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BELOVED AND PARADISE BY TONI MORRISON: A STUDY IN GENDER, ECOLOGY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ACROSS TWO STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Applying ecofeminism as the theoretical background, the current study analyzes (i) the role of race in deciding the nature of people's relationships; (ii) economic, racial and gender connections between communities; and (iii) the relationship between humans and the nature in *Beloved* (1987), and *Paradise* (1997), two of the 116 narratives/novels of Nobel laureate Toni Morrison with slavery as the leading theme. The sub-themes analyzed are: (i) the devastation of human life by war; (ii) the impact of war in causing social chasms and inequalities; and (iii) oppression and other evils of slavery. An attempt is also made in this study to investigate the role of ownership of land and other resources, slaves' biological entity, and the role of spirituality and its principles in human relationships as Morrison weaves the stories around patriarchal ownership of two highly productive resources: Slaves and land, both exploited for economic gains. The study takes leverage from the critical theories of Bell Hooks and Sherie M. Randolph in the literary analysis of the two novels.

KEYWORDS: Ecofeminism, slavery, ownership, racism, African-Americans

1. INTRODUCTION

More than anything else, the economic factor disturbs relationships not only locally but also, across geographical boundaries. Despite economic and occupational paradigmatic shifts, class conflicts, racism and even gender differences remain societal highpoints. Stepping back in history, social taboos such as slavery though legally abolished still manifested in other forms of oppression in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its concomitant atrocities included torture, rape, and deprivation. Psychologically, the impact was even more solemn, reducing humans to the level of animals, robbing them of human dignity, equality, freedom, free will and other fundamental rights like property rights and ownership, producing animosity between peoples with uneasy relationship based on the color of the skin (Jayamohan, 2023; Threadcraft, 2025)

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In the terrifying world of Morrison's characters, patriarchy engendered another system of oppression, exploitation and gender bias with patriarchs displaying abhorrence of slaves, treating them as 'objects or possessions/assets used as commodities. Land ownership was the sole domain of slaveholders; the slave labor doing the farmwork but suffering starvation. Treatment of slaves was no different from that of objects: stored, controlled, shackled, humiliation being a constant in their exploited lives. The slaves, particularly women, even when pregnant, were not shown any sympathy. In case of sickness medical assistance was not prompt, and slaves were expected to show up for work. Physical abuse began with thrashing and beating (routine affairs) and frequently extended to sexual exploitation for amusement/entertainment, or mere child bearing to create more slaves. As if this was not enough, slave-mothers' milk was stolen, leaving their babies to starve. Like animals, women were made to produce the maximum number of children which could be sold by their owners or added to their slave count. The slaves, particularly women, had no ownership over anything, including their flesh and bodies;

they suffered both physically and psychologically. However, overwhelmed by oppression, female bonding amongst Morrison's characters resulted in breaking free from the shackles of slavery, the now free women moving to a forest clearing to live freely. Many thinkers have advanced theories stating that female bonding process is indeed highly significant as it would manifest as a united force, raising voice against the atrocities of slavery. Ajmal, Kanwal, and Bibi (2025) states while reflecting on women's friendship that with due consideration, theoretically female friendship can be defined as "giving form, expression, and actuality to the ways that women have been for each other" and their "own selves."

Female friendship is viewed as essentially an asexual relationship. Weems (2004, pp. 65) describes it as an asexual partnership in appreciating, comprehending, and encouraging one another."

It is common knowledge that females give space and act on instinct more than by reasoning. Therefore, women friendship is service-centred, and it provides moral support and displays compassionate behaviour: women care for each other; the care and empathy extend as a natural response to society in the treatment of society as an extended family in the rational socialization process (Go'oh epse Kome, 2025). Further, writings by Black women authors demonstrate that there are alternative forms of expression, such as sisterhood and writing (Nnaemeka, 2005).

Imran et al, (2020) opines that female friendship is used as a strong strategy apart from its being a powerful tool to combat the oppressive evils of patriarchy. Imran et al. (2020) adds in "Veiled Courage: Inside the Women's Resistance against Violence through Their Writings", women's friendship is a center point of the writings of black women writers, a view that draws on the idea of reciprocal bonding.

Women in Convent as described in *Paradise* create and nurture friendships with the aim of resisting oppression by colour racism and patriarchy. However, when female friendship or sisterhood breaks down under the unbearable weight of patriarchy, unexpected

new tensions and conflicts surface in Morrison's novels. These conflicts and tensions point to the reality that patriarchy is deeply entrenched in the social fabric.

