

UNIVERZITA KARLOVA V PRAZE – FILOZOFICKÁ FAKULTA

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR



Diplomová práce

Michaela Brzobohatá

Community in Toni Morrison's Novels

Komunita v románech Toni Morrison

Prague, June 2012

Vedoucí diplomové práce:
Pavla Veselá, PhD

Declaration:

Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně a pouze na základě uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Praze dne

I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned.

Prague, date.....

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank my supervisor Pavla Veselá, PhD and Michael Sitcov.

English Abstract

Toni Morrison deals with the topic of community to a greater or lesser extent in all of her books. Being influenced by her own upbringing, she has always been aware of the role community plays in one's life and its influence on an individual. Community can both save you and forsake you. The nature of black community has been changing, according to Morrison, and so has her view of it. Her writing career reflects these alternations, revealing a significant change in her perspective. Looking at her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, her third novel written seven years later, *Song of Solomon*, and her seventh novel, *Paradise*, written in 1998, this thesis traces the way her position alters throughout the years. Being opposed to both radical separatism and blind assimilation, Morrison first proposed return to traditional African values as the possible cure for the black community destroyed by the forces of capitalist society. Later in her career, however, Morrison changes her ideology and suggests as a remedy a community that does not exclude the unworthy, but is open, caring, and inclusive. By evolving from individualism to individuality, communities that will include everyone can be created.

Czech Abstract

Toni Morrison se zabývá tématem komunity ve větší či menší míře ve všech svých románech. Díky výchově, které se jí dostalo, si vždy byla vědoma role a vlivu, jaký komunita na jedince má. Komunita nás může zachránit, ale i zavrhnout. Toni Morrison věří, že charakter černošské komunity dostal výrazných změn. Její kariéra spisovatelky odráží tyto transformace a odhaluje výraznou změnu autorčina postoje. Tato práce sleduje pomocí analýz jejích románů *The Bluest Eye*, vydaného v roce 1970, její třetí knihy napsané o sedm let později, *Song of Solomon*, a její sedmé knihy z roku 1998, *Paradise*, způsob, jakým se měnil její pohled na komunitu. Toni Morrison byla jak proti separatismu, tak proti asimilaci černošské komunity. Jako možnou záchranu černošské komunity před rozkladem, ke kterému dochází vlivem hodnot kapitalistické společnosti, Morrison nejprve navrhuje návrat k tradičním africkým hodnotám. Později ve své kariéře se však od této myšlenky odvrací a řešení nalézá v komunitě, která nevyklučuje nevhodné a nehodné jedince, ale je otevřená, pečující a inkluzivní. Přejedem od individualismu k individualitě vzniká komunita, která zahrnuje všechny.

Contents:

1. Introduction	7
2. Community – Theoretical Background	13
2.1. African Traditions and Values	14
2.2. White Society.....	18
2.3. Conclusion.....	21
3. <i>The Bluest Eye</i>	23
3.1. Images of White Ideals of Beauty	24
3.2. Accepting White Standards of Beauty and the History of Racism	26
3.3. The Breakdown.....	31
3.4. Conclusion.....	35
4. <i>Song of Solomon</i>	36
4.1. The Deads.....	37
4.2. Pilate’s Family	44
4.3. Healing.....	49
4.4. Conclusion.....	53
5. <i>Paradise</i>	56
5.1. Ruby	58
5.2. The Convent	64
5.3. Conclusion.....	69
6. Conclusion	71
Bibliography	74

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 as Chloe Anthony Wofford in Lorain, Ohio. She studied at Howard University and later at Cornell. She worked as an English teacher, but in 1965 she became a senior editor at the Random House. Thanks to her, many African American works are being published. Morrison published her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, in 1970. *Sula* was published in 1974, followed by *Song of Solomon* (1977), *Tar Baby* (1981), and *Beloved* in 1987. In 1993, Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, becoming the first African American woman to win the prize. Morrison continues to publish until the present day; her most recent works include *Paradise*, *Love*, and *A Mercy*.¹ She has always been interested in community and racial issues which are increasingly topical nowadays, not only in the United States, which is witnessing its first African American President, but all around the world. It seems that our current society is experiencing racial and ethnic diversity and interaction at an unprecedented level, as people of different races and ethnicities live together side by side worldwide.

