



TRAUMA IN INTIMATE RELATIONS: WORDLESS ANGUISH IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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Abstract

People have raised voice against the sufferings to seek justice for the wrongs done to them. Trauma Studies have emerged as a primary response to traumatic events. Freud is the one who introduced the idea that trauma is a dialectical process, the original event is neither incorporated completely by the consciousness nor by the memory that later generates that experience. In light of Judith Herman's trauma studies, this study focuses on domestic violence in Toni Morrison's Paradise. Contemporary African-American fiction has appealed to black man's failure to live up to his claims of greatness in comparison to white man from whom he has met out degradation at societal level. These critiques center on hypocrisy of the black man who fights against collective racial exclusions but his treatment of woman at home is rather imbalanced which results in emotional trauma of the woman. Morrison has interlocked racial and gender coercion with economic oppression being borne by silent characters of the society. Using Morrison's artistic piece as a methodological framework, I investigate how domestic violence is subtly registered in Paradise through the character of Mavis who becomes rhetoric to advance the cause of social justice resisting oppression. The findings of the study foreground that silent trauma borne by women may have severe repercussions.

Keywords: Anguish; Domestic; Mother; Trauma; Violence;

Introduction

Toni Morrison, a contemporary scholar, novelist, editor, and representative of African American community is one of the most influential writers of American literature. Unlike many writers, she draws upon subjective experiences, as she says in an interview to Bakerman, "I will use what I have seen and what I have known, but it's never about my life" (1994). She draws upon images to capture the intricacies of human life. These images not only initiate an entire episode but also explore the nature of love;

[W]hile images enliven and ground her writing, questions fundamentally drive her prose; she writes in order to understand certain dynamics or the nature of specific relationships—how does a child come to hate herself? What will a mother do to protect her child? How does a man achieve self-understanding? What is required to make paradise a livable reality? For Morrison, storytelling and the process of writing are ways to explore the central challenges of human existence—how individuals both flourish and hurt one another, how oppression operates, how communities sustain generations. (Li, 2010)

Literature Review: Trauma in Domestic Sphere

Judith Herman in her seminal text, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*, explicitly discusses that a woman is repeatedly abused in two cases: one as a prisoner and the other when she is under a complete control of the perpetrator. She says that such conditions do not exist only in

concentration camps or institutions where organized sexual exploitation is promoted but in families too. A man feels that he is the owner of the house and can run it in whatever way he likes. She states,

In domestic captivity, physical barriers to escape are rare. In most homes even the most oppressive, there are no bars on the windows, no barbed wire fences. Women and children are not ordinarily chained, though even this occurs more often than one might think. The barriers of escape generally are invisible. They are nonetheless extremely powerful. (1997)

Little is known about the psychology of perpetrators because they never consult a psychologist thinking that nothing is wrong with them. They believe that it is the behavior of the woman which compels them to adopt coercive attitude. Besides this, they never volunteer themselves to study. Outwardly they are so normal that they do not fit in the definitions of psychopathology. Apparently following the social norms, they leave no proof of their tyrannical behavior for legal authorities also. For the justification of their behavior they enslave the victim by exercising autocratic control in every aspect of the life of victim. They also demand love and respect from her to make her accept the truthfulness of the situation. On the other hand, the psychology of the victim is designed by actions and views of the perpetrator. Broadening the horizon of the discussion, Herman says that “the desire for total control over another person is the common denominator of all forms of tyranny Perpetrators of domestic battery demand that their victims prove complete obedience and loyalty by sacrificing all other relationships” (1997).

Victim is kept in a state of constant fear. Most of the times the threat of death is enough to control the situation rather than resorting to physical harm. Perpetrator dictates his instructions by just threatening the battered woman that he will harm her close relations like parents or children. So the physical domination is linked to psychological domination. Herman further adds that in addition to fear “the perpetrator seeks to destroy the victim’s sense of autonomy” (1997). This is achieved by keeping a strong hold on victim’s bodily functions which results in physical debilitation. To achieve complete domination, she is not allowed to have contacts with friends or relatives. She is not allowed to have any sort of communication with her close relations as she is brainwashed that “their closest allies have forgotten or betrayed them” (1997). In many case-studies, it is seen that “the record of domestic violence is filled with accounts of jealous surveillance, such as stalking, eavesdropping, and intercepting letters or telephone calls which results in solitary confinement of the battered woman within her home” (1997).