Morrison, in her writings, shows female friendship in two phases with the pronounced aim of regaining ownership over their body and flesh and also re-establishing their status as 'subjects' (as opposed to 'objects'). In the first phase, the female friendship is initiated and further developed as a response to outside pressure stimuli. In the second phase, it suffers decline with unpleasant and unexpected setbacks due to patriarchal interference and control. Morrison is quite clear in highlighting the harmony of the first phase of friendships. She also highlights with similar clarity the difficulties cropping up in the second phase of friendship accounting for its failure in sustaining itself. In other words, women are not deliberately accorded equal status on humanitarian grounds as they are treated as commodities which the owner keeps under control; women voicing opinion is a taboo and not permissible (Jamil, Khan, & Ahmad, 2021).

In Morrison's writing, the patriarchal traditions continue to be the cause for women's alienation. They need to continue their struggle without losing confidence and persist with their cause with tenacity and intensity. Women assert that their children should not be snatched; they should enjoy childhood, remain integral part of family and should not be treated as slaves, much less sold or purchased like animals. In their combined and shared struggle, Morrison examines the psychological processes of her women characters to bring out the aspects of female friendship and also highlight the social challenges by investigating their behaviors via the presentation and development of the plot, setting, and characterization to inspect Black female companionship (women-bonding).

2.1. Objectives of Study

The main objective of this study is probing gender-based treatment of women by slaveholders, interaction between human and natural environment (ecology) and the state of social justice in treatment of slaves, particularly the women slaves as depicted in *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

3. DISCUSSION

In her novel, *Paradise*, Morrison furnishes an elaborate description of the plight of the black women. She also describes how her female characters are forced by their hapless/pitiable condition to start and continue the struggle for becoming self-conscious and to be in control over their world at least to some extent through the force of interest-cum-pressure groups (women friendship) taking inspiration from the concept enunciated in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*.

Sinari (1970) states that female friendship has a socio-political aspect, adding that the idea of forming groups to pursue group interest emerged especially after the Industrial Revolution which created alienation, and that typically, opinions differ between two groups.

As per Morrison (1998, p.3), *Paradise* contains a story picked from two different social groups - urban and rural communities. Geographically, these were: (i) the fictional town called Ruby in Oklahoma; and (ii) Convent, located seventeen miles away from Ruby. A small independent group of women lived in Convent who all helped each other. They aimed to make Convent a dream-home that kept fear, racism and bias at bay. Men of Ruby and women of Convent were not at peace with each other; the former due to patriarchal mindset and the latter standing for slave emancipation. Morrison (1998, p.3), says that a big clash occurred between Ruby men and Convent women mainly because men could not bear the freedom of women. Colour and racial diversity were accepted in Convent but Ruby men disapproved of this. A clash triggered as the men in Ruby did not like women not being submissive to men and planned to "kill the white girl first". That girl was the only white female killed by the Ruby group of men, forgotten by all and by Morrison also in *Paradise*.

Schur (2004) asserts that Morrison's novel contains "political undercurrents of her work" Morrison's novels in general and *Paradise* specifically, support more liberation for oppressed black women under patriarchal rule. Drawing a pertinent parallel to *Tar Baby*, where reference is made to ants: They sacrifice the male ant, but the female ant lives. It applies to

Jadine who departs to Paris and makes it through, assuming a distance from her beloved son. There is, however, contrast in *Paradise*: Women are sacrificed when they feel distanced from the males of Ruby (town) and create a private 'convent' (to feel free and resurrect their individual identity as 'subjects').

3.1. *Paradise*

The poignant story of *Paradise* highlights how prejudice breeds narrowness. The Convent is witness to groups of women with a common goal: freedom from the "narrowness" of the prevailing patriarchy. However, the male point of view is that Eve earned punishment in Eden as she lost her innocence and both Adam and her were hence removed from Eden. Men on earth now do not wish to let such a thing repeat. Men view themselves as smeared with "holy oil," the females in human society are Christ-like sacrificial figures. *Paradise* is designed for persuading women to keep moving on in their struggle for survival. Morrison disappoints the readers and ends the novel stating that the living in Convent is not to be taken as completion of women's struggle: her view is that the struggle for regaining self-consciousness as independent entities is not yet over. Morrison (1998, p.196-97) clearly indicates that racism sometimes makes forceful forays into gender domain. She adds that under all situations, the men at Ruby will continue causing trouble to women wherever they might live, even if women are united in female friendship.

