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SCHOLARLY ARTICLE

Rethinking History and Black Identity: An Examination of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and *Beloved* through the Lens of New Historicism

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Abstract

History is arguably the study of human history as recorded in written records that people have left behind. However, biased, incomplete, and partial historical records and documents can leave gaps in our knowledge of the past. History is therefore incomplete. Toni Morrison has attempted to recreate history and reinterpret the world from the perspectives of experience, culture, and nationality in her historical novels. As a writer, Toni Morrison feels compelled to acknowledge the gaps in history and to rewrite it in her books. Thus, re-patterning actual and fictional materials to re-enact and reconstruct the reality of a historical past that might not otherwise be reached, becomes an irreversible task for Morrison. Morrison believes that it is necessary to rewrite history with an inventive approach in order to discover the overlooked areas. But despite their appearance as historical witnesses and quasi-documentaries, Morrison's novels portray history as narrative, sometimes skewed on purpose, sometimes fantastical. In order to better understand how Toni Morrison reframes history and examines Black identity in her books *Paradise* and *Beloved*, this article will be using the New Historicist approach as a theoretical tool in the research.

Keywords: Morrison, history, black identity, New Historicism, irreversible.

Rethinking History and Black Identity: An Examination of Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and *Beloved* through the Lens of New Historicism

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Introduction

Toni Morrison is a well-known writer of African American literature. Her writings address issues of sexual politics, racial injustice, history, community, enslavement, love, and survival. Using these universals, she addresses topics like rewriting history, reassessing civilisations, and examining and confronting man-woman and black-white prejudices in America. She makes an argument for the inclusion of the African community in her works, which examine African American lives in several historical periods. Morrison appears to have facilitated her people's historical rediscovery and subsequent empowerment through her literary works. Using a historical lens, Morrison aims to restore and re-contextualise the African history that was lost to American slavery. Her works have a complex historical connection; they resemble historical fiction in that they feature African Americans who have persevered throughout American history.

Morrison primarily employs a realistic tone in her writing, portraying White people as the dominant group and Black people as the "Other" in America where racial conflicts are still unsolved. Morrison, who is African-American herself, has continued to represent the historical African-American culture in her writings. The legacy of African Americans is significantly shaped by their history. It serves as a link to their glorious past. The majority, or White people, have created American history by denigrating and distorting Black people's presence in the nation. America's history will remain unfinished if the voices of those on the margins are not heard.

The struggle based on race between African Americans and White society is a recurrent theme in Toni Morrison's writing. Her ideas on the conflict between Nigger and White are expressed through the perspectives of African-American characters and the struggles that African-Americans face. She started writing during a time when African Americans faced many injustices. Most of the main characters in her works struggle with identity difficulties and cope with the consequences of not just their own lives but also those of their ancestors, way of life, rituals, and practices. Although Morrison's writing is unquestionably steeped in Black traditions, it is never just a propaganda tool or voice for some nebulous concept of "Black worth" (Tessa 99). Although the author is clearly involved in the current African-American struggle for true equality and emancipation, her novels never blatantly support the various forms that this struggle has taken.

Paradise, published in 1998, is Toni Morrison's first book since winning the 1993 Nobel Prize in Literature. *Paradise* completes a "trilogy" that began with *Beloved* (1987) and included *Jazz* (1992). The book *Paradise* is divided into nine sections. The town where the novel is based is named "Ruby" for the first one. The names of women who have participated in various aspects of the town and convent's operations are listed in the remaining ones. Morrison describes the parallel histories of the town of Ruby and the Convent, which is located 17 miles south of it, as well as how the men of Ruby become motivated to eliminate the Convent women, even though the chapters are named after specific characters whose tales are told in them.

Morrison emphasises the horrors and tortures of slavery in *Beloved* by drawing the reader's attention to an actual episode from African American history. Following the release of *Beloved* (1987), Morrison was accorded praise that was not devoid of controversy or opposition (Gillespie 9). *Beloved* is based on the true story of slave Margaret Garner. Garner killed her two-year-old daughter and attempted to kill her other two children on January 28, 1856,

because she didn't want her children moved to the plantation where they worked. Morrison feels that the horrible issues connected to slavery are disregarded and omitted from the popular narratives of slavery, which is why she wants to bring attention to the unpleasant and underappreciated aspects of slavery. Morrison's novels force readers to confront the facts and conditions surrounding slavery in a nation that would prefer to forget it ever happened.