As the victim is isolated she becomes increasingly dependent on the perpetrator which is called *traumatic bonding*, the woman starts thinking that the captor is her savior and rescuers are to be hated and afraid of. The prolonged captivity leads to self-hatred in which a person surrenders herself by complete submission to the perpetrator. She stops taking care of her basic necessities of life like food or keeping herself warm in cold which leads to low immune system and bad health. Such women start thinking about suicidal thoughts and it is seen that “long after their liberation, people who have been subjected to



coercive control bear the psychological scars of captivity” (1997). Research proves that more than forty percent of battered women attempt suicide and many continue to hate themselves even after the release from the captivity.

Significance of the Study

My work is significant because researchers have provided valuable insights into the issue of segregation due to racism still being faced by African-Americans in the white community and racial pride as significant themes of *Paradise*. In contrast, my point of departure is that I will address the suffering of a married woman who is abused by her husband and tortured by her children. Consequently, she loses her twin babies by locking them in car out of absolute nervousness. She is so shocked that she loses her agency. The readers of the article would be interested to find if the recovery takes place in this character or not, and if it does take place than how it takes place.

Critical Analysis

Ruby is established by descendants of former slaves who wanted to institute a paradisaal community, free of racial and economic oppression which they experienced during the period of slavery. By discouraging any foreign encroachment, the citizens of Ruby guarded against further oppression by establishing inflexible and isolationist code of behavior. Seventeen miles away from Ruby, a group of women established their own paradise, the Convent, which in contrast to Ruby is very flexible and encourages its inhabitants to live freely and independently.

Mavis in one of the five women who have taken refuge in the Convent as their house-mates fail to provide security to them, an essential requirement of human existence. The trauma of Mavis is unspeakable as she feels that it will not be understandable to others because she is traumatized by her husband who has weakened her to such an extent that she cannot even handle her eleven year old daughter, Sally, who threatens her with the help of her father’s used razor. Mavis has become too weak because she has been constantly abused by the husband on small household chores. It is out of her nervousness that she loses her twin children. She knows that her husband will expect the right type of food and will severely criticize her on not procuring and cooking the food according to his expectations, so she hastens to a superstore to buy grocery for the supper. She has to carry the twins with her, whom she locks in rear seat of the car. She could not imagine that the heat of the car will suffocate them and this suffocation might lead to their death. The whole society is considering her responsible for the death of her children. The media has erupted in her house making her life all the more difficult. Instead of soothing her, their questions are aggravating her tension making her realize that she is the one who is solely responsible for the death of her babies. This makes her think about herself and her death-like existence which she is leading in this house. She is living such a stressful life in her own house that her mind has stopped taking right decisions at right time, that is why she has failed to take care of her infants. It is not that she is a dull-headed person but constant nagging and abusive behavior of the husband has made her a nervous-wreck.

It appears as if Sally has established a complete control over the weak mother. While Mavis has been interacting with the journalist, Sally has been squeezing off her mother's waist. As the journalist leaves their place, she stomps a beetle on mother's foot. Without saying anything to her daughter, she gets up to see her back in the bathroom mirror of how much her daughter has damaged her. Though the other children are screaming and jumping but she could not divert her attention from *intrusive thoughts* related to Merle and Pearl. She lost her babies in the same "Mint green. Lettuce green. Cool" (Morrison, 1997) Cadillac which has been viewed and envied by the neighborhood for months. The photographer has taken its pictures from many angles to show to the public that such a beautiful and flashy car has suffocated the two babies lying inside it.

She is living in a constant state of threat because of the attitude of the husband. On finding her behaving strangely, he asks as if she is alright to which she replies as usual that she is. Mavis wakes up with a "start of terror, which dissolved quickly into familiar fright" (Morrison, 1997). This comment of Morrison reveals the frightening environment of Mavis' home in which she is trying to survive. Frank is blank in his expressions; he is not saying a word to console the lost mother. When she has been confronting the journalist, he has had a perfect meat-loaf with a couple of eggs. His indifference towards the loss of twin children is heart-breaking for Mavis. For so many years she has been living with this cold and indifferent man but his reaction on the death of his children is like a climax in the marital life of Mavis who takes decision of leaving him and his children forever. Frank has been in a very comfortable and playful mood while the children are becoming bolder on the encouragement of their father. Sally, who has been pinching her mother's back, is now playing with her father's old shaving razor. She is asking questions to her father which refer to the sharp images of piercing and cutting. The father, with children, is enjoying their jokes and cutting remarks. All except Mavis are laughing at sharp remarks of Sally, which are aggravating the unspoken anguish of Mavis, who is silently bearing the trauma.