While most researchers view texts of Tony Morrison as concerning the differences between the whites and blacks, this study is directed to find the differences within blacks whose one group deliberately suppresses other blacks only due to its being more powerful as compared to them. This difference cannot be easily identified. In *Paradise*, Morrison speaks about the alienated black women's group settlement, Convent, where the females enjoy freedom and independence expressing liberal ideas fearlessly concerning feminist freedom and forging fearless women friendships aimed at breaking away from male dominated society to continue their struggle, though in isolated community, for complete emancipation from patriarchy and racism, and establishing their

'subject' identity without interference from the male world. Apparently, there is danger from the untamed patriarchs who are not answerable for their evil deeds of aggression since they behave as absolute rulers of an all-black town (Ruby). It correlates with the finding of Ahmad, Mahmood, and Mobeen (2020) which says that Morrison brings to the fore various challenges which the female bonding faces and warns the women to be cautious and fully aware of the dangerous power of patriarchal structures in society. Morrison also reprimands the aggressive and violent manhood which feeds through stigmatizing women as 'others' and branding them as 'devilish'. Race and gender differences are both the very foundations of Morrison's fiction and these manifest in cultural effects on women through male thinking rooted in race and gender.

The Convent is not only a place for survival, but also one that allows women to construct attitudes that differ from those of suppression and defeat. *Paradise* depicts two forms of black communities: (i) a small community of secluded women gathered in the Convent, a forest clearing 17 miles from Ruby and (ii) the oppressed blacks in Ruby, a town founded on patriarchal, racial, supremacy.

In *Paradise*, the one reason for women's exclusion and marginalization is religion (Wajiran & Apriyani, 2025; Wuriati et al., 2025; Koroğlu, 2025). The Convent women are attacked by Ruby's men because the latter interpret religious teachings on women as meaning that "women are wrong and men are right". The menfolk of Ruby have thus redesigned Eden. The women, on the other hand, have created another "Paradise" about 17 miles away from Ruby.

3.2. *Beloved*

The central character in the story, Beloved, flees and remains unaccounted and none made any effort to trace her. Go'oh epe Kome (2025) applies the same logic to the women in *Paradise*. They left Ruby and settled in Convent and none bothers for them. Morrison says that Beloved leaves footprints but these slowly obliterate from everyone's memory. However, Convent's alienated black women move leaving no footprints. The males of Ruby are

not ready to forget them as these so far silenced women are now vocal about their rights and assert their 'subject' identities. They start attacking these isolated women destroying their peace and belongings, and even murdering them.

Sethe is in the center-stage of Morrison's narrative. She is a former slave. Her journey in moving onward, breaking from the past is described in detail; she is keen on embracing not only her freedom but also to feel as 'subject' with an independent will.

Beloved is also an important character in Morrison's *Paradise*. She sets about exploring the never ending evil effects of slavery: not only on all black males and females as individuals but also on their communities. She engages in documentation of the destruction done and on 60 million or more African people's survival recording how a large number died (and many murdered) in the Middle Passage.

Many critics find *Beloved* revising the slave narrative tradition over and over again. There are many narratives describing physical escapes of slaves and their move towards freedom. But, Morrison not only follows the traditional writers in describing physical escapes of slaves but also makes additional significant contribution by narrating the sufferings of the slaves while struggling to survive the psychological trauma.

Almenia and AbdelFattah (2025) extols Morrison's ability of arousing memory in the characters of their dirty past sufferings, not only physical but also psychological; none succeeded in the past in documenting the psychological condition of slaves so well. Krumholz (2002) holds that *Beloved* gives due attention not only to the individual characters but also brings to light the historical impact that the practice of slavery had.

Beloved is placed in the period 1870-90, coinciding with the Reconstruction period. It is formally structured into three parts. In part one, Paul D arrives at the house on Bluestone Road. His narrative ends when he leaves. Motifs are introduced by Morrison in the narrative which aid in shaping the major themes which include memory, parenthood, community, dependence, and freedom. There

are references and images in this part to supernatural, mammary, rape of Sethe and the "tree" made by the merciless beating on Sethe's back. These enable shaping the distinct stories and recollections of the relative characters.

The town of Ruby is depicted as the place (town or city) for marginalizing and subjugating women using torture, beating, rape and other means of oppression, to the extent that those slave women lose their identity as subjects and accept themselves as objects for entertainment, doing all menial jobs and raising children. The women are not included in the head count. So, the city is actually highly polarized. In other words, the Ruby men believe that women are responsible for moral corruption. Women should, therefore, be driven away; their presence is inimical to men (patriarchs). Morrison says that the word "patriarch" is found in Biblical allusions, the women do not follow the teachings of the Bible because they, living independently in the Convent, refuse to surrender before men and are unwilling to be mere submissive wives. The men in Ruby, therefore, agree to kill them. The men also trust that God is "on their side" in this purging act which they think is a holy one. The males feel justified in their "cold blooded" killings because they think the women are horrible sinners. These women were either silenced or killed years ago; referred to as "throw-away" women who were forced out the door. This had happened even before the men attacked them (Martín-Salván, 2022). The dead were not searched, none missed them and none was aware why they disappeared; they were just forgotten. In Convent, political confrontation seems apparent because of the Black women's united voice, alienated and marginalized as they were. They determine to fight patriarchy and destroy its social structure for leading smooth, satisfying, independent and prosperous lives. The Convent women are bonded by their shared resistance in challenging the man dominated socio-historical structures around them. The black men also behave like white patriarchs and so, they are not well disposed to granting women independence and free will. Bodies of murdered women disappear but the resident

women believe on the spiritual plane that bodies are composed of worldly material liable to perish but soul is immortal; this inspires and encourages them to continue their struggle for freedom from slavery. Krumholz (2002) opines that the Convent no longer remains simply as a dwelling; it becomes a center for the women who get associated with and actively contribute to ideas relating to movement, liberty, and sharing through the strategy of women-friendship. The women discard imposed identities and create mutual understanding and thereby make the Convent a place of harmony, and peaceful co-existence.

Morrison poses regular challenges to the reader to register to memory the tragedies consequent to the practice of legalized slavery. *Beloved* tries to forget the past but fails at each effort to this end. In order to be truly free, one

must learn to live with memories of the past. In the narrative, the characters were subjected to horrors and degradations of slavery; they are now moving into the future with the past behind their backs, no more nightmares threatening them.

4. CONCLUSION

The main conclusions obtained from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise* are enumerated in Table 1 summarizing comparison of the themes of violence, social justice, ecofeminism, land ownership, slavery, and patriarchy. The table illustrates Morrison's connection between gender oppression and ecological exploitation, showing how systemic injustice and the long-lasting psychological and social effects of slavery are shaped by racial, economic, and patriarchal supremacy.

Table 1: Gender, Ecology, and Social Justice in Beloved and Paradise

Key Area	Major Insights from <i>Beloved</i>	Major Insights from <i>Paradise</i>	Overall Conclusion
Slavery and Oppression	Psychological and physical trauma through Sethe's life; dehumanization and loss of identity	Continuation of structural oppression within Black communities	Slavery's legacy persists through systemic inequality and internalized violence
Gender and Patriarchy	Female body treated as property; motherhood under slavery	Patriarchal control in Ruby; suppression of women's autonomy	Patriarchy exploits women across generations regardless of historical period
Economic and Land Ownership	Ownership of slaves parallels ownership of land	Land and community controlled by male authority	Control over land and labor reflects power hierarchy
Ecofeminist Dimension	Exploitation of women symbolically linked to exploitation of nature	Women and nature portrayed as productive yet oppressed	Morrison connects ecological and gender justice
Violence and Resistance	Infanticide as tragic resistance; "violence begets violence"	Communal violence against women in the Convent	Oppression generates cyclical violence
Social Justice Implications	Need for dignity, equality, and healing	Critique of exclusionary social systems	Morrison advocates moral, social, and ecological justice

The two works demonstrate that black slave women are alienated due to atrocities and inhuman treatment of slaveholders. The two reasons are: (i) gender discrimination. It is between white and black races; and (ii) Intra-racial discrimination. Both types have shared characteristics such as domination of patriarchy and its oppressive and restrictive practices frustrating women's initiatives to form female friendship or female bonding.

In *Paradise*, Ruby men refuse to accept women living independently in Convent. They are also against diversity allowed in Convent

by the females. These differences trigger conflict, escalating to murders.