This paper aims to establish the literary and historical significance of Morrison's *Beloved* and *Paradise* within the canon of African-American literature. This paper will examine how Morrison gives black people a voice and an identity by presenting American history from a black perspective, challenging the largely white American discourse. This study uses New Historicism as a theoretical framework to evaluate Morrison's two books, *Paradise* and *Beloved*. This paper employs New Historicism, a theoretical paradigm that considers literary works to be historical texts and reinterprets the relationship between texts and the cultural context in which they are produced.

Morrison’s Use of History and New Historicism

History can be defined as the study of the human past as it is preserved in written documents by past generations. Partial, prejudiced, and unfinished historical records and documents might leave gaps in our understanding of the past. Thus, history is deficient. A few reasons why history is incomplete include the lack of historical records, their eventual loss or destruction, the selective representation of historical events by historians and record-keepers due to personal agendas, the interpretation of historical events that vary depending on cultural, social, and political contexts, and the suppression or exclusion of the histories of marginalised groups from historical records. This feeling of deficiency is exactly what spurs people to continue exploring previously undiscovered areas of their own lives, their communities, the present and the future (Ying 12). This endeavour is carried out generation after generation. Toni Morrison

has distinguished and continued an impressive attempt to rewrite history and recast the world from the perspective of nationality, cultural tradition, and experience in her historical novels. As a writer, Toni Morrison feels compelled to acknowledge the gaps in history and to rewrite it in her books. Morrison considers it an irreversible task to re-enact and reconstruct the truth of a historical past that could not have been possible otherwise, by re-patterning real and fictional materials. Morrison's novels possess a subtle historical resonance. Morrison believes that it is necessary to rewrite history with an inventive approach in order to discover the overlooked areas.

Literary works are seen as historical texts by New Historicism. It is indicative of a subjective reading of literature and was mostly used in Renaissance studies. Social institutions shape identity, according to New Historicism. Another type of social construct that is created by society and actively contributes to changing that society's culture is literature. A cultural creation created by multiple consciousnesses is literature. A society's literature is shaped by its social, political, religious, and economic aspects. These components permeate society through social energy that is embedded in artistic creations, transcending their historicity and serving as a vehicle for the use of texts to convey cultural ideology. New Historicism attempts this by advocating for “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Abrams 249). This historical mode is based on the ideas that history is not a set of fixed, objective facts but rather, like the literature it interacts with, is a text that must be understood; that literature, and history in particular, is a discourse that, while appearing to present or reflect an external reality, is actually composed of what is known as cultural and ideological representations; these representations primarily function to reproduce, validate, and spread the power structures of dominance and subordination that define a particular society (Abrams 249).

New Historicism views history as "cultural," whereas traditional historicism views it as "universal." The main characteristics that set New Historicism apart from Old Historicism were

its rejection of objectivity and permanence and its emphasis on the process of creating or inventing the past rather than on the actual replication of the past. While New Historicism contends that history can be known through subjective interpretation, Traditional Literary Historicism maintains that the fundamental goal of literary historicism is to attempt an objective reconstruction of the past. The current awareness is in charge of understanding the past.

It is suggested that Morrison's writings document a history of people—particularly those she refers to as ordinary people—who have been disregarded or deliberately forgotten, and they give voice to the voiceless. Although Morrison writes fiction, it is possible to argue that certain of his themes—such as lost people—are real or even biographical. She finds inspiration for her writing in the recollections and experiences from her own early years. Morrison's novels gain credibility when she writes about both her own family's history and historical events. For example, the story of Sethe in *Beloved* is based on Margaret Garner's actual life.

New Historicists view literature as a product of the era in which it is produced. To this end, they focus on literature as a cultural text, hold that literature must be studied in its cultural context, and hope to lessen racial, class, and gender injustices by closely examining how literature interacts with societal power structures. Morrison explores the various facets of the power systems that envelop members of a community in his books, which function as cultural texts. Morrison's literary works are grounded in the ways that societal constructs of the masculine and feminine are made. She clarifies the more intricate and harmful facets of patriarchal civilisations in *Paradise*, showing how these systems ruin relationships between women as well as between men and women.

Slavery and the Haunting Past in *Beloved*

Morrison views herself as a creative historian who, from a black perspective, both reconstructs and deconstructs American history. To Morrison, reconstructing history is about staying connected to the past. Morrison brings historical personae—African Americans who were victims of racial discrimination—to life by creating them as a presence in a modern environment. In order to expose the cruelty of a racist world, she gives voice to its victims.

Morrison states in "A Conversation with Gloria Naylor" that the concept of *Beloved* came from two or three small titbits of experiences she had heard from various sources (Morrison and Naylor 580). The first was the tale of Margaret Garner, a slave who ran away from her Kentucky master, Archibald K. Gaines, in January 1856, and attempted to cross the Ohio River and seek safety in Cincinnati. Gaines followed her along with many other officers. She, her husband Robert, and their four kids were seeking refuge in the house when they were encircled by them. Robert fired at the officers, injuring one of them before they were overpowered when the officers pounded on the door and charged inside. Seeing that their chances of liberation were in vain at this point, Margaret Garner grabbed a butcher knife that was lying on the table and quickly slashed her small daughter's throat—the person she presumably loved the most. She then made an attempt to end the lives of her children and herself, but before she could finish her desperate work, she was overcome and hindered. Margaret Garner refused to accept being forced to back to servitude, preferring to die for herself and her greatest love. Margaret Garner's life story ultimately served as the historical counterpart to the *Beloved* storyline.

Beloved is a classic literary work that also aims to comprehend the psychological effects of slavery on people as well as the more general patterns of culture and history. Morrison was intrigued to the historical narrative because it raised issues of love and motherhood in an era and place where life was not given much importance. It is Morrison's turn to condemn slavery

and express her desire for the emancipation of all enslaved people. Morrison writes a historical novel, *Beloved*, which examines the most oppressed period of slavery in African history, and demonstrates the historical truth that collective resistance is the only workable answer for African People. The book shows how the Black identity was successfully developed during a period when it was not granted to Black people. Morrison describes the physical and psychological torture that Sethe, Paul D., and the other slaves at Sweet Home endured in great detail, exposing the atrocities of slavery. *Beloved* helps Morrison critique the aesthetics that have dominated American society and its canon of literature in addition to speaking for the slaves whose voices were stifled.

Morrison's insistence that *Beloved* tells the tale of a group of individuals rather than a single person makes clear her deliberate focus on collective struggle as opposed to individual struggle. Morrison has stated that the book was not about institutional slavery. It deals with those unidentified individuals known as slaves, how they manage to survive, how they construct a life, and what lengths they will go to, no matter how long it takes, to maintain a relationship. Despite starting off as Sethe's story, the book eventually becomes about these people who are unaware that they are living in a historically significant period. They merely know that they must survive each day, and they are making a valiant effort to be wives, mothers, and fathers.

Beloved addresses both deconstructed history and reconstructed memory. This eerie tale of slavery and its consequences, set in Ohio after the Civil War, follows the life of Sethe who has only managed to block out a horrible memory by closing off a portion of her mind. Sethe's past existence as a slave on Sweet Home Farm, her escape with her kids to what appears to be a safe haven, and the sad events that transpire are all covered in this book. Despite her physical survival, Sethe experiences mental subjugation, and her need for love—both giving and receiving—becomes a destructive force. Morrison also talks about the challenges former

slaves have in maintaining their homes. The classic novel is no longer a suitable tool when slavery has destroyed a person's sense of identity, when the past is perceived as more real than the present, and when a dead baby's wrath may practically rock a house.

Black bodies are largely degraded by white supremacists in order to maintain power over them; this is most effectively accomplished by convincing people that Black bodies are unattractive. As a result, slavery prioritised the dehumanisation of women through the use of the body. When thinking about institutionalised slavery, it is important to recognise that the mistreatment of African American women was more important than liberation on its own. In addition to being Black, women were also the most vulnerable members of Black society itself, making it simpler to treat them cruelly. This knowledge gave White oppressors the licence to sexually abuse their victims. Since women were frequently the victims of rape, forced child-bearing and natal estrangement from their children throughout slavery, Morrison's *Beloved* amply illustrates that there is more to oppression than meets the eye. Since they were "mothers," White masters were also able to dehumanise and deprive women to a greater extent than they could have done to slave men.

Therefore, the easiest way to demonstrate the brutality of dehumanisation that ultimately drives Sethe to commit infanticide is to use instances from the book. Sethe succumbs to the dehumanising powers of her White oppressors at two pivotal points in her life. Early in her youth, Sethe is categorised as having animal features by her schoolteacher, which is the first distinctly identifiable episode in her biography that marks a turning point in her life and fundamentally alters her perspective of the future. Sethe listens in on the man's instruction as he instructs his nephews on the characteristics of humans and draws a clear distinction between them and animals. He categorises Sethe as a representative of the animal kingdom, having provided a clear illustration of the distinctions between the human and animal realms. When Sethe becomes pregnant with Denver much later in life, the second attempt takes on much

greater significance. After that, Sethe's milk is taken away to feed the nephews of the schoolteacher. Sethe is obviously upset at the theft of her milk since it robs her of her essence and most valuable resource—her mother's milk. The fact that Sethe completely ignores the pain she endures on the way to Baby Suggs's house in order to provide the milk to her children—who have already made the trip—shows how much she values her milk over her own body.

Depriving her of her motherly responsibilities and reducing her to the status of a breeder, Sethe is treated like an animal raised to provide food for humans. When Sethe finds out that her husband Halle is a witness to the incident, the humiliation reaches a breaking point. He feels less of a man because he can't defend her, so he leaves her. Eighteen years after the event that killed her child, Paul D. enters Sethe's life as the last of the sweet-home men and the only one to live. Paul D. appears ready to build a connection with Sethe. To Sethe's dismay, though, Paul D finds it difficult to accept that Sethe would carry out such a heinous deed as murder. Neither Paul D nor the black community provided Sethe with the assistance she had hoped for in her suffering.

Sethe argues that her action validates her position by saying that if the master could subject the slave children in bondage to a slow 'social death', the mother could release them through physical death. Her deed can be seen as a brave act of resistance that exposed the entire concept of slavery. Morrison seems to be urging her readers to view Sethe's killing of the child as a reworking of the stereotype of the mammy figure, rather than as an isolated incident. After she freed herself from slavery, the society had already warmly accepted her as a legitimate member and invited her to join their free community. But she only gets to enjoy her status as a Black sister for a month. The people who, due to their shared experience, could best comprehend her motivations after the abominable infanticide turned their backs on her. Sethe finds herself alone and desolate behind the confines of 124 Bluestone House after experiencing rejection. Because Sethe confines her existence to the house, she is able to discern how to

discover who she really is. The spirit of Sethe's dead kid emerges from her mind yearning for forgiveness and an explanation of what happened in the past. West African belief holds that because the past (the deceased), present (the living), and future (the unborn) coexist, the dead are not finished with the living. Ancestors who have passed away can and do interact with their descendants, particularly in cases when specific funeral customs have not been followed. A worldview like this suggests that the past and present are fluid and continuous.

Black History, Gender and Racism in *Paradise*

Another instance in which American history is repeated and the inner lives of Black Americans are revealed is Morrison's *Paradise*. *Paradise* is another novel by Morrison that uses literary archaeology to explore the unspoken spaces within the landscape of American history. *Beloved* and *Jazz*, for example, are based upon news clippings of traumatic historical events that were too terrible to tolerate or frequently left unspoken. Morrison bases these novels on significant moments in black history. The Vietnam and Civil Rights eras of the 1960s and 1970s are the subjects of *Paradise*. Morrison explores the function of narrative in the reconstruction of the individual as well as the larger society in each of her novels. But in *Paradise*, Morrison is more concerned with evaluating the function of narrative in the community at large than she is with focussing on the individual restoration process.

African American history is replete with instances in *Paradise*, such as the creation of all-black villages following the end of slavery. The entirety of *Paradise* is set in the twentieth century, with a focus on the history of the all-Black communities established in the years following the Civil War. These villages were common in Oklahoma, the setting for Paradise, and were frequently built on land that was once controlled by Native Americans. The story's main action takes place in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Civil Rights campaign—a social campaign to remove racial discrimination and segregation in American society—was

officially declared to have ended. The characters in *Paradise* are profoundly impacted by the Civil Rights Movement.

The foundation of town Ruby is racial purity, meaning that its residents are a pure ethnic community bound by an unwritten blood principle that prohibits them from being married to White people or light-skinned individuals. The Ruby people reversed the racism they experienced and thus developed a form of racism. The eight rock Black residents of the community are accepted and given preference, while the other residents face discrimination. "They shoot the white girl first" is how the book begins (Morrison 1). The skin tone designated as White emphasises how important race is. As the term implies, racism promotes the idea that one race is superior to another and works to preserve the alleged purity of a race or races. However, racism still exists in *Paradise*—that is, racism within the Black community.

The Ruby people of *Paradise* are proud of their dark skin and fervently believe that they are God's chosen people. On the other hand, they embrace White bigotry and put money and power above their own people. They erroneously believe that the White man is the devil, and they leave the oppression they experience due to their skin colour to build their own settlements. These towns are fashioned after the ones they are fleeing, though. White people and others with lighter skin tones are viewed as "outsiders" and "enemies." They take out all the non-8-rocks to purify the blood. Furthermore, the rejection they experienced from Whites and light-skinned individuals intensifies their animosity towards the outside world. It appears normal for White people in this town to despise Black people and to refuse to assist them in any way, including following the law. Even more concerning is the bigotry that permeates the Black population, contributing to a perverted culture. Not only does racial injustice persist between White people and Black people, but it also poses a threat within the Black community.

Two excellent instances of the racial issues that the Black community faces are Billie Delia and her mother Patricia Best Cato. Patricia, a descendent of one of the first eight-rock

families in Ruby, is the mother of Billie Delia. One of the members of the eight-rock families, her grandfather Roger Best, defies the blood laws by being married to a lady with lighter skin. Due to her lighter skin, Billie Delia has been subjected to harsh treatment since she was a little child. "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-rocklike you, like them, I passed the skin onto my daughter," says Patricia Best Cato, Ruby's history teacher, explaining why Ruby town has distanced itself from her family (Morrison 196). Patricia despises Billie Delia, her daughter, for bringing only shame rather than glory.

There is racial injustice within the Black community as well as between White people and Black people, which creates a perverse society. Beautiful Ruby is killed because she is black. No white physician wants to treat her. The reason for Billie's grandmother's death is her fair skin. Ruby's males won't offer assistance. Billie Delia is treated unfairly by her community as a loose woman because of her lighter skin tone. Thus, the nation's problems require a passionate commitment to racial fairness. Racial purity is the main basis for exclusion in Ruby, while gender is also a factor.

Ruby's younger generation desires to change the course of events. The older men's refusal to cede control is the true problem facing the Morgan family. The Oven discussion demonstrates that the elders respond to any challenge to their viewpoint by reciting communal history since the community's current historical narrative chronicles a protracted history of cruelty and horror. The people of Ruby refer to it as the Disallowing, from the atrocities of slavery to the present migration. This account describes how, in 1890, 158 liberated Black slaves departed "Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes" (Morrison 13). At each point along the route, they were turned away by Native Americans, White people, and other Black people because they were "too poor, too bedraggled-looking" (Morrison 14). Ruby thinks there is a historical reason for the state of emergency. Morrison, however, rejects the concept that this

strategy is optimal since it encourages abuse and corruption. Ruby's defensiveness has legitimate historical reasons, but that doesn't excuse guys with quasi-fascistic tendencies like Steward Morgan, who does nothing in response to the Convent attack. The story of the Disallowing, according to Ruby's elders, is an ideology that permits them to use any level of terror or violence as long as it serves the town's shared interests. Like others in their generation, Decon and Steward Morgan aspire to write their own history. Their history stops being a document that can be changed with every generation and becomes a closed book. The males of Ruby maintain a belief in their own manufactured past, but the moral foundation for this belief has been shaken, and the elders now hold onto it more out of an instinctive need to hold onto their influential position at all costs than out of moral conviction.

While the story in *Paradise* emphasises the value of honouring Black history, it also looks at how a community can become overly envious of its past. Ruby has preserved its past in a way that jeopardises its ability to change and react to the present; it has been imprisoned in a single instance of their shared past. The rebellion that results in the Convent massacre is sparked by Ruby's residents' refusal to accept their own children's demand to take part in the community's lived experience.

Conclusion

Black American experiences are contextualised and African American history is revisited in Toni Morrison's novels. She explores what it means to be black in her writings. Rewriting African American history from a black perspective is one of her main priorities, and she describes her writing as an archaeological inquiry. She investigates how black existence is shaped in American society by the interplay of race, class, and gender. Morrison's writing explores the black experience in white America and aims to reconcile the conflict that is part of her African American identity. Being aware of her own marginalisation in the mainstream,

she cherishes her existence on the periphery since it is richer and more intricate. For her, as a socially conscious literary artist, realising the gaps in conventional history and rewriting it from a black perspective is an irreversible act. Morrison believes that it is irreversible to rewrite the history of individuals who have been marginalised and forgotten in the canon of existing history. Morrison captures in her books the struggles and intricacies of African American existence, from the traumatic history of enslavement to the aggravatingly prejudiced present. Morrison creates a new history for her characters and African Americans in books like *Beloved* and *Paradise*, empowering them to look back on the scars of a shameful past and strive towards a better future.

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