As Elissa Schappell points out, when in Lorain, Morrison learned the importance of community. Morrison describes it as “both a support system and a hammer”² and she deals with it to a greater or lesser extent in all of her novels. She grew up listening to folktales of the supernatural and observed her grandmother keeping her dream book and foretelling the future. Her father taught her to view the world critically and question the standards of beauty and success.³ Adama Soro claims that when Morrison later started writing, she drew from this background to investigate inter- and intra-racial relationships as well as to treat themes such

¹ Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Preface to *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and K. A. Appiah ed. (New York: Amistad, 1993) 13.

² Elissa Schappell, “Toni Morrison: The Art of Fiction” in Jan Furman ed. *Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon: A Casebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) 234. Further referred to as *Casebook*.

³ *Casebook*, 234.

as the individual versus the community. Her main concern is to show richness of the past, stress its importance, and contrasts it with new values.⁴

Morrison has been highly interested in the changes the community, sometimes called neighborhood, has been undergoing. In her conversation with Robert Stepto in 1976 she explains:

My tendency is to focus on neighborhoods and communities. And the community, the black community – I don't like to use the term because it came to mean something much different in the sixties and seventies, as though we had to forge one – but it had seemed to me that it was always there, only we called it "Neighborhood." And there was life-giving very, very strong substance that people got from the neighborhood [...] And legal responsibilities, all the responsibilities that agencies now have, were the responsibilities of the neighborhood. [...] If they [community members] were sick, other people took care of them [...] [A]nd every woman on the street could raise everybody's child, and tell you exactly what to do and you felt connection with those people and they felt it with you.⁵

In another conversation with Charles Ruas in 1981, Morrison talks about the importance of mythology. She believes mythology to be immensely important for black community. The community has to pass from one generation to another the mythologies, given qualities, stories, and assumptions which will keep them intact if they do not join the mainstream culture group. She thinks that the "consequences of the political thrust to share in the

⁴ Adama Soro, "Living Together: African Community-Based Values in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*," *Sciences sociales et humaines*, Revue du CAMES Nouvelle Série B (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007) 295.

⁵ Toni Morrison in Robert Stepto, "Intimate Things in Place: A Conversation with Toni Morrison" in, Danielle Taylor-Guthrie ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 11. Further referred to as *Conversations*.

economy and power of the country were to disperse that.”⁶ She explores the forces and influences of an individual and community on one another and examines traditional familial and communal values and compares them to the current ones.⁷ Each of the analyzed novels explores some of the dangers and shows their consequences.

Looking at three novels from different time periods —*The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Paradise* (1998) —I will analyze her treatment of community and show whether or not it has changed over the years, and if so, how. The prominent theme seems to be the critique of African-American communities for adoption of white society’s and capitalistic values. She considers values such as materialism, patriarchy, the nuclear family model, or the greater importance of an individual over the community dangerous if adopted by black communities, as it can lead to madness, death, and communal breakdown. However, there seems to be certain development of her view over the years. Initially, in *The Bluest Eye*, she appears to be critical mainly of the white society which oppresses the black community. At the same time, nevertheless, she condemns the black community for adopting the values of white society and for forsaking their racial identity. She introduces the traditional African storytelling as a possible cure. It is not, however, fully developed. In *Song of Solomon*, an effective remedy for the damaged black communities seems to be suggested; namely, the return to traditional African values such as the notion of an extended family, the importance of a whole community rather than the individual, storytelling, and the belief in magic and healing. In the most recent published analyzed novel, *Paradise*, Morrison diverts from her solution as it seems no longer effective. Even though the African values are still present in the book, they cease to work and she proposes a more inclusive type of community as a solution. Moreover, she tends to be more critical of the black community for adoption of the values that are destructive.

⁶ Toni Morrison, in *Conversations*, 112.

⁷ Soro, 295.

Initially, the African values and cultural heritage will be discussed, mainly with the help of Melville J. Herskovits's book *The Myth of a Negro Past*. Moreover, this will be contrasted with the white society that has an immense influence on the African-American community and which was shaped mainly by the emergence of capitalism and its values. Lastly, the contemporary views on society represented by Benedict Anderson will be discussed. Subsequently, the three novels will be analyzed.

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, (1970) Morrison portrays an African American community in which some of its members lose touch with their own identity by adopting white values, especially white standards of beauty. Since in white-run society at that time, whiteness was equated with beauty, cleanliness, and superiority and blackness with ugliness, filth, and inferiority, the main character Pecola assumes she can only be loved or considered attractive if she is white. As a result, she not only loses her identity, but her mind as well. Morrison introduces the theme of storytelling as one of the traditional African values that helps the characters make sense of their lives. Moreover, the destructive power of community is portrayed when Pecola is ostracized by her community and made a scapegoat.

Her second novel, *Song of Solomon*, (1977) further explores the loss of identity caused by the adoption of white values by a black community. This time, however, Morrison focuses on the danger of rejecting the traditional African extended family – and in a broader sense the whole community – in favor of the selfish materialistic individual and for the black community destructive model of nuclear family. Moreover, Morrison criticizes white patriarchy and introduces a strong female character, Pilate, that was very important in traditional African communities. Pilate proves to be of great importance in the main character's quest for his identity and the discovery of his heritage. Generally, the book criticizes the values of new capitalistic black community adopted from the white capitalistic society and urges the black community to return to their roots and African heritage.

Paradise (1998) delves even further into the dangers of patriarchy and goes on to explore the adoption of racism. After experiencing racism from both whites and blacks, the leading men of the group adopt this method and create an all black community which favors individuals of a darker skin color and ostracizes those with lighter skin. The community also adopts the values of capitalism and patriarchy as the men control everything both morally and financially. In the book, a whole group of women is killed, supposedly in order to protect the community. The importance of a female character is presented again, as women serve as guides for the community's recovery. As Channette Romero explains, the communal history has to be healed in order for the individuals and the whole community to "reimagine" the future.⁸ In *Paradise*, Morrison introduces a new remedy for the decaying community as well. She hopes that, as Michael Magali says, the community moves "past racism and patriarchal structures toward an alternative non-hierarchical form of justice that emphasizes coalition and community."⁹

It seems that black individuals and consequently black communities in Morrison's fiction have lost their sense of identity by being ostracized and oppressed by white society. Yet, instead of turning to their own traditional values in order to maintain their identity, the black communities portrayed by Morrison adopt white values. This is ultimately, according to her, destructive. Initially, she seems to believe that the return to African values is life - and community-saving. However, over the time she appears to come to believe that this is no longer sufficient and suggests a new solution. She criticizes communities based on isolationism and patriarchy and the way they try to achieve equality, and she claims that African American communities continue excluding and marginalizing individuals.¹⁰ Only

⁸ Channette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" *African American Review*, (Vol. 39, No. 3, 2005) 415.

⁹ Michael Magali. *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingslover, Castillo, Morrison* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006) 166.

¹⁰ Romero, 421.

communities that are inclusive and more open provide human beings “the strength to cope with difficulties in a constructive way.”¹¹

¹¹ Magali, 174.

2. Community – Theoretical Background

As Michael Magali points out, the notion of community is an old one. However, its modern versions have been conceived in various ways. Aristotle believed that people formed communities to fulfill their basic needs and to find meaning in life, whereas Thomas Hobbes argued that community forming is a process of people coming together to maximize their self-interest. According to Magali, it is obvious that the dominant paradigm in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century is more based on the Hobbesian notion of community.¹

To argue that Toni Morrison in some of her books praises the African values and sees it as a remedy for the once strong African-American community that is, according to her, disappearing or decaying, necessitates an examination of African values and traditions. There has been a great effort to analyze which features in African-American community and society are African, and which have been formed after the contact with America. It is a difficult task, but its complex history and development makes African American culture so unique and specific. According to Melville J. Herskovits, there has probably never been a people that was nearly completely stripped of its social heritage, as the African people brought to America. “Through the force of circumstances, they had to acquire a new language, adopt new habits of labor, and take over, however imperfectly, the folkways of the American environment.”² Using his book, *The Myth of a Negro Past*, I will sketch the African values and traditions that are in some way related to those Morrison draws attention to in her books. Moreover, the idea of African (African-American) community will be contrasted with Western idea of society, formed mainly after the emergence of capitalism and compared to the ideas of society of a distinguished contemporary philosopher, Benedict Anderson.

¹ Magali, 15.

² Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of a Negro Past* (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1990) 4.

2.1. African Traditions and Values

It is no doubt an extremely difficult task to analyze the surviving African traditions and beliefs in present-day African-American culture, as Herskovits is quick to state. There has always been an enormous problem as far as material is concerned and, what is more, the traditions, beliefs, and values differ from individual tribe to tribe. However, there are some patterns that could be traced especially in the area of West Africa, which was according to Herskovits the heart of the slaving belt and from which came the people who have left the most definite traces of their cultural heritage in the New World.³ Those traditions are also of a great significance for the analyses of Toni Morrison's novels.

One of the most important features to be analyzed is the notion of family. It differs from the Western⁴ norm in many respects and not even the contact with it in America caused a complete diversion from the African type. It is evident, according to Herskovits, that division of social units based on kinship in terms of immediate family, extended family, and sib is widespread.⁵ The immediate family consisting of the father, his wives, and their children is but a part of a larger unit and is recognized as belonging to a local relationship group termed the extended family. Extended family is "a well organized institution which affords a more restricted relationship grouping than the sib (clan), and finally the sib itself, comprising large number of persons."⁶ The nature of society and the notion of family affect other areas of life as well. The principal occupation is agriculture and the landholdings are conceived in terms of family rather than individual right. The man holds the ownership of the produce but he does not own the land itself. As Herskovits points out, women are mainly sellers in the market which enables them to retain the gains for themselves and eventually to become financially independent.⁷ According to Herskovits, these societies are stable as the

³ Herskovits, 60- 68.

⁴ To be precise Western capitalist type, to be discussed later.

⁵ Herskovits, 82.

⁶ Herskovits, 63.

⁷ Herskovits, 62.

“economic aspect reinforces the social one in a peculiarly intimate manner.”⁸ The spirit behind the numerous types of cooperative societies of Africa tended to be kept alive by the very form of group labor employed on the plantations. The cooperative spirit is rooted in their cultural heritage and it was not crushed by slavery, but rather it emerged in the form of a Negro economy.⁹

The family is characterized by its polygamous nature as well. The substance of the polygamous system brings about a different place for women in the family, and their relationship with their children. As the child shares his father with the children of other women, there is a much greater attachment of the child to the mother than to the father. All the responsibilities of upbringing, discipline, and supervision are the province of the mother rather than the father.¹⁰ The importance of a woman in African families was retained in America and, in the 1930 census “showed a larger number of families with women as heads among Negroes and among whites.”¹¹ The role of the women in the family is so important that the term “matriarchal” came to be employed when describing this type of family. Moreover, there are a number of households with old women as the heads of large numbers of children of irregular structure.¹² In these families, the women are the sole breadwinners and they enjoy greater independence and freedom. As Herskovits further points out, the old women watch over the children and participate to a great extent in the upbringing of their grandchildren. The father always has a place in the family, but the tradition of the paternal control and the function of the father as the principal provider, essential to the European pattern, is not followed.¹³ Herskovits also points out there was no difference made between men and women

⁸ Herskovits, 63.

⁹ Herskovits, 140.

¹⁰ Herskovits, 169.

¹¹ Herskovits, 173.

¹² Herskovits, 173-174.

¹³ Herskovits, 180.

in the field and as far as the workload was concerned during slavery, leading to greater equality between them compared to white, capitalist, western societies.¹⁴

As Herskovits further explains, in the kinship system, the ancestral cult is the fundamental sanction. The power of men does not end with death, as the dead are an integral part of life. The dead are honored with extended and expensive rituals to assure the ancestral good will. Funeral is actually in many West African tribes the true climax of life.¹⁵ The dead are, according to him, regarded as close to the forces that govern the universe and are believed to influence the well-being of their descendants who properly serve them. The worship of ancestors supports all social institutions based on kinship, giving them that measure of stability and integration that has been frequently remarked upon by those in contact with African tribes. Moreover, even though it is evident that the Africans converted to Christianity in its varying forms in the New World, the ancestral cult has not disappeared altogether, especially its spirit.¹⁶ Extremely important within the African family is the role of the elders, as Herskovits also notes, whose power is based on the closeness of their relationship to the ancestors who give them their authority.¹⁷

The importance of a proper burial and funeral is also connected to African belief in spirits and ghosts. According to Herskovits, they hold true that if a man is not properly buried, his angry spirit comes back. Moreover, the spirits of the dead are also regarded dangerous if death occurs in some strange manner. They assume that they might return to the scenes they knew when alive.¹⁸ This is closely connected to African view on the supernatural and magic. Magic is extremely important all over the area. Herskovits supposes that magic is not hard to understand for Europeans, however, its underlying philosophy is more obscure and not so simple. The outward manifestations encountered everywhere are the charms people wear on

¹⁴ Herskovits, 173.

¹⁵ Herskovits, 62-63.

¹⁶ Herskovits, 198-199.

¹⁷ Herskovits, 81-82.

¹⁸ Herskovits, 205.

arms, legs, or necks and the practice of the widespread principle of “like to like.” The knowledge of how to manipulate the specific powers that reside in specific charms is also prevalent. As Herskovits explains:

Characteristically, a charm has certain taboos which its owner or wearer must observe lest it lose its power, while its ownership entails certain definite prescribed actions which must be carried out if it is to retain its force [...] good and bad [magic] are conceived but the two sides of a single shield.¹⁹

The supernatural functions intimately in the daily life of West Africa and the powers of universe are of passionate interest.²⁰

Mythology, historical tales, and stories for children are extremely rich and reflect the people’s complex world view. The animal stories of the Uncle Remus type are indeed popular; they are however, according to Herskovits, neither naive nor necessarily only for children. They are often handled in a subtle and sophisticated manner and often exhibit a double-entendre. There is also a great number of proverbs and riddles used often to prove one’s point in an argument or to document an assertion.²¹ Generally, the tradition of storytelling and its oral nature is of a great importance in African culture. Especially later on, in America, songs and stories provide the children with the knowledge of their past and identity. According to Holloway: “It is through song that the children receive the archetypal imagery of their race, and it matters not whether a loving mother or a rejecting mother sings these songs, so long as the children hear them.”²² Traditional African dance and song is

¹⁹ Herskovits, 73.

²⁰ Herskovits, 73-74.

²¹ Herskovits, 75.

²² Karla F.C. Holloway and Stephanie A. Demetrakopoulos, *New Dimensions of Spirituality* (Westport: Greenwood, 1987) 109.

generally said to be surviving among slave communities, as well as the traditional musical instruments as drum, gong, and flutes.²³

2.2. White Society

As Adama Soro claims, and as I have shown above, in pre-colonial West African and later in slave communities,²⁴ the community overshadowed the individual. Morrison feels that this type of community is vanishing.²⁵ Morrison seems to believe that the instigator of this process is white, capitalist, Western society and its values when she said in an interview with Charles Ruas that capitalism is dispersing a once powerful sense of community among African Americans.²⁶ According to Collin Harris, the economic sphere in capitalism society is defined by three major institutional forces: private ownership, market allocation, and corporate divisions of labor. Rooted in a competitive class structure, these institutions dominate peoples' lives and shape their values, attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. In capitalist society, markets are the central institutions, organizing social activity according to their core values and projecting their power onto every dimension of human relationships. He further claims:

Prices and commodities are the language of markets and decisions are determined by a cold logic of material self-interest. Human beings in a market system engage in the social activities of production and consumption as atomized buyers and sellers in competition for scarce income and resources. The drive for profit is the dominant

²³ Herskovits, 75.

²⁴ It is not possible to deal with the issue of African communities during slavery times properly here. However, it is necessary to mention that according to John W. Blassingame: "Rather than identifying with and submitting totally to his master, the slave held onto many remnants of his African culture, gained a sense of worth in the quarters, spent most of his time free from surveillance by whites, controlled important aspects of his life, and did some personally meaningful things on his own volition." (John W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979, xii). Slavery did not destroy the sense of community among the African slaves or the importance of families. The slaves continued to value the family bonds and community as a means of survival.

²⁵ Soro, 295.

²⁶ Toni Morrison in *Conversations*, 93-118.

motivational force in market relationships, each actor advancing at the expense of another.²⁷

According to Wally Seccombe, there has also been a significant change in family structure due to capitalism.²⁸ With the help of his book, I will try to point out the most important features that characterize white capitalist society with the main focus on familial relationships that Morrison considers destructive for the African American community when adopted by its members.

According to Seccombe, the familial relationships changed considerably in the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Families became divorced from the means of production and lost the capacity to transmit productive property from one generation to the next. The livelihood of the youth was then secured by turning outward to the labor market where wage labor was the primary means of obtaining wealth. Moreover, children's support for the elderly parent was not longer secured by the parents' control of essential property. There was a shift from a stem to a nuclear family form. The household also ceased to be the centre of production. The typical work team was no longer comprised of kin and household members and the only thing the families later had to offer for sale was their members' labor power. Engaged in work elsewhere, they entered employment and came directly under the authority of an employer. With the disappearance of household production, the neighborly exchange declined with the main means of acquisitions being monetary means. As the wages became the family's only income, a new form of household organization based on men's status as the primary breadwinner emerged, causing the dependency of the married woman on her husband. Furthermore, with compulsory schooling, the intimate connection between work and training in the domestic environment was lost, resulting in the change of the manner of

²⁷ Collin Harris, "The Pathological Psychology of Western Capitalism," May 31, 2010, 18 Feb 2012
<<http://www.zcommunications.org/the-pathological-psychology-of-western-capitalism-by-collin-harris-1>>

²⁸ Wally Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (London: Verso, 1992) 233.

the transmission of knowledge between generations. The predominantly oral literary culture of the community's elders was gradually replaced by teachers, and the scope of parental authority was thus constrained, as Seccombe argues.²⁹

Besides the changes in family life, capitalism also brought changes in perception of society as such. As Harris claims: "In capitalist society, with its origins in Western liberal thought, the perspective of the world is individualized" and consequently:

Collective obligations are considered to be assaults on individual autonomy, rather than as integral supportive aspects of living in a community through which people cultivate their mutual nourishment as social beings. Individualism assumes competitive relations, promoting cynicism and anti-sociality [...] [C]apitalist institutions subsidize our social atomism by systematically favoring values that concern people as separate individuals and discouraging the fulfillment of needs as an interconnected community.³⁰

The community becomes less important as it comprised of self-interest oriented individuals who lack a sense of affiliation.

Harris believes that the psychology of capitalist society is pathological, as community has become a hollow term denoting a mere aggregation of self-interested individuals, free of mutual responsibility and obligation.³¹ The change has also been observed by Magali who argues that especially the communities that developed around issues such as civil rights, student rights, poverty, the Vietnam War, and later the women's and gay rights went beyond a common identity in terms of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and age, "demonstrating a version

²⁹ Seccombe, 233-235.

³⁰ Collin Harris, "The Pathological Psychology of Western Capitalism," May 31, 2010, 18 Feb 2012 <<http://www.zcommunications.org/the-pathological-psychology-of-western-capitalism-by-collin-harris-1>>

³¹ Collin Harris, "The Pathological Psychology of Western Capitalism," May 31, 2010, 18 Feb 2012 <<http://www.zcommunications.org/the-pathological-psychology-of-western-capitalism-by-collin-harris-1>>

of community as culturally constructed around shared political aims and positions rather than on pre-established forms of identity.”³² Thus, community becomes socially constructed. Similarly, some contemporary philosophers believe that community is something imagined. There has always been a tendency among the human race to form groups. People forming a community of a kind are supposed to share certain beliefs, values, preferences, needs, or other conditions. There is a wide range of different types of communities and societies and it has always been very difficult to define them or pin them down. Benedict Anderson believes community is something imagined. According to Anderson, nations were built on comparable basis, and he considers nation to be an imagined political community. It is imagined, according to him, because the members do not know each other. It is imagined as limited, as it is finite. It has certain boundaries beyond which there is another nation but every nation is imagined as sovereign. Lastly, it is imagined as community, as the nation is conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.³³

2.3. Conclusion

We can see that according to Herskovits and his extensