



HEGEMONY IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*



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ABSTRACT

African Americans have undergone much trauma which has had a significant impact on their lives. Though the generally recognised source of their trauma is the experience of slavery and racism, this study uses Toni Morrison's Paradise to demonstrate that hegemony (which encompasses race, gender and class) are accountable for the plights of African Americans. Hegemony examined at the level of race is mirrored through different dimensions like internalized racism, institutional racism and intra-racial racism. Moreover, the study also focuses on gender

through which the different forms of patriarchy revealed in Morrison's texts are decoded. We examine the difference that exists between the oppression of white women and that of black women. Hegemony in class unveils the economic difficulties that characterize the African American community. Analyzing Paradise from the perspectives of African American Criticism, the study concludes that hegemony has led to the stratification of the American society as a whole and the black society in particular.

KEYWORDS : *Paradise, Hegemony, race, gender, Class*

RESEARCH PAPER

This study examines hegemony as a predominant concept in the African American female author Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1999). Morrison's novels are known to depict the tribulations of the African Americans. She shares common concerns with other black writers in America such as Maya Angelou, Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Alice Walker and a host of others. *Paradise* explores the vast history of African Americans; a history that stretches from the period of the abolition of slavery to the postmodern period. In each era we observe the perennial problem of racial, gender and class. The persistence of the issue of hegemony in her novels reveals the inability of the African Americans to build a peaceful society by learning from their past. Moreover, unlike many black writers, Morrison reveals that the quest for power and the ability to subdue a weaker group of people is not exclusive to racists. Rather, it is an innate characteristic of man; race notwithstanding. It is as a result of this that she goes beyond the atrocities of racism to explore the subjugation of black women by black men (gender), and the subjugation of poor blacks by rich ones (class) within the black community.

Consequently, the African American society seems to be stratified following a certain hegemonic order with whites over blacks, Mulattos over blacks, black men over black women, rich blacks over poor ones and even African American adults over the youths. The conflict between the oppressors and the subalterns causes destruction in the African American society in particular and the American society at large. In order to carry out this study we will be relying on the notions of African American Criticism. African American criticism brings us closer to the black people, their history, culture, beliefs, music, religion and all the different sectors through which hegemony is exposed as will be discussed subsequently. But first, we will proceed with defining the major theme hegemony as will be used examined in our study.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The main term used in this topic which requires detailed definition is hegemony. *The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World* edited by Joel Kreiger, traces the origin of the word hegemony back through the Thucydides Classical Realist. History of Peloponnesian wars in the fifth century B.C. The reconceptualisation of this term is however attributed to Antonio Gramsci, a Marxist philosopher. Joel Krieger explains that this reconceptualisation comes from Gramsci's attempt to explain the relationship that exists between power; stability and order in international relations, as exposed in the work entitled *Prison Books*. This concept is said to be used in such

debates as the question of the United States hegemonic decline and also, the history of Britain in the 19th Century and the Soviet Union in the Communist world between 1945 and 1989. Joel Krieger goes further to reveal the definition of hegemony by Gramsci's followers. (*The Oxford Companion to Politics of the World*, 354-355)

The Gramscians view hegemony as “conceived by different groups and classes in a civilization or political order.” Hegemony to them is not just at the level of nations or state, but also at the level of civilizations.

The classical Realists define hegemony as a dominant state (e.g. Athens, Rome, Britain and the United States) exerting hegemony on the other states. The ruling class or elites “exercise hegemony and leadership by articulating and synthesizing conceptions of general interest, so that their material power is embedded in, and strengthened by, political concert”. In other words, the ruling states exert hegemony by reforming ideas and societal norms, in a way that will rather enrich their material and political power (355).

Merriam Webster's Online Dictionary defines hegemony as preponderant influence or authority over others: the social, cultural, ideological, or economic influence exerted by a dominant group. They give the example of the European intellectuals' debate on the hegemony of the American culture all over the world. Hegemony here goes beyond political borders to ideological, social and cultural aspects in a community.

A Dictionary of Modern Legal Usage gives us a simpler and explicit definition of the term hegemony as fundamentally political; it posits that it has been “imported” in non political contexts such as socio cultural aspects. This is true as sociologists have their own definition of hegemony. Another definition is seen in *Men and Masculinities: Theory, Research and Social Practice*;

Hegemony commonly used to describe the domination of one class, nation or group of people over others. It was extended by Gramsci to denote a more general and intellectual dominance, especially when hegemonic ideas influence people's political and cultural perceptions. (153)

This will serve as our working definition. We will examine hegemony as the domination and control of a group of people by another or other groups within a nation. Within the sociopolitical milieu, we will study the political hegemony of the white race at the detriment of other races such as the black race and the Native Americans. Apart from political milieu, we will examine

hegemony at the level of gender and class. We will expose the fact that, while men believe they are superior to their women, the upper class oppresses the lower class.

Theoretical Framework : Our Study will be guided by African American Criticism. African American criticism came up in the 20th century and is developed by the Black Art movement, led by emerging talented African American writers like Henry Louis Gates, Ralph Elison, Richard Wright, Angelina Grinbla, and Marina Bauner. In *Critical Theory Today*, Lois Tyson reveals that, this form of criticism evolved alongside Post-Colonial criticism and both tend to have a number of similarities as they are based on “the experience and literary production of people whose history is characterized by extreme political, social and psychological oppression” (363). That is to say, these theories study the lives of people whose history is characterized by intense subjugation. Lois Tyson also explains that, African American criticism is all about “...a number of recurring historical and sociological themes all of which reflect the politics—realities of political, social and economic power of black American experience” (388).

John Lye presents in his online publication a number of considerations that characterize African American criticism. To Lye a study or reading of African American writing, should involve the textual or aesthetic elements and the cultural or ideological values. Moreover, Lye notes that African American criticism contains the idea of identity and representation. That is, it studies the identity defined by himself. This could be seen in the way Whites painted a dark and ugly image of the African Americans, a representation that the blacks did not approve of. Because of this, Blacks seek to show the valuable characteristics that make up their identity. They valued their songs, myths, folklore, language (the broken African American English) and above all their history. All these aspects summed up, make up the African American identity.

Charles E. Bressler in *Literary Criticism; An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, declares that: “African-American Criticism challenges established ideologies, racial boundaries, and racial prejudice.. (210)” Through Bressler’s depiction of African-American criticism, we realize that this theory plays a great role in debunking internalized ideas of black writing and black art which is often relegated to the back ground. As John Lye points out, it promotes the history and culture of black people, taking into consideration their experiences especially those of racism. African American criticism therefore becomes a useful tool in the study of race and its effects on black people and black art. From the perspective of this critical approach, racism becomes a major characteristic of African American criticism and Lois Tyson gives us an insight to this notion.

Racism, according to Lois Tyson is “the unequal power relations that grow from the socio-political domination of one race by another and that result in systematic discrimination practices (for example segregation, dominion and persecution)” (387). Tyson argues that for a person to be a racist the person has to be in a position of power; that is a member of the dominant race like the Whites in America. Racism however goes beyond this level, for we are introduced to what is referred to as institutionalized racism.

Institutionalized racism is an organized form of racism that is legally implemented in the different societal institutions and services such as schools, train stations, bus stops and hospitals. This form of racism is prominent after the abolition of slavery and right up to the period of the fight for civil rights by African Americans. It is an era that is greatly exploited in American and African American literary works, for even at the level of literature, only texts by white authors are recognized by school authorities and only such books are put in the school program until the emergence of prominent black writers like Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison and Richard Wright. These writers have produced award winning works that are now recognized by the American government and academic institutions. Institutionalised racism had a very significant impact as it resulted in internalised racism. (*Critical Theory Today*, 383)

Internalised racism is the psychological acceptance of racial inferiority. Lois Tyson uses in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to demonstrate this concept of internalized racism. Pecola Breedlove an African American girl believes beauty resides in blue eyes. An equal example of black self-denigration is seen in Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* through Shorty, who willingly allows himself to be oppressed by whites. To counteract this psychological flaw, African Americans by the 60’s fought for the assertion of black identity through statements as, “Say it loud; I’m black and I’m proud” (*American Journal of Sociology*, 868).

Intra-racism on the other hand is a form of discrimination between African Americans of light skin and racial tampering and those of dark skin with more African features (*Critical Theory Today*, 383). Because the light skinned bear some features of whites, they are often looked upon to be more refined and superior to other blacks. This gives the African Americans of light skin the feeling that they are next to the whites in superiority. This brings about conflict among African Americans.

Another important concept in African American criticism is the Oral tradition. In this field, Lois Tyson distinguishes Orality from folk motif. Orality, he says, gives a literary work “a sense of

immediacy by giving readers the feeling that, they are hearing a human voice (385). Oral tradition is shared by Africans and African Americans. It is a form of narration that is often exploited by African American Playwrights to give the reader the impression that he is being told the events. The reader is moved by the detail description and suspense as if he is part of the events.

Moreover, similar to this is the idea of folklore. This is another aspect that characterizes the African American tradition. Folklore involves practices like singing, storytelling and other rituals which serve as a way of maintaining the society and continuity with the past. The narration of personal or group stories, traditional wisdom is passed down through generations. This is a peculiar aspect of the African American tradition as it creates a link with the African tradition.

The subjugation of the black woman happens to be another important concept in African American criticism. The African American woman suffers from male subjugation. It should be noted that for African American women, the struggle for proper recognition becomes difficult because they have to break the boundaries set by their race as well as the African American patriarchal system. In order to change the fate of the black woman, African American writers resort to recurrent literary strategies like the attribution of the role of the narrator to Black women, in order to resonate the tragic experience of the African American woman in the patriarchal system.

Hegemony in Race : Section one of the 1850 American constitution read: “No Negro or Mulatto shall come into or settle in the state after the adoption of this constitution” (Carol Petett, 8). This constitution like many others that are made after the abolition of slavery, left the ex-slaves and freed men very perplexed. These people had no land of their own; nor did they have a place of settlement or cultivation which is the main source of revenue at that time. In the online essay; “African American Westward Migration” Pettet notes that “Although no longer enslaved and considered freedmen they did not enjoy treatment under the law. Freed people could not testify in court against a white person nor could they vote” (Par 7) Racism against black people is the tragedy that Toni Morrison unfolds in the history of the ancestors of the people of Ruby. The irony in all this is the name they bear “freedmen”- free men who are not free to settle where they wish to, who are indirectly still subjugated by the government and rejected by the population. Petett tells us that white societies continually refused blacks in the West. Some states require blacks to pay a bond to guarantee that they will behave right. Others just reject them. Morrison

emphasizes that they are rejected by whites, even poor ones, yard dogs and jeered by prostitutes. The pain of this rejection remained implanted in their memories. The African American folklore tradition made it possible for their experiences to pass unto their grand and great grandchildren through tales.

Zechariah Morgan, the head of this migratory group, gives all details of this painful journey to his son Rector and grandchildren Steward and Deacon, with the aim of instilling in them a passion for their community. Steward and Deacon implement rules and regulations that favour their inheritance of the community Ruby which they consider their paradise. This land is void of white people, white rule and white hegemony and all is done to conserve this seeming state of freedom. In her interview with Elizabeth Farnsworth, Morrison gives a typical characteristic of a 'paradise', which explains the actions of Steward, Deacon and the other rulers. She says "All paradises, all utopias are designed by who is not there, by the people who are not allowed in". This statement somewhat justifies the Morgans' radical rejection of whites. This form of isolation from the society is what makes the land special, as Toni Morrison points out in her interview "The isolation, the separateness, is always a part of any utopia". However, she affirms that it is this same isolation that destroys the society. "Well, isolation you know carries the seeds of its own destruction...as it did with Ruby". In other words, the Morgans' attempt to protect and isolate their paradise from the rest of the world only leads to Ruby's destruction.

Moreover, the implementation of institutionalized racism made African Americans feel that they are inferior, ugly and despicable hence internalized racism. This led to their gradual fascination for white beauty as earlier seen in *The Bluest Eyes*. The Mulattoes or light skinned automatically developed an air of superiority due to their resemblance to Whites. Darker African Americans looked at them in utter admiration. However, as these light skinned African Americans view the others as inferior, a profound form of segregation is born as the dark skinned grow to despise the light skinned. The same hatred they reserve to white racists is transferred to them. Patricia in *Paradise* reflects on the history of the ancestors of Ruby during their migration. The narrator describes their encounter with the people of Fairly, a town of light skinned African American racists. Zechariah and his people thinking they had met all forms of discrimination are shocked as "Now they saw a new separation; light skinned against black" (194). Zechariah and his people are among those who had dark skin with real African features. As a result of this, they are given food but not even a night's shelter. They are asked to leave immediately. Zechariah and his

people were a reminder of the seeming ugliness of black people-all that the mulattoes hated in themselves-hence intra-racial racism.

Zechariah later reflects that even if they accept to live in such a society, “their daughters would be shunned as brides; their sons chosen last; that colored men will be embarrassed to be seen socially with their sisters”. This is a painful thought as these people had never expected this form of segregation; segregation among African Americans. The trauma caused by this experience is so intense that these blacks decide to live in a society void of mulattos. They in turn get to practice intra-racial racism in Ruby. They call themselves the 8-rock of pure race (*Paradise*, 95). They kept their promise and in order to make their decision permanent, they imprint this doctrine in the minds of their children through tales and even plays acted to reinforce this tradition. Nevertheless, they fail as one of the descendants of the 8-rocks gets married to a person of “racial tampering” and even though he is constantly treated with contempt the super 8-rock pure race is defiled.

Hegemony in Gender : In *Paradise*, the history of the people of Ruby is narrated in a purely patriarchal way. One hears little about the contribution of women. Their utility during the migration era is not mentioned. The men of Ruby like their forefathers are sexist. This implies that the community is founded by men and is still ruled by them. Their women through generations, sought to carry out what they believed is their own contribution to the community; that is their domestic obligations. This novel unveils the fact that gender varies greatly with culture and that the men of Ruby are patriarchal. Their emblem, the oven, reflects patriarchy as Julie Cary Nerad explains in her article “The Oven”. “Built in Haven, Oklahoma, in 1890 for communal cooking, the Oven became a symbol of the patriarchal community’s unity and a testament to the fact that none of the community’s women ever cooked in a white kitchen” (257). It becomes obvious that unlike the black men, black women have a double battle; their race and their sex.

Dovey, Steward’s wife is worried as she believes that her husband is dissatisfied with her cooking. She complains to her sister Soane “...he complements my cooking then suggests how to improve it next time” (82). Control is very important to these sexist even if they have to extend it to the kitchen. Soane however comforts her, telling her that “...I wouldn’t worry about it if I are you. If he is satisfied in bed the table won’t mean anything” (82). In other words, the black woman’s sole utility resides in her husband’s satisfaction. Morrison actually brings out a

contrast in the distribution of gender roles for men and women. While the Morgan men talk on land, property, lineage, construction, their wives talk about their husband's meals and how to satisfy them in bed.

The men of Ruby see their wives only as "home keepers", and this explains why Deacon is happy that he has a wife who "...was beautiful as it was possible for a woman to be; she kept a good home did good works everywhere" (112). The woman's quality is evaluated at three levels: her beauty, her sexual and reproductive abilities and her servitude. Power, control and wealth were male attributes. Male sovereignty over women as an attribute to culture served as a justification for their misuse of power, thereby leading to degradation at the level of the family and the society as a whole. The massacre of the five ladies at the convent is actually in reaction to the fear of being emasculated.

Hegemony in Class : The importance that Americans attribute to wealth contributes greatly to hegemony in the society. Toni Morrison studies this aspect at the level of the white and black society. It should be remembered that after the abolition of slavery, whites especially in the South are not ready to see blacks evolve. Consequently, they refused to give away some of their land to blacks because they are totally against the idea that blacks should own property. Their fear of blacks owning property is backed with the logic that power follows possession. Whites did not want to envisage an era when blacks will become wealthy and powerful enough to defy them. Due to this, whites used all legal and illegal means of cheating blacks and robbing them off their possessions. To this effect, blacks, tired of working for whites in exchange for miserable forms of remuneration, went west in search of virgin land they could own and exploit. This is the case of the blacks in *Paradise*, whose ancestors move west ward in search of land but also in the desire to move far away from all form of racist rule over their society. They created all black towns in which blacks could live freely without the fear of being oppressed by white racists. Examined from this point of view, blacks are nothing but harmless victims. Morrison in *Paradise* presents the part played by blacks in oppressing themselves through the power of wealth.

Within the African American societies, there is an incessant quest for wealth and power. Morrison uses Steward's reflection to narrate another experience of Zechariah and his people during their migration. With the creation of new all black towns, announcements were often written in newspapers, advertising available settlements areas for homeless free-men. Zechariah and his people come across one of such towns through an advert with the hope of integrating in

it. When they get there, to their greatest dismay, they discover that the people of who referred to themselves as “self supporting” Negroes (14), found them too poor, wretched and filthy to settle in their land. They are not given the chance to move in. The rejection is so painful and humiliating that they wondered if these people had actually shared the same history of slavery like they had done. They then posed the following question, “We free like them; is slave like them. What for is this difference?” (14)

From the above event, the 8 rocks bore an unforgettable grudge against their brothers of the same race. This explains why the Morgan’s, having built up their town, drive around the other black towns like tourists, admiring their devastated and crumbled states. They gain pleasure seeing all these prestigious towns crumble and are hypocritical enough to attribute the misfortunes of these blacks to “the mystery of God’s justice”. God seems to be for the chosen people of Ruby like He was with the Israelites and not for the blacks of the other black towns who represent the Egyptians.

However, the Morgans (Steward and Deacon) are not insensible to wealth and power within their society. With this, they do everything possible to make sure that they have total control over the economy of Ruby. Deacon enjoys driving his “brilliant black sedan” over a distance of “three-fourths of a mile” (107). This distance he could cover in no time, but for the pleasure of seeing people admire his car, he drives slowly enjoying the glances full of admiration thrown his way. Toni Morrison criticises this in the statement “The silliness of driving to where he can walk in less time that it took to smoke a cigar...” (107). Deacon and Steward are at the apex of aristocracy in Ruby. This is reflected through their wealth and authority in Ruby. It is important to note that they are descendants of the famous Zechariah Morgan who organised and led the migration that got them out of white oppression. Moreover they are at the centre of wealth as they control the only bank in Ruby.

Needless to say this power earns them more of veneration than respect from the people of Ruby. Consequently, all the decisions they take and are not contested. Deacon enjoys this privilege to the fullest. He often “laughed along with friends at his vanity...” (107). The whole idea of moving his car around does not end at his desire to be envied but also stretches to a psychological possession of the town. He goes round the town checking and admiring. Anna Flood complains bitterly about this attitude by saying “See. Just look at him...why does he have

to hover like that? (113). To this Reverend Misner replies “He’s just checking on things...Got a right doesn’t he? It’s sort of his town...His and Steward’s” (115).

The bank of Ruby set up from the contributions of all the 8 families represented in the 8-Rock appellation is actually controlled by the Morgans. The bank their father had set up had crumbled, so though one gets the impression that it is the same bank, it isn’t. It now belongs to the community and not to the Morgans. However, the Morgans treat it as though it is still a property of their inheritance. More to this is the fact that all the business people and even farmers are in a sort of vicious circle with the bank. They borrowed money for their farms and investments and a good part of their profits come back to the bank through the huge interest rates levied on them. Thus, the Morgans become wealthy daily at the detriment of the people of Ruby, the people they are expected to help evolve. Not only do they control their resources, they have them dangle as puppets. Consequently, though all the families are somehow shareholders of the community bank, only two people seem to make the maximum use of its profits. Morrison, through this, turns the solidarity image often said about black people into a myth.

Conclusion

It is paradoxical that blacks should isolate themselves as far as ninety miles away from other towns, and apply the same forms of oppression they dread in their communities. They escape racism and exercise racist tendencies on a white woman till her death. They form their own hegemonic groups, the Mullatos who are fair skinned, the black pure race, the wealthy blacks and of course the patriarchs. Morrison deconstructs the image of black solidarity. She reveals that they are before anything human and though they have a common history of slavery they remain men like all men who are more interested in power than virtue. The question becomes, if blacks had been in the shoes of white slave masters would they have acted so differently? Or will we once more accuse whites of having transmitted such tendencies to black people like some inherited culture? This also reveals Morrison’s refusal to be judged by her race and sex. Her race and sex is often than not a source of prejudice as one will expect her at all times to hail black people and victimize black women. Or, many read her books only from such perspectives. However, Morrison is a liberal writer whose stories are before anything just a reflection of mankind in spite of the race or sex.

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