The trauma is extremely painful because she is being traumatized by her husband for whom she has sacrificed her day and night to make his life comfortable and from her own children to whom she has given birth and nurtured. She feels as if no one around has "human interest" (Morrison, 1997). She has just been through the most tragic episode of her life—the loss of twins. She is going through such a terrible state of mind but the husband is least concerned about her mental state. After the dinner Mavis goes to bed to sleep but she is worried about the husband. She is relieved to find that tonight he will spare her, she feels "relaxed, permitted herself a sigh" (Morrison, 1997) but to her surprise he ruthlessly "pulled her nightgown up, he threw it over her face, and she let that mercy be. She had misjudged. Again" (Morrison, 1997). This marital rape is unbearable for the wife anymore. Her tension is multiplying on the thought that their children must be around watching or hearing all this happening. This must have casted a very bad impact on their growing minds. She has been in her deep sleep before the husband came to her. She has been dreaming of doing something very important which she is trying to recall, but everything slipped out of her mind. She is becoming a nervous wreck because she feels so

“overwhelmed by an abusive husband Her husband rapes her on a regular basis” (Winchester, 2002). She finally decides to stop thinking about anything anymore. It appears as if he is completely ignoring her feelings and even “while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face” (Morrison, 1997), he talks to his children saying that they all are trying *to fix it*. They are treating her as a non-living being that is why he is using the pronoun *it* for her. Then he uses the pronoun *we* which suggests that he has joined his hands with his children to fix her. She is not only suffering from “violent sexual abuse by her husband” (Widdowson, 2001) but all the family members are deliberately mistreating her. They are trying to fix her as if she is not a human being but a machine who works endlessly for them but recently after losing her babies her performance is not hundred percent.

She has become so scared of the man sleeping beside her that she is afraid that he might not smother or strangle her. This is very traumatic to feel scared of a very closely attached person. She waits for Frank to go to sleep and remains alert for the rest of the night by not closing her eyes for a second. As soon as she finds him in deep sleep, she slips out of her bed. She is afraid of meeting her eleven year old daughter, Sally, who might hold her legs. Though she is just eleven years old but she visualizes her as if she has “teeth too big for her snarling mouth” (Morrison, 1997). The word *snarling* is usually associated with wild animals like wolves and bull-dogs. This tells how much she is terrified of her family members.

She finally decides to escape from her own house as she cannot survive amid such relations that have become so threatening that they are always ready to pounce upon her. Schur contemplates,

In Paradise, Morrison portrays how African Americans have houses, but not homes. Haven, this group’s first settlement, and then Ruby fail to live up to their names because racist and sexist ideologies do not respect the borders established by the towns-people. These communities based on a utopian ideal are not homes because the racial ideologies that the inhabitants of Ruby sought to escape follow them within their hearts and minds. As in much of Morrison’s work, racist ideologies transform “domestic” sites into racialized spaces due to the racism and sexism built into their foundations. (2004)

She does not carry a bag of necessities or purse carrying cash but she escapes wearing soiled clothes with her purse in which the spare key of the car is hidden under the tear. Though she is leaving her house in the darkness of the night and she has no place to go but she is more afraid of those who are at her back i.e. her family members. Morrison vividly explains, “[h]olding her breath, eyes wide to the darkness, Mavis padded quickly past the other children’s open door. With her back exposed to that much danger she felt feverish—sweaty and cold together” (Morrison, 1997). On her way, she comes across the hospital where she has been admitted for fifteen times. This again tells about her anguished life which as a young woman she has been passing unlike other young people who normally do not visit hospital as frequently as she has visited after getting married to Frank.



