination is pervasive within the people of Ruby, and particularly within the relation between Ruby townsmen and what we can refer to as "female sisterhood" seventeen miles away. At the heart of this sisterhood is the Convent, which used to be an embezzler's mansion turned before it was turned into a nun school, where "Arapaho girls once sat and learned to forget" (T. Morrison, 1997, p.3) Now, this former nun school is a house for (single) women with troubled past.

It is important to say a few words about the above idea of "Arapaho girls [learning] to forget", which is significant in the American historical context of domination over local indigenous and foreign cultures. Arapaho, here, refers to Indian Americans, who were according to this statement, the object of cultural up-rootedness. "Arapaho girls once learned to forget" simply means that they were drawn in a process of acculturation. The Convent, thus,

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<sup>4</sup> Judith Butler's notion of "heterosexual matrix" is developed in her book *Gender Trouble* (1990). But for the purpose of this work, we have borrowed a second-hand analysis from Hannah McCann and Whitney Monaghan (2020) who expose similar views in their *Queer Theory Now: From Foundations to Futures*. London: Red Globe Press.

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served as a mule for brainwashing, where the model of American cultural personality was shaped into Native Americans.

It is this sisterhood which becomes the object of attention, especially from the people of Ruby, men and women alike. Usually opposed to one another for cultural difference, these people are overtly at odds with the women of the Convent. One main cause of this hostile relationship is the nature of the Convent itself.

Known with the reputation of a mansion for an “embezzler”, which contrasts with the image of nuns using it as a school to alienate Indians from their culture, it has grown to be a cosmopolitan cluster of women from diverse origins. A significant part of these is presented as having a light skin complexion, or having been involved in one way or another in the trajectory of white people. This fact, in addition to other supposedly reprehensible elements, nourishes a sentiment of hatred from the men and women of Ruby, especially the men who are deadly set against their growing autonomy, as Steward reproaches saying that these women live quietly without “nobody bothering or insulting them” (T. Morrison, 1997, p.8). This statement illustrates a misogynous sentiment of Ruby male figures at the head of whom is precisely Steward Morgan and Deacon Morgan, his twin brother. Coupling misogyny with the eight-rock politics, these Ruby townsmen who believe they have “God on their side” (p.18) are intent to preserve their town from racial impurity. This is among different reasons what brings them to destroy the threat the Convent represents.

As Patricia attests in the closing chapter of the novel, the townsmen decided to murder the Convent women for many reasons. They killed them: “(a) because the women were impure (not 8-rock); (b) because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and (c) because they could—which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the deal required” (297). This statement, echoes one sentence by Steward, one of the leading Fathers of Ruby. Unable to stand the too much freedom of the women of the Convent, Steward Morgan complains because for him, they live quietly without “nobody bothering or insulting them” (T. Morrison, 1997, p.8).

As we can read from the above sentences, the sentiment of grandeur and power sometimes leads to the folly of human beings, as the system of racial ostracism in America illustrates. Here, the killing organized by Ruby townsmen on the women of the Convent can be read not only as the expression of America’s rejection of racial diversity, but also and more importantly its difficulty to get rid of historical gender and sexist heritages. The fact that the

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people involved in the racist and sexist killing are black is the sign that the century-long politics of racial and patriarchal exclusion has had durable effects in America, to the point that the victim has developed a radical sense of revenge. This revenge takes the form of a reversed racial situation in which the former victimizer experiences the life of the former victim. Such is, at least, the impression the reader draws from reading Morrison's *Paradise* (1997). The question is, though, to know whether this option is pertinent enough, and seriously relevant to the vision the writer and 1993 Nobel prize winner has had of the American society that she allegorically portrays as a paradise in this fiction.

### **Conclusion**

Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) is the first she published since she won the Nobel Prize in 1993. A fiction that she presents as the third of a trilogy which started with *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* is one of the books which confirm Morrison's artistry, by representing the history of America both in its tradition of grandeur, but also in its horrors. For us, *Paradise* (1997) is simply an allegory, not less than the other books by Morrison, yet one that foreshadows a radicalism which is incoherent to her writing tradition, rooted in celebrating the memory of slavery and the folk heritage of people of African descent.

From the point of view of history, this radicalism that Ruby embodies is Morrison's effort to revisit an important segment of slavery which progressive forces were determined to fight over the long struggle for racial equality in the United States of America. Obviously, the odyssey of the one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen wanderers who were "unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith" (T. Morrison, 1997, p.13) illustrates the trajectory of newly freed slaves upon the proclamation of Abolition in 1863.

Like the freedmen who engaged on the way of migration North and West in mass, searching for a better life, the one hundred and fifty-eight ex-slaves were, in fact, in the process of the great migration. And if the happiness for which they were thrown on the routes of the promised land was unattainable, because of the persisting racism, the radical turn became an option, at least for a significant number of these freedom fighters. Living in the town of Ruby and represented by the descendants of the Founding Fathers with a radical racial politics of exclusion, the story of this community is what is examined in this work as allegory of reversal racism.

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