

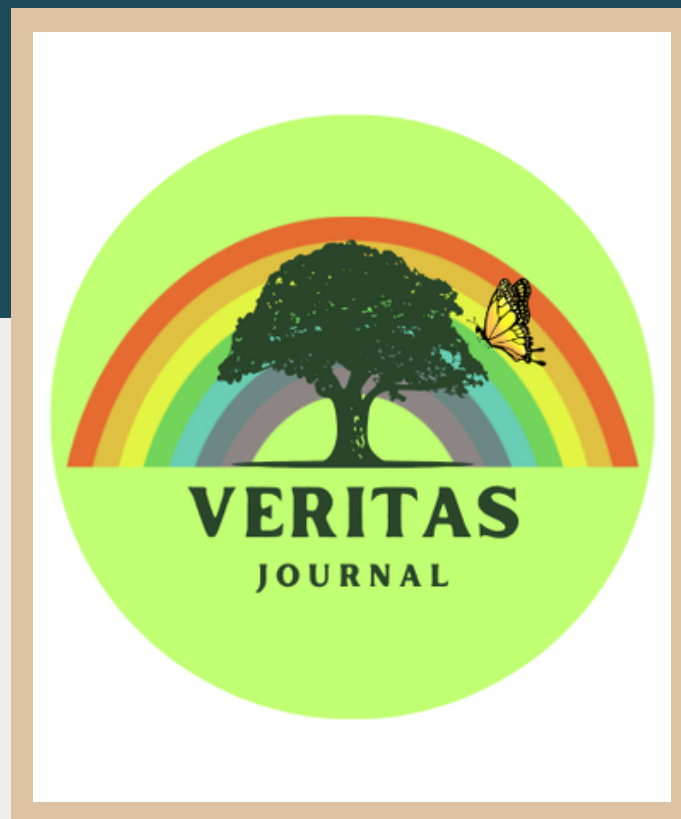
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A STUDY OF UNRESOLVED MASCULINITIES IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE* AND *THE BLUEST EYE*: THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF EXORCISM

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Abstract:

All gendered behavior is after all a performance. Feminine and masculine manifestations of identities from communities are collective in nature and susceptible to stereotyping and typecasting by the judging gaze of the outsider. But there is a reason for them to be so. Newly emerging identities as a result of socio-political liberation with an evolving awareness of the self and a newfound consciousness undergo a sustained tension between the past trauma borne by their marginalized and oppressed position on the one hand and internalization and emulation of hegemonic behavior and ideology of the colonizing master on the other. The present paper attempts to trace this tension in the colonized self as 'Other' hinting at the impossibility of an exorcised consciousness. The paper looks closely at the performative masculinities in two of Toni Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise* trying to go beyond gender stereotypes to the agonized, warped and claustrophobia ridden consciousness of the black man.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, black masculinity, spectral, hegemonic masculinity, racism.

The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past.

William Faulkner

Central Argument

The black men in Morrison are haunted by a history that has denied them a stable masculine identity; in attempting to perform the masculinity they believe will restore their power, they reproduce the structures of domination that produced their wounds. Their violence against women therefore becomes a revenance—the return of an unresolved historical trauma—and their attempt to exorcise the threat outside themselves ultimately fails because the ghost is within them.

Introduction: Masculinity as a Haunted Performance

This paper intends to look outside the immediate ambit of the obvious spectrality in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*¹ and *Paradise*, beyond the spectral figures, the liminal spaces and the 'ghosted' (Anderson n.p.) women that haunt these works and that are so well traced, analysed and discussed by Melanie Anderson when she traces spectrality in the novels of Morrison. The paper intends to take a look at the black men in these novels who find themselves in the grip of their newfound/superimposed, historically and politically composed masculinities and a suddenly surfacing gender anxiety. Tormented by

¹ All further references to "The Bluest Eye" will appear in the text in parenthesis as (*TBE*)

repressed emotions, haunted by their past, shadows of their former selves, these are mentally mutilated men who individually or collectively project their darkest fears and unspoken and sometimes ‘unthought known’ apprehensions onto someone who they consider more vulnerable than them, compelled to act the way they do. For these men, who are constantly battling ghosts, the skeletons in their closet outweigh their material problems. For them, there seems to be no transition, no redemption, no way out of the eternal torment as they fail to understand their own manhood and succumb hopelessly to a white model of patriarchal masculinity turning into ghostly and ghastly figures, embodying ‘the ultimate form of male domination encapsulated in violence’ (Gallego 55).

