

THE HEALING POWER IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

ZENG NA

School of Foreign Languages,
China West Normal University,
Nanchong, Sichuan Province, P. R. China.

E-mail: nanazeng2000@163.com

Abstract

Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, devotes herself entirely to writing to serve African American needs and heal the trauma especially for black women. As the last novel of her trilogy, Paradise continues to touch the issue of healing within the black community. On the basis of close reading, this paper analyzes the healing power in the novel, which can be found in the female healer and the healing community of the Convent. The aim of this paper is to present Morrison's vision of such an issue, her highlight on the importance of female guidance and the bond of sisterhood, by which trauma can be healed and peace and wholeness can be restored.

Keywords: healing power, Toni Morrison, Paradise.

1. Introduction

As one of the major African-American authors, Toni Morrison dissents from what she calls the whiteness of the American literary canon, which puts her on a mission to write for and from within the African American community and to serve the African American needs to heal from the slavery trauma. As a woman writer, she is also concerned with the practice of women relying on one another for direction and strength. In contrast to a culture that has marginalized African-American women, novels by African-American women writers often celebrate the heroic struggles and courageous role of healers who have helped their sisters not only to endure but to prevail (Morrison). For example, Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* initially becomes her own healer through letters to God, but, Celie finally learns to encounter the heart and the hands to comfort her with the arrival of Shug Avery.

The issue of healing has also been presented in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998), the third novel of her trilogy which includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). Distinguishing itself from the earlier texts in this trilogy, this novel attaches much emphasis on the possibilities it contains for healing the traumas and injustices of African American women. In the novel, the group of oppressed women eventually found shelter

in the Convent and shared a sisterhood of oppression. Through its focus on the community of women whose members overcome past trauma by learning to relate to and depend on each other, the novel seems to argue that the strength of love lies in its being communal, not individual. By exploring the woman healer especially the leading healer by the name of Consolata and the healing community by the name of the Convent, this paper seeks to disclose that Toni Morrison devotes considerable attention to this special bond of sisterhood which is powerful and has the tremendous force that heals, bringing peace and wholeness.

2. Analysis of the healing power

2.1 Consolata ----The Leading Healer

In the world observed by *Paradise* (1998), Ruby is founded by descendents of former slaves who struggled to leave behind the racial and economic oppression they experienced during the period of slavery. By allowing no outside encroachment, the citizens of Ruby guard against further oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behavior. When another community, seventeen miles outside of Ruby, known as the Convent, was built by a group of women who had fled from their lives, the male citizens of the town begin to feel threatened. Because the Ruby men refused to allow any new ideas, beliefs, or ethnicities to interfere with their sense of racial pride and community, the Convent was seen as "dark and malevolently disconnected from God's earth" (18). However, perfect as it seems, Ruby remains dead to change, static. It is in the Convent, where the inhabitants have been marginalized by the rigid code of behavior in Ruby: adulterers, unmarried pregnant women, alcoholics, and women fighting with their husbands or other authority figures in the community, the real healing process takes place.

The healing power, manifesting itself in care of others, can be found in the character of Consolata, who demonstrates an almost magical ability to save others. As a former Catholic nun, Consolata is able to speak to multiple deities, read minds, and raise the dead. Consolata is portrayed in the novel as a magical woman who has a kind of "bat vision"---- "she ... see[s] best in the dark" (241). Lone call it "stepping in," and Consolata said it was "seeing in". "Thus the gift was 'in sight.' Something ... made it possible for her to accept Lone's remedies for all sorts of ills and to experiment with others while the 'in sight' blazed away. The dimmer the visible world, the more dazzling her 'in sight' becomes" (247).

Consolata's gift of "in sight" is similar to what W. E. B. DuBois term "second sight" in *The Souls of Black Folk*: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil and gifted with second sight in this American world---a world which yields him no true self-consciousness but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world" (DuBois 1903:19). With this gift, she "saw ... what took place in the minds of others" (248). With this gift, she is able to step in and perform the practice of "raising the dead".

Initially, Consolata complains that "she did not believe in magic" (244), and she considers it "devious" which goes against her Christian faith. Lone, Ruby's sole root worker and midwife, argues: "You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from his elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world"(244).

When she eventually accepts Lone's beliefs, she begins to teach the other women at the Convent the importance of connecting the material to the spiritual, the body to the soul. In terms of the sensation of feeling bodies connected to one another, she states:

My bones on his the only true thing. So I was wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter. Where is it lost? Hear me, listen. Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve. (263)

This concept disrupts the thinking of the Ruby men who label the Convent women "[b]odacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" and "take aim. For Ruby"(18). This exertion of patriarchal control defines who and what is Good and Evil, which women are Mary, which are Eve. It divides women from each other and their bodies. Thus, the novel deconstructs the patriarchal way of women and divisions.

Consolata also teaches the women at the Convent to share their experiences and suffering with each other. The "loud dreaming" sessions bring together strategies found in Morrison's earlier texts to create a holistic spiritual method for healing the women's minds and bodies: "[I]t was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale"(264). Because all of their bodies ache, there is no one voice of authority here. Because each woman has experienced violence, humiliation, and trauma, each gains the power to make connections between the speaker and her own tale. Consolata's unique therapy of "loud dreaming" not only encourages the women to confront and acknowledge their past traumas, it also allows them to recognize similarities between their own and others' experiences.

Through her magical way of healing, the repressed is allowed expression, the unsaid is articulated, the unfelt is felt to climax, and the empty becomes full. The women change. They become more "sociable and connecting," they appear "calm" and have a more "adult manner" (266). "[U]nlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" by their individual histories (266). As Nancy Peterson proposes (2001:1), if history is a "wound," Morrison provides readers with a way to heal the traumas of history where mind, body, and nature are harmoniously connected beyond any conventional means.

2.2 The Convent---the Healing Community

The healing community is as significant as the healing bond of sisterhood. In Paradise, the Convent serves as the refuge for the afflicted who have been battered, molested, shunned, and abandoned. There is a specifically female need for such a haven, for those who seek solace are "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying" (222). As opposed to the community of male dominated Ruby, the Convent is composed of all women. It is not difficult to note Morrison's endeavor to come up with an alternative form of writing, which is from within the African American community and without the gaze of men.

The traumas of black women then come nearer to our vision, just as W.E.B. DuBois defined in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that African American double-consciousness is an internalized self-hatred which is triggered by the awareness of a double identity whose component parts are in conflict (DuBois 1903:615). During centuries of slavery, pain is so dear to the African American soul that it almost came to be identified as a specific African American feeling. The pain now ensures the continuity between a historical trauma that has not yet been fully surpassed and must be acknowledged.

Mavis, the woman we are first introduced to, is a woman labeled by newspapers and social workers as criminally insane. What else can explain a mother who leaves her twin infants to die of suffocation in a car? Paradise provides some possible alternative explanations that draw from the repressed horror and tragedy developed in *Beloved*: a mother's love for her children being so strong that she would rather they go to

Heaven at the expense of her own soul to prevent them from suffering extreme and constant abuse. So distraught is Mavis over what she has done and that she still has not prevented her other children from the horror of abuse her husband performs on her daily that she flees. Initially going to her mother's, Mavis soon realizes that her own mother, like her older children, will conspire against her because of the strength of the social norm that children and women need to have a father and husband.

Like Mavis, the other women who end up at the Convent must deal with repressed hurt and learn how to escape cycles of abuse. Grace, or as she first calls herself, "Gigi," to the denial of the name her mother gave her, is so dependent on the approving gazes of men that she reduces herself to sexual flirtation. Seneca was abandoned by her mother and cuts her arms with sharp objects obsessively to have some sense of feeling to her body, using the physical sensation to substitute the emotional pain. Pallas, who eventually becomes "Divine," witnessed her mother committing adultery with the man she loved and thereafter developed an eating disorder. These women are drawn to the Convent where the abundance of food seemingly sprouts from the soil as if the garden is Eden, where the unconditional love and forgiveness of the consoling Consolata, allow free expression.

These women from diverse backgrounds and diverse environments come together into a sisterly bond magnetically drawn by the compass of Consolata, the spiritual healer, the embodiment of soil and blood organized not by mere genealogy but by emotional suturing and forgiveness. Since individual approaches can very often lead to distortion, the community's love for its members is always generous and supportive, aiming at empowering people who have been through similar forms of oppression. Staying together in the Convent, the women can open their experiences to creative expression and sisterly affection and learn to convert pain into understanding and mutual nurturing.

Magali Cornier Michael describes the community of the Convent as an empowering instance of collaborative struggle for healing: "Morrison's *Paradise* depicts women characters acting collaboratively on the basis of particular, temporary, intersecting subject positions connected to a common history of oppression in order to resist and/or move beyond specific forms of injustices perpetrated by an exploitative racist and sexist American culture" (Michael 2002: 646). By putting their shattered fragments of selves together, these women help each other to counterbalance the wounds that are in most cases caused by deeply disturbing experiences. However, continuing to be haunted by stories of their past traumas, the people of Ruby relentlessly repeat the story of the Disallowing, which stands in sharp contrast to the healing power over the women in the Convent. These people internalized the shame and hatred they had experienced and passed on their past traumas to their descendents who consequently would become even more exclusive and intolerant than their persecutors.

As a more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusions of Ruby, the Convent is not so much a space of religious retreat in the conventional sense. In fact, it is a place of healing where women can protect and look after each other. Although the women "left the Convent off and on", they "always returned"(49), because the Convent is not just a community of women; it is a community where men do not have to rule, and where the rules for belonging do not have to be exclusionary.

3. Conclusion

At the beginning of the novel, a group of men from the town of Ruby, anxious to exert their power, creep into the Convent and commit the brutal attack on the women. And in the novel's climax, these women, including two who are pronounced dead by multiple witnesses in the text, escape into "another realm," a spiritual door or window in the sky. It is true that the novel ends up with nine Ruby men's bloody assault on the Convent women, yet it is the men who lose the battle. Just as Reverend Misner states, "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"(306). Ruby has eventually becomes "an necessary failure", while the Convent women are expected to return or reappear "with blazing eyes, war paint and huge hands" to "rip up and stomp down this prison (Ruby) calling itself a town"(308).

By this novel, Morrison reinforces the theme that one can overcome with the guidance of others, usually a female other. And through unearthing the theme of healing, Morrison herself has become what Marjorie Pryse terms a "metaphorical conjure woman," a medium who "make[s] it possible for ... readers ... to recognize their common literary ancestors (gardeners, quilt makers, grandmothers, root workers, and women who write autobiographies) and to name each other as a community of inheritors"(Pryse 1985: 5).

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