Sethe states that her mother was lynched when Sethe was only a child, and she remembers she was trying to identify the body by her mother's "mark". This "mark" is another reference to the physical scars of slavery inflicted by cruel slaveholders.

Sethe remembers the "message" conveyed by Nan, her wet nurse, saying that her mother was raped repeatedly by the white crew of the Middle Passage. Babies born out of those rapes were thrown away by her (killed). Sethe's mother kept Sethe because she was the child of

a black man born out of their shared love. Sethe feels important themes of motherhood. She is sad that slavery destroys the emotional bonds between mothers and children. Sethe, therefore, becomes protective of her daughter, Denver.

In *Beloved*, Paul D, after having sex with Beloved, was able to connect not only with his body but also served as connecting with emotions and memories.

We see the relationship of three characters in Morrison's narrative with *Beloved*. Her relationship thus affects the three characters' development. *Beloved* is seen in the narrative taking on numerous forms, including (i) an infant, (ii) a sexual woman, (iii) a daughter, and (iv) a sister.

Sethe admits that she wanted to kill her children, as she killed many, so that they were not subjected to the horror of slavery that she and others passed through. She has the memory of having been forced to divert her child's milk to other babies. She feels greatly hurt as her view is that the mother's milk is a symbol of motherhood; her motherhood was robbed.

Denver, when seven, stops taking lessons from Lady Jones, and stops socializing when her fellow classmate tell her that her family was shunned by the community as her mother had been imprisoned for murder. She also becomes deaf. Critics have pointed out that Denver experiences her mother's trauma. Krumholz (2002) says that Denver "is as stuck by Sethe's past as Sethe herself is". Denver's Deafness disappeared after two years when the baby ghost registered presence in the house making it haunted.

Morrison mentions that during the early days of Sethe's arrival, house 124 was cheerful, there was an atmosphere of happiness to it. Later, the house 124 transformed into haunted house as the Baby Ghost entered it creating an atmosphere of fear; supernatural happenings occurred which threatened the peace.

Sethe takes Denver and Beloved to the Clearing (Convent) to "pay tribute to Halle", her late husband. Ella, a young woman, delivers Sethe good news: Stamp Paid has already securely delivered Sethe's three children to house 124 on Bluestone.

Sethe meets Baby Suggs for the first time. After having been reunited with her children, she spends twenty-eight days in house 124. In that exalted feeling, Sethe expressed: "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that free self was another". None visited her as the house was haunted by Baby Ghost.

Sethe was tormented by humiliated memories as a woman. The schoolteacher (in Sweet Home) called her an animal. His nephews stole her milk: one sucked her milk and the other held her down. The duo beat her with cow-leather even when she was pregnant with Denver. Sethe is treated as 'object' and as racially inferior. She is not treated with human consideration; but treated as a sexually aggressive wet nurse.

Sethe leaves Sweet Home carrying the tree mark of beating on her back. Amy describes it as: "It's a tree. Here's the trunk—it's red and split wide open, full with sap, and here's where the branches will grow. You have a lot of branches. The leaves also resemble blossoms, and darn if these aren't. Tiny, white cherry blossoms. Your back has an entire tree on it." This reference connects her with nature which provides colors, patterns and trees including water and saps as gifts equally to all, with no discrimination.

When Paul D and Sethe are reunited, he says: "Sculpture on scarred back, like the decorative work of an ironsmith who is too passionate for display." And yet, after Paul D and Sethe make love, he thinks of it as "the wrought-iron maze he had explored" as a "revolting clump of scars".

Hine (1979) engages in discussing three methods that are used by women slaves for putting up firm resistance against their economic and sexual oppression by men and slaveholders: (i) sexual abstinence; (ii) abortion; and (iii) infanticide. She opines that infanticide cases may not be treated either as murders for lack of love or out of a higher form of love. Slave parents may be considering lives of their children as "living death" under oppressive slavery conditions. Infanticide was probably the only answer to rape or forced pregnancy.

When Beloved dies, Sethe raises a memory stone with the word "Beloved" engraved on it in exchange for sex act with the sculptor who

demanded ten minute sex for adding the word "Dear".

To sum up, the flight of the two sisters (Denver and Beloved) is a flight away from

power and silence. Their inaudible song becomes an utterance of protest against gender injustice and inequality. The narrative closes with the word "Beloved".

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