The Ghosts of Manhood: Historical Trauma and the Black Male Subject

The most overwhelming presence in the novel *The Bluest Eye* is that of the bluest pair of eyes which is oddly never seen but always an ‘absent present’. Like this ubiquitous central motif which eludes the eye, coaxing the reader with the ‘premonition of its arrival’² (Punter 262) to read on, overseeing the narrative, taking us through it, there are other apparitions too that make themselves visible, not to the naked but to the discerning eye. In sharp contrast to the unemployed, alcoholic and abusive³ black father Cholly Breedlove is the presumably nice, well-off, absent, white father of “Dick and Jane”, the master of the lovely house described in the opening pages of the narrative who provides for his children and ensures that, like Pecola, they are not ghosted⁴ and do not end up wandering in the space between dream and reality, the real and the unreal. The overweening presence of this reassuring white father is juxtaposed with Cholly’s incompetence and worthlessness, establishing the stereotypes of essentialist white and black masculinities; it can also be seen as a revenance⁵ or an uncanny returning of the two white men who had exploited Cholly’s vulnerability years ago by catching him in his first act of lovemaking and forcing him to carry on while they watched:

...When he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder...there stood two white men...there was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it...Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up, all in one motion. The men had long guns... “I said, get on wid it. An’ make it good, nigger, make it good.”...With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers, and underwear...Cholly, moving faster, looked at

² Drawing from Derrida’s suggestion of the eventual arrival of the apparition Punter shows the paradoxical and uncanny presence in an absence, a premonition of arrival which will never be fully removed or replaced. (Punter 262)

³ The stereotyped black masculine as 1)violent 2)sexual and 3) incompetent. (Jackson 123)

⁴ Anderson attempts to understand Morrison’s ghosted women in the light of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock’s description of a ghost who he says is “... that which interrupts the presentness of the present...and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story, that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events.” (Spectral America 5)

⁵ The word ‘revenant’ occurring in Derrida’s discussions when he talks about the anticipation involved in waiting, how it is ‘at once impatient, anxious and fascinated: this the thing (‘this thing’) will end up coming. The revenant is going to come.’ (qtd. Punter 262)

Darlene. He hated her...the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile (*TBE* 115-116).

Cholly Breedlove: The Return of the Emasculated Man

What should have been a beautiful intimate experience marking the transition from boyhood into maturity for Cholly, becomes a cheap pornographic act, shattering Cholly's masculinity even before it has taken shape and becoming a nightmare, coming back to taunt him and haunt him for the rest of his life, reminding him of his mental impotence.

Dick and Jane's father has nothing in common with the two white men except for the racial association which is why they have a lot in common since their superior critical gaze from a position of power and privilege are on Cholly, judging, ridiculing and inferiorising him, sometimes covertly, sometimes overtly. Denying Cholly his rightful entry into manhood and appropriating his sexual prowess to cater to the white men's voyeurism implies a symbolic emasculation⁶ or depriving the black slave of his phallus which is one of the many violent residual memories embedded in the African American masculine unconscious. The lynching which these white men resort to stems from the entrenched disposition of white hegemonic masculinity to be perversely fixated on the black male body as a site of sexual activity and physical excess and also symbolizes the myriad ways in which racial oppression is practiced.

The white men invisibilise and infantilise⁷ the individual Cholly at once, by reducing him to a performing diminutive and making a spectacle out of him. The narrative tells us that Cholly goes in search of his father after this incident – a frightened little child in search of a reassuring parent after a terrible nightmare, only to be disowned a second time. He tries to repress these ghastly encounters, keep the skeletons firmly locked up in his closet and a period of relative peace and happiness follows when Cholly meets Pauline and after a brief courtship marries her. But the repressed always returns and so do these ghosts, dragging along with them, phantoms from a bloodied and violent past that had stood witness to the emasculation and the 'picnic(king)'⁸ of Cholly's ancestors at the hands of their white masters in numerous plantations.

From Repression to Revenance: Cholly and the Violence of Return

In her book entitled *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, we see Melanie R Anderson put Cholly Breedlove in the category of 'social ghosts', who, she sees, has an opportunity to 'shape his identity' the way he wants to as he seems to be 'isolated and disconnected' from his community and his past (18-24).

