

SITUATING SPACE AND VOICING PAIN: PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC NOTES IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

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Abstract

Melancholy and listlessness are common among women who are victims of psychosocial trauma which may lead to substantial clinical consequences. Victims should be provided with appropriate care either by their close relations or at specialized care centers. This work examines what happens when the care is denied at the time of offense, and how the process of escape and taking refuge at a place away from home helps in soothing pain. The complexity of needs of victims and the role played by women-community in healing the invisible wounds of trauma caused by interpersonal violence are studied in detail. I use qualitative method to assess varied methods adopted by nonprofessional women to de-escalate stress and prolonged anger within victimized individuals. The study has shown that psychotherapy is more an ethical endeavor which is grounded in compassion and less a clinical practice which can be practiced by family members and friends, besides experts.

Keywords: *heal; recovery; support; trauma; pain; women.*

Introduction

African-Americans underwent extreme violence and racial hatred which dates back to the time of slavery but *Paradise* discusses the question of love in its myriad forms. Toni Morrison has tried to demystify racial pride by bringing to light Black man's attitude towards woman in domestic boundaries. She depicts restorative journeys of women-characters towards self-contained and independent lives. The fundamentals of recuperative process, such as storytelling, re-memorizing, and delving into highly imaginative contemplation amidst compassionate community are also positioned. The wronged women struggle to unburden and relieve themselves.

Literature Review

Black Literature has been developed under the critical eye of contemporary readership shedding light on culture, traditions, and complexities of Afro-American lives. Toni Morrison takes advantage of a literary genre to register her complaints against the interpersonal violence and to unveil the realities of people's lives bound to it.

Morrison's *Paradise* has been taken up for research and criticism by many scholars and critics. Widdowson thinks that *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise* is a loose trilogy of race, gender and African-American history. The novel's historical chronology matches with political upheavals of America as "[t]his is the period of Vietnam, Watergate, the assassinations of John F. and Robert Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and, in particular, of the acme of the 'Second Reconstruction': the Civil Rights Movement" (326). Comparing the two communities, Ruby and Convent, one is an exclusively all-black town in Oklahoma while the other is an informal refuge of damaged women. The critic has also argued that the novel is about the failure of Reconstruction. It also focuses on black experience, black racism, and patriarchal prejudice.

Examining the complex origins of black identity, Romero wishes America to be a paradisaal state where there is equality and social justice for all Americans, “this rethinking of the past opens up the possibility of reimagining the future” (415). The attention of readers is drawn towards the fact that almost no change in national values has appeared in the past two hundred years. The narratives are based on exclusion and patriarchal violence. Morrison broadens the scope of paradise as she wants to construct an inclusive community free of marginalization which includes people from variety of racial, cultural and geographical backgrounds. Likewise Schur says, “The origins of Haven and Ruby betray their names because the metaphors of sanctuary are never quite realized” (280).

Assessing the impact of trauma on the victim’s capacity on retention of memory, Lonien’s PhD dissertation entitled “*Houses Packed with Grief-Trauma and Home in three Novels by Toni Morrison*”, analyzes Morrison’s trilogy which is situated within the tradition of national identity in the process of reconstructing social memory. The literary scope of this study is that it only picks up *Beloved*, *Jazz*, and *Paradise*, differentiating *Paradise* from the earlier two works because the former two are associated with “the commemoration of traumatic history” (7) while *Paradise* warns “the excesses of commemoration that can hold a community in its grip” (7) making the community unfit to adapt itself to the present. Western historiography is considered as discursive construct because with its discriminatory logic it empowers only the dominant voice.

A thesis titled “‘*Shuttles in the Rocking Loom of History*’: Dislocation in Toni Morrison’s Fiction” by Terry addresses the theme of dislocation negotiating black diaspora focusing on the sites of remembering, displacements, and losses. Most of the work of Terry is allocated to the study of dynamics of militarism and the losses of Vietnam. Unlike my study, Terry’s work deals with the degeneration of the utopian vision of all black settlement in the West. She also examines how institutional religion supports patriarchy, conservatism and ethnic absolutism in dissimilarity to Consolata’s “non-institutional forms of worship” (193). In contrast to my work, this is a study of racial and gender politics plus the collapse of establishment of an ideal state. I have dealt with the collapse of women in private spheres of life, and how they find their way out to overcome it. Although extensive research has been carried out on *Paradise*, no single study has exhaustively examined strategies adopted by broken women to support and heal one another.

Research Method

I attempt to engage with a community where women are considered inferior in social hierarchy. They are disempowered members of the community, so traumatic experiences which they have to endure, result in additional assault on their integrity and confidence. They are ignored or silenced by patriarchal structures, but they situate a space for themselves where they voice their pain and grievances to reconcile with their past. This study illuminates varied psychotherapeutic strategies which women employ in their struggle to come out of their state of restlessness.

Qualitative method of research is not statistical analysis of the subject, rather it is interested in exploring an individual’s relationship with society and socio-cultural norms that determine an individual’s role in the social context and construct. The research has employed an analytical and qualitative method to answer the following research question:

- How the process of escape and refuge helped the injured women-folk to overcome illness and regain mental health?

Theoretical Template: Role of Psychotherapy in the Process of Recovery

Jon G. Allen, a contemporary psychologist, considers psychotherapy as more an ethical endeavor and less a clinical practice. He emphasizes that it is a “science informed humanism” (“Psychotherapy is an Ethical Endeavor” 126). Psychology is an off-shoot of philosophy. Psychology established its existence a century ago, then psychotherapy came into being. Relating philosophy to the science of psychology, Allen thinks that psychologists have much to learn from ancient and contemporary philosophy. He has drawn attention “to an ethics-based humanistic perspective on psychotherapy” (“Psychotherapy is an Ethical Endeavor” 107), thus associating the work of a psychotherapist to humanism and disassociating it from clinical practice.

Psychotherapy is an activity based on ethics which is associated to the qualities of good life. Ethics is related to morality which lays emphasis on good treatment of oneself and others thus laying foundation of good life. This keeps a person away from “damaging attitudes and behavior directed toward the self: self-contempt and self-hatred as well as self-destructiveness, self-injury, self-neglect, and suicidality” (“Psychotherapy is an Ethical Endeavor” 107). Psychotherapists’ ethical and moral mode of thinking lays much emphasis on self-compassion which is there in all major religions. They suggest paying attention to self-exploration, as it will lead to self-knowledge and contribute in bringing a positive change in the personality. For a psychotherapist, it is essential to adopt neutral attitude. The therapist should not impose personal opinions and values on the sufferer. He should not be judgmental and avoid being intrusive and pushy in imposing his set of values on others. So a psychotherapist should be morally active but at the same time he should observe objective and detached attitude.

People having trauma-history often complain of gaps in memory. It is seen that “memory gaps are not necessarily reversible by various memory retrieval techniques” (“Dissociative Detachment” 160). Mentalizing is a useful way of psychotherapeutic treatment of interpersonal trauma. The listener has to engage emotionally with the broken narrative of traumatic memories thus helping the speaker in modifying negative emotions and disturbances, finally converting the broken thoughts into coherent narrative. Mentalizing is inherent within us as we naturally react to what the other person is saying. It comes in moral dimension to agree or disagree with other person’s statement or action. It is considered immoral to remain “objective, detached or indifferent” (*Mentalizing in Clinical Practice* 93) to others; so we should either show our resentments or thankfulness to the speaker. Allen thinks that mentalizing is the ability to represent the same situation in multiple ways, to think of alternatives, and to adopt multiple perspectives. With mentalizing, one can imagine various ways in which others may think or feel, wondering why they do, striving to make their actions intelligible. He says, “[w]e also develop a capacity for metarepresentation, being able to think about our own thoughts and feelings. Much of psychotherapy exploits this capacity for metarepresentation as we engage our patients in reflecting on their actions and considering them from multiple perspectives” (*Mentalizing in Clinical Practice* 94). So mentalizing demands emotional engagement of the listener to the narrative thus helping the speaker to convert the broken narrative into a coherent one leading to change negative views of life, world and the self. So “[t]he goal of trauma treatment is not to put trauma out of mind but, on the contrary, *to enable the patient to have trauma in mind*—to mentalize it, to make sense of it, and to bear it without succumbing to impulsive and self-destructive actions” (*Mentalizing in Clinical Practice* 102) (emphasis in original). It is a unique blend of folk psychology with clinical work as the therapist moves “back and forth between

person-to-person emotional engagement and professional-scientific detachment” (*Mentalizing in Clinical Practice* 108).

Textual Analysis

Paradise opens with the murder of a white woman whose identity is intentionally not revealed to suggest that it is violence against the gender irrespective of race. These women are killed by the stakeholders of the community because they feel threatened by their presence and fear change; not realizing that these injured women are struggling just to survive by accepting discomforts and learning to bear pain skillfully. These traumatized women feel severely threatened both psychologically and physically so they have decided to live a life among those who help them in collecting their shattered selves. Trauma has disrupted their body’s natural equilibrium, thus freezing their nervous system. The site of trauma usually remains unacknowledged so the site of loss and pain becomes unfathomable. The victims of traumatic experience, according to Felman, can never recover from it when

trauma survivors live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through its completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its survivors are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The survivor, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (69)

Similarly Brearley thinks, “A trauma is something that overwhelms the psyche in a more than momentary way, arousing fear or even terror, often a fear of death and a sense that life is not worth living The traumatised person loses a sense being a containing figure, internally or externally” (194). Morrison has not only illuminated the condition of these traumatized women but she has vividly criticized the black man who is responsible for this. She says:

They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had thrashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. (306)

The recovery from trauma is a highly individualized process because the time which one might require for recovery varies from individual to individual. Self-help, mutual-support or a combination can effectively facilitate one’s process of healing. In *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Schreiber suggests that “trauma, whether initiated by physical abuse, dehumanization, discrimination, exclusion, or abandonment, becomes embedded in both psychic and bodily circuits” (2). In *Paradise*, Connie and her friends live in Convent have no professional training in psychotherapy but they treat a traumatized person as if they have acquired a skill to do so. They let the traumatized person acknowledge her feelings about the trauma and accept them. When Gigi comes to the Convent, she prefers to remain uncovered to which Mavis strongly objects. Connie discourages Mavis and allows Gigi to do whatever she wants to do, thinking that she should be given liberty which society denies; believing that with time she will cover herself like others. Billie who takes refuge in the Convent for some time says,

A little nuts, may be, but loose, relaxed, kind of. Don't be surprised if they don't have on any clothes. I was, at first, but then it was, I don't know, nothing. My mother would have knocked me into next week if I walked around like that. Anyway you can collect yourself there, think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time.

They'll take care of you or leave you alone—whichever way you want it" (175-176).

Self-soothing activities which result in emotional regulation are encouraged to reduce emotional intensity. Gigi by sitting among friends, with no piece of cloth on her body, eases her process of acceptance of her feelings which are a part of a grieving process, essential for healing the trauma. Connie is letting her exercise *distress tolerance* which is a psychotherapeutic practice. It involves the ability to accept emotional and physical distress already experienced along with the current situation, without being judgmental. Distress tolerance enhances coping capacity by strengthening resilience, promotes the ability to adjust, and moderates the feeling of guilt or shame.

Participating in social activities is essential to reestablish connections with life. In the Convent, all women are encouraged to do various household chores. They do farming on the land surrounding the mansion which gives them enough food to eat and sell. That gives them money to buy things of necessity. They work in complete co-ordination like one fixes the stove while the other collects vegetables. It is as if they have joined a *support group* which gives them a sense of mutual identification and support. Talking and tending to connect with others further the process of healing. Realizing that others are also facing same type of problems also helps in reducing the sense of isolation.