On her way to California, she accidentally comes across Connie from whom she asks the location of any telephone booth. Connie is living with her mother in an abandoned mansion. She asks Mavis if she is a drinking woman; to which she replies in negation. Her mental and physical states are not going along with the statement. To this, she replies that she has been in a state of stress by continuous driving and then she has run out of gasoline. She requests Connie for a cup of coffee which might help her in feeling and appearing better. Connie, when asked by Mavis, if she does not feel scared of staying here almost alone with miles of wilderness around. To this Connie replies, “Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is [sic] inside” (Morrison, 1997). This is the first lesson which Mavis learns from wise Connie. Though Mavis has come far away from home but sad and painful memories of Merle and Pearl do not leave her. While sitting in the kitchen she imagines that the big kitchen is crowded with laughing and singing children “two of whom [are] Merle and Pearl. Squeezing her eyes shut to dissipate the impression only strengthened it” (Morrison, 1997). Unfortunately, when she opens her eyes she could not find anyone around her except Connie who is working in the kitchen. On finding her lost in depressive thoughts, Connie suggests her to keep herself busy by doing something useful which will keep the intrusive thoughts away from her.

Flashbacks attend Mavis as she is living in the Convent. While doing household chores, she goes back in time as she is reminded of her “sixth-grade teacher opening a book: lifting the corner of the binding, stroking the edge to touch the bookmark, caressing the page, letting the tips of her fingers trail down the lines of print” (Morrison, 1997); but at the same time she is enjoying the pleasant wind coming through the door of the kitchen. Her thoughts are accompanied by the natural sounds of shells falling in the bowl, insects whispering accompanied by “the argue of long grass, the faraway cough of cornstalks” (Morrison, 1997). There is no radio, no television, and no entertainment of any sort but still she is enjoying peace of mind. The police have issued her arrest warrants for huge theft and murdering her two children but she is passing time without any fear of being caught-up. When asked about her children by the mother of Connie “Mavis could not speak” (Morrison, 1997) so her anguish remains unspoken. She has never talked about her children to anyone because the discussion will be followed by suggestions which she does not want to listen. It is not that she has forgotten her other three children but it is not possible for her to stay with them under the same roof. When taken to the bedroom of Connie for sleep she looks outside the window where she finds “[t]wo milky moons” (Morrison, 1997). Instead of one moon, she can see two moons like her own twin children whom she has lost together. These two moons are a part of the natural world which are offering her consolation and soothing her pain. The world created by God is “Unjudgmental. Tidy. Ample. Forever” (Morrison, 1997). It has got so many qualities to offer. Nature gives ample time to man and is not quick in passing judgments. It is full of beauty with vastness to offer. It provides a person with ample opportunities to move on and search truth. It appears as if it has a long history and ample geography.

Mavis, like other women, has taken protection in the Convent. She has been through painful experiences in her life so she suffered from flashbacks and *nightmares*. At her home, she suffered silently and in the Convent also she prefers to bear her anguish in silence. She has been traumatized in domestic sphere so she wants to soothe her nerves otherwise she might collapse due to intense pressure like other “characters in Paradise [who] are all mute-figures, unable to speak out about their needs” (Abdul, 2014). When Palas takes refuge in the Convent, Mavis tells “[t]his is the most peaceful place on earth” (Morrison, 1997). The women in the Convent do not interfere in anyone’s life nor do they disrupt the society’s peace. To survive these woman have no other way but to escape in female friendship where there is no one to intimidate them. It is by “acknowledging the complete narrative of their experiences, the women are able to accept the realities of their lives honestly, without the impulse to control anything that is beyond their capacity” (Gillespie, 2007). During the day time they might have severe fight but “the day’s unruly drama dissipated in the pleasure of chewing food” (Morrison, 1997). Once in a while they arrange such a party when they dance and drink, and relish deep sleep afterwards. Connie’s “unique therapy of ‘loud dreaming’ not only encourages the women to confront and acknowledge their past traumas, it also allows them to recognize similarities between their own and others’ experiences” (Na, 2015). They have made their own paradise, but sorrowfully they are killed ruthlessly by the stakeholders of the community. Romero thinks that Ruby is a “microcosm of America which can change its view of itself and its relation to the world as long as its members participate in the ‘endless work’ required to create and sustain more enabling communities” (2005).

Conclusion

Mavis is severely abused by her family members but she prefers to remain silent. Her silence is not a silence of a dumb person but she used it as a mechanism to fight against the situation. She has never let anyone ask her a direct question about her personal decisions; if anyone asks her, she prefers to remain silent because she feels that probably no one will be able to understand her anguish. This wordless anguish lets her develop resilience to survive amid harsh realities of life.

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