⁶ Jackson talks about the two most common forms of punishment meted out to black men by white slave owners for offences ranging from general to grave, one of them being 'emasculation or '...cutting off the penis. This removal of the phallus symbolized the denial of black masculinity.' (124)

⁷ Gallego refers to Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* in which he says how "...Black men were literally treated like boys, not adults, and systematically denied their manhood, thus feminized, or even castrated – physically but also psychologically. (footnote Gallego 53)

⁸ The two punishments Jackson talks about one being emasculation and the other a picnic, "...the social etymology of the term..." being "pick a nigger" when "...white slave owners would bring their children, wives and friends, to witness the hanging of a black slave who was deemed disobedient." (Jackson 124)

But how rootless and free can Cholly really be given his traumatic past? Repressed memories translate into unwarranted fear and violence which is projected on the most vulnerable. Dealing with a marital relationship which is more like a festering infection than any kind of bond, and yet clinging on to the ghost of this once beautiful relationship (the only meaningful relationship he probably had), Cholly finds himself wavering between two worlds, two spectral spaces; transfixed on the crossroads of love and estrangement, battling physical and psychic impediments, repressing anxieties, warding off ghosts...in a curious and inexplicable combination of rage and tenderness he rapes Pecola, his own daughter:

“Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt...the sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love...Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened-why wasn’t she happy?...He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet.” (*TBE* 127)

Whether the act amounts to an attempt to reclaim a lost manhood or is the manifestation of a repressed emotion or the return of some hidden trauma and its projection onto someone vulnerable or all of this, it reduces Cholly to the category of the stereotyped and much feared and abhorred black man embodying violence, depraved sexuality and a criminal mindset. If these ghosts shadow Cholly like bloody apparitions leading him on to do terrible misdeeds which result in and are the cause of his undoing and that of his daughter and the entire community, stigmatizing black masculinity, there are other subtler, less explicit apparitions floating in the labyrinthine darkness of the unconscious which perhaps haunt Mavis’s husband Frank in *Paradise* leading him to abuse and torment his wife. These cunning ghosts refuse to come out in the open, directing and pulling the strings from behind the curtains, resulting in discoordinated and unsynchronised movements from the ones they control: a smile followed by a blow, furtive sex followed by withering looks, a desire to love coupled with a desire to hurt. In the unconscious of these men are intertwined the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely, the strange and the commonplace in an inextricable coil.

Ruby’s Patriarchs: When the Master’s Model Becomes the Black Man’s Own

The town of Ruby regarded as “Paradise” by its elders is ironically nowhere close to a Paradise. True, it speaks of success stories and abundance, material prosperity and community living, the upholding of an ethos and adherence to a way of life, but it fosters many evils which manifest themselves in the running of a society given to exclusionary and prejudiced practices. There’s a deep-rooted narcissism in the elders of Ruby who are proud and possessive of their unadulterated, unmixed and undiluted blackness. This narcissism is tormented by the shadow of the memory of the “Disallowing” when their ancestors were turned down by light-skinned Africans for being too black and asked to go and settle elsewhere. This is very much a part of the collective racial memory of the inhabitants of Ruby and a reason for their exclusionary practice of maintaining the *pure blood* (italics mine) feature in their community. Thus the town of Ruby, run by patriarchs is based exactly on the white, hegemonic xenophobic model of racial intolerance, proving the incapacity or inability of the blacks to exorcise the ideological ghosts of their white masters.

The elders of Ruby, the patriarchs who have laid down the rules for the village, epitomize hegemonic black masculinity which unfortunately is completely modeled on the lines of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and feel threatened by the women in the Convent who follow a different set of rules and have their own means of subsistence.

The Convent as Threat: Masculinity, Possession and the Fear of Powerlessness

The women haunted and traumatized by a past they desperately want to get away from, have sought refuge in the Convent and forged a life of their own. The elders of the village are men who started their lives from scratch and rose from the ranks without any interference or assistance from whites or other communities. They laid down the rules determining the social practices of the village that rested on a loyal adherence to strict binaries. Women were to manage the house and raise babies while men would work and provide for them. Ironically these men are proud of their ethnicity; however what they fail to see or realize is apparently how deeply they have internalized the rigidification of the gender-specific roles laid down by white-supremacist patriarchy which relegates women to a domesticated existence and urges men to understand and realize their masculinity in being responsible for the family's upkeep which primarily and finally means running the house, earning money and making decisions: an essentially male prerogative.

The humiliations and endurings of the past, return to torment the patriarchs of Ruby and in the women of the Convent, they see reflected, their rejection and irrelevance. The fear of erasure and being reduced to a state of powerlessness and insignificance once again, which is a constant underlying anxiety, surfaces and translates into their 'fear of the evil eye'.⁹ The fiercely possessive makers of Ruby take upon themselves the task of guarding her jealously and warding off the evil eye, in this case, the women in the Convent, who can mean nothing but harm for the people of Ruby.

The women become witches, their routine activities become sinister rituals and witchcraft, and the Convent becomes a site that needs cleansing. The men, in showing a great deal of reluctance in accepting the Convent as a possible home or haven for the homeless, also symbolically negate their original homes¹⁰ - the wombs of their mothers: the original prehistoric home; since the Convent is nothing less than a womb, taking everyone into its protective fold and breathing new life into near-dead tormented souls. Their zealous crusade to the Convent and the subsequent massacre of the women reinforces the desire of the fetus to control the womb which Mary Daly explicitly proves through the metaphor of the "vehicle" and the "astronaut" and the notion of the "vessel" in her book *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of*

⁹ Freud in *The Uncanny* talks about the fear of the 'evil eye' and attributes the origin of the fear in a person when he "possesses something precious, but fragile, is afraid of the envy of others, to the extent that he projects onto them the envy he would have felt...what is feared is thus a covert intention to harm, and on the strength of certain indications it is assumed that this intention can command the necessary force." (Freud 146-147)

¹⁰ Freud describes the womb as the original home of every man at the same time indicating the discomfort certain men feel about female genitals which implies their reluctance to return to their original homes. (Freud 151)

Radical Feminism. She quotes Ellen Frankfort who comments on Thomas Ford's likening of the fetus to an astronaut in a spaceship:

It takes a certain kind of imagination to assume guardianship for something lodged within another's body – a rather acquisitive proprietary imagination that fits right in with the conception of a woman as a spaceship and the contents of her womb as an astronaut (Introduction 30).

The Failed Exorcism: Violence, Loss and the Persistence of the Past

The elders of Ruby would like to have total control of the vessel which had started steering on its own through the women in the Convent. Possession of the vessel combined with an unexplained dread of the original prehistoric home, the dark chamber, prompt them to project their fears onto it and destroy it.

Though Morrison makes the women living in the Convent blur the boundaries of the spaces defined by binaries and transcend the material world to continue existing in a liminal world as spectral beings and reach out to people healing troubled and traumatized souls, for the men in Paradise, the torment is not over. We see the men as the sum of their losses. They are shadows of their former selves. Steward's lost ability of taste is suggestive of his lost ability to enjoy the finer things in life. No interest in 'quiet flavour' is how Dovey, his wife sees it. His material gain is exactly proportionate to his personal loss. Deacon too, haunted by his memories with Conie, cannot come up clean, in front of his wife.

Ironically, in what seems to be a gynophobic move, the men claim to have cleansed the Convent of all evils but fail to exorcise themselves, free themselves from the ghosts and spirits of the past. The erasure of these women doesn't salvage the situation. If anything, the task becomes harder. But they realize this too late in the day. Victims of their own misdeeds and folly, now begins the slow painstaking task of healing, of trying to redeem themselves. Small changes are gradually visible.

The Unresolved Man: Masculinity Without a Model

Caught between older cultural understandings of male identity and the patriarchal model imposed and reinforced under slavery. The newly freed black man inherits a deeply contradictory conception of manhood: on the one hand, the desire to assume the role of provider, protector and patriarch; on the other, the pressure to emulate the white master's more coercive and dominatory model of masculine authority. As bell hooks observes, enslaved black men were encouraged to aspire to patriarchal responsibility as a marker of manhood, while many subsequently adopted the dominator model of white masters, reproducing violence within their own families and communities. In Morrison's Cholly and Frank, and in the patriarchs of Ruby, this unresolved inheritance produces a masculinity unable to reconcile vulnerability with authority, and dependence with the demand to provide and control.

Both, a witness to and a survivor of the trauma of emasculation at the hands of white masters, the black man in his new found freedom is again symbolically emasculated¹¹ by the black woman in the race to

¹¹ E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) presumed that contemporary problems among black communities stemmed from the destruction of the black family, as the female-headed household replaced the patriarchal order. The erosion of the traditional male role led generations of studies to contend that gender identities among black men developed pathologically, creating a sense of social impotence both inside

empowerment through employment. Caught between two worlds again, the distant ethnic world and the recent world of plantation with its defining value system, these men are helpless preys caught in the vicious tentacles of the past, prodigal children of morbid histories who do not wish to do disservice to any ghost. Since earning a livelihood is a remote possibility, the desire to be powerful and assert that power manifests itself in the form of violence and oppression.

One bears witness to both, individual instances of sporadic violence in a domestic space along with calculated and organized violence inflicted on women within a social space with an intention to control and wipe out resistance as a determining feature of black masculinity. New found masculinity,¹² in the need to assert itself, battling with old ghosts, some known, some belonging to the realm of the ‘unthought known’, runs amuck in the absence of a model; like a many-armed monster, it is awkward, directionless, purposeless and predatory. In the indiscriminate and unexplained violence inflicted on black women by black men, we see an inability to be decolonized, a “revenge” or a compulsive return of the abuse of black slaves at the hands of white masters which was used as a strategy to control and rule.¹³

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Exorcism

What we see in these novels is the black man’s predicament as he struggles with an eternally ambivalent model of masculinity that he is expected to assume and live up to. Haunted by the ghost of historical emasculation on the one hand and a compulsive need to assert his manhood in an accepted way on the other, he finds himself caught in the simultaneity of two worlds: one shaped by a memory that was inherited through culture and the other, the internalised white supremacist patriarchy that slavery leaves behind. The newly acquired indicators of masculinity—economic independence, the role of provider, master and decision-maker of the house and authority over women—does not stand to salvage the black man for it is an unconscious emulation and roleplaying of the master’s model. That is precisely the tragic predicament of the men discussed in Morrison’s works: they try to assert their power and in the process they end up reinforcing the very patterns and systemic structures which emasculated them.

Cholly and the men of Ruby are face different circumstances, belong to different generations and social geographies and yet the connection is unmistakable. They are both haunted by the same ghosts. Cholly’s violent behaviour is the result of a deep psychic wound that was inflicted on him in his adolescent years, right at the juncture when he was on the verge of being initiated into manhood. The “founding fathers” of Ruby turn a painful past marked by rejection, invisibilisation, humiliation, alienation and subjugation convert a collective racial memory of rejection, humiliation and dispossession into paranoid obsession to control and territorialise the women of the Convent.

and outside of the family. (Buckner 9)

¹² Gallego talks about ‘slavery’s traumatic legacy’ and how ‘...the foundations of the Black community rely heavily on a White model markedly flawed by racist and sexist prejudice. (Gallego 53)

¹³ When slavery ended...black men often used violence to dominate black women which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slavemasters used. (Hooks 4)

Ironically, their attempts to free themselves of these shadows by projecting them onto the women/ girls is an exercise in futility. The massacre that the men carry out at the Convent is as futile as is Cholly's act of forcing himself on his daughter. Neither act reclaims their lost and emasculated manhood. The women become the site and vessels of masculine anxiety and while they are destroyed, the men are not rid of their anxiety. The narratives seem to repeatedly convey that the men will not be able to let go or exorcise themselves of the past ghosts through violence because the haunting is within.

Morrison portrays black masculinity as complex and layered and does away with the simple dynamics of victim and perpetrator. The male characters have been victims of unimaginable trauma and violence but are unfortunately also reproducing the same violence and inflicting it on those lower in the hierarchy. They do not have an unbroken past to return to, and they are also unable to play out the hegemonic model of masculinity without being violent and dominating.

The black men are therefore ghosts from a traumatic past, akin to avenging furies that have come back with a purpose, refusing to leave or die down till they have attained what they set out to and, when they retreat, if at all they do, leave behind ghosts and spiritual wrecks, residues and relics of what once was the black man before he was enslaved, mutilated, emasculated and possessed. The impossibility of exorcism lies not in the failure to banish the ghost, but in the realization that the ghost has become inseparable from the self. The haunting continues because history continues to inhabit the present.

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