When Pallas comes to the Convent, all the residents realize that she is in such a state of mind that she cannot cry because "[t]he pain [is] down too far. When it [comes] up, tears would follow . . ." (172). The girls realize that Connie is the most mature person to handle the situation so Pallas should be taken to her. Connie relaxes her by soothing words and compassionate expressions; like a psychotherapist who gives anti-depressant to the patient, she gives her some wine which acts as anti-depressant to relax her extremely tense nerves. The trauma-victim narrates a "backward and punctured and incomplete" (173) little story of how she was hunted by the predators. Under the guidance of Connie, all girls try to recognize pain of other girls. They also try to help one another to alleviate the suffering. Feeling compassionate for others is a spiritual experience. Volunteering activities which involve helping others and challenging the sense of helplessness which is often associated with the experience of trauma is a magnificent way to reconnect with people.

When Mavis loses her twin babies, the whole society considers her responsible for the accident. People blame her by making her realize that she is a careless woman who lost her two babies by locking them in a car on such a hot day not realizing that they will die due to lack of oxygen. She can only survive if she stops blaming herself for the situation she finds herself in. She has to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving towards herself. The people of the community are not letting her do so. On the contrary, when she reaches the Convent, no one blames her. She shares her thoughts and feelings with Connie, who mentalizes with her like a psychotherapist. Articulating her experiences allows her an opportunity to exercise control over her memories by bringing together all the episodes of the tragic event. Now she understands what has happened to her as she integrates that experience into her life and memory. Such integration and understanding defies logic and logical formatting. She ultimately recovers and finally forgives herself.

In addition to that, the women in the Convent try to maximize their ability by staying grounded which helps them in maintaining mental and emotional stability. Mavis cooks crepe-like delicacies, without going to the market. Heavy responsibilities of running a house are replaced by smaller and more manageable tasks. Deriving pleasure from minor accomplishments make these women feel better and keep their minds relaxed. Thus the attention and energies are diverted from traumatic experiences to more positive activities.

Connie uses the technique of *somatic experiencing* to heal the trauma of women living in the Convent. Prevatt and Prevatt-Hyles explain:

Somatic experiencing takes advantage of the body's unique ability to heal itself. The focus of therapy is on bodily sensations, rather than thoughts and memories about the event. By concentrating on what's happening in your body, you gradually get in touch with trauma-related energy and tension. From there, your natural survival instincts take over, safely releasing this pent-up energy through shaking, crying and other forms of physical release. (206)

On one cold night of December, Consolata addresses them with aristocratic gaze to scrub the cellar floor and lighten-up the place with candles. The following description shows that she uses the technique of somatic experiencing to heal the trauma of the women living in the Convent:

In flattering light under Consolata's soft vision they did as they were told. How should we lie? However you feel. They tried arms at the sides, outstretched above the head When each found the position she could tolerate on the cold, uncompromising floor, Consolata walked around her and painted the body's silhouette. Once the outlines were complete, each was instructed to remain there. (263)

These women work-through the painful memories by re-experiencing and reliving the event through hypnotherapy, a process of reducing the stress and opening the mind to new thought processes, ultimately allowing the survivor to gain mastery over the memory, ideally hindering the occurrence of pathological symptoms.

Conclusion

Professional treatment is immensely helpful in healing trauma because psychotherapists employ varied techniques to let the individual release from the tight grips of trauma and to help the individual to continue life with an enhanced sense of safety and personal responsibility. In *Paradise*, womenfolk are denied love and care from their close relations, so they shelter themselves in an abandoned mansion where they treat one another like psychotherapists. The above discussion shows that they have been very kind and supportive to one another. Their goal is to heal psychological wounds by addressing existential questions that arise in the aftermath of trauma and letting them discover the true meaning of life.

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