

## Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to examine the major writings of Toni Morrison which addressed the issues of race and the outcomes of racial discrimination such as for instance dehumanization through slavery or destruction of identity. The works chosen are mostly Toni Morrison's later novels such as *Paradise*, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child*. Other crucial writings by Morrison concerned with the problematics of race are discussed as well. The analysis focuses on her oeuvre exploring black identity and experience (particularly the experience of African American women) in the United States as well as on the views on race and racial prejudices.

In the introduction, the construction of race and racism is discussed in the context of American history. The analysis of the most pivotal historical moments, such as the enactment of the hereditary slavery law of 1662 in Virginia or the civil rights movement in the 1960s, reveals various issues stemming from the institutionalised racial discrimination such as disenfranchisement, anti-miscegenation laws or racial segregation. The subsequent subchapters encompass the definition of race, highlighting a scientific discovery by Stephen Oppenheimer, which proves that all humans have one common birthplace in Africa. This research demonstrates that race is not a biological reality but a social construct. Lastly, it explains how racial hatred, assumed racial superiority and consecutive discrimination are criticised in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison.

The first chapter is focused on Morrison's portrayal of the devastating effects of racism and sexism in *Paradise*. The novel examines racism within an almost paradisiacal and utopian place of an all-black town called Ruby in rural Oklahoma and focuses especially on the black female experience as the majority of this novel is narrated by female characters. The strict ideology and patriarchy of Ruby seem to be endangered by women living in the nearby Convent, who are autonomous and live by their own rules, accepting everybody who comes there. The central act of *Paradise* is the deliberate and brutal slaughter of the Convent residents performed by Ruby's leaders. Nevertheless, the racially "pure" town fractures as a result of their actions. Morrison engages with the critical race theory and incorporates the element of "racelessness" in *Paradise* as the "race" of her characters is often not specified, even though it differs. The racial hatred between light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans in Ruby springs from the community's long and traumatic history and demonstrates that sterile isolation from the outside world is not the solution for black communities in the post-civil rights era.

The second chapter explores the early stages of the slave trade in the time of colonial America during the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. *A Mercy* is set in this historical period portraying the coexistence of slavery and white indentureship, which exposes a time when slavery was not yet racialised. This novel explores the roots of racism as well as the concepts of human freedom in the early days of America. Morrison gives a voice to all the marginalised characters undergoing slavery in *A Mercy*, even though they belong (sociologically) to many different races. Their lives and personal experiences are captured through various innovative narrative strategies such as non-linear narration, multiple narrative perspectives or discontinuity persistent throughout the whole novel. Morrison portrays a plethora of forms of enslavement in *A Mercy* to provide an in-depth exploration of the concept of slavery and subsequent racism.

*God Help the Child* represents Toni Morrison's last novel and explores how the sufferings of childhood can have long-term effects on the life of an adult and on the acceptance of one's identity. This novel depicts the tragic childhood of Bride, who is a victim of racial prejudice and discrimination due to her ebony skin tone. Bride experiences this discrimination not only from society as a whole, but also from her light-skinned mother. Nevertheless, Bride is able to make peace with her past and become successful in her career. Her transformation to an empowered woman is closely linked with the philosophy of black feminist theory, which celebrates the minds, bodies and consciousness of African American women. This chapter displays the detrimental effects of racism and a corrupted society by showing how they affect the most vulnerable members of our society: children.

All these later novels written by Toni Morrison use different strategies to present the abhorrent reality of racism and racial discrimination in our society. In the closing chapter of this thesis these strategies are compared and analysed in order to realise the similarities and differences in Toni Morrison's portrayal of race in her literary oeuvre. The theme of "rememory", making peace with traumatic past full of unspeakable events and the use of fragmented narration are only a few strategies that contribute to the unique presentation of slavery, racism and racial hatred in Toni Morrison's later novels. Morrison puts the social construction of race at the centre of her novels and examines its meaning and value in society. The significance of her novels in the examination of what race actually is and how it affects our society is apparent, especially in the context of recent events such as the Black Lives Matter movement or George Floyd protests in 2020. The fact that our society is still remarkably shaped by the concept of race highlights that we have not yet reached the post-racial era and therefore, the examination of race and racial injustice is of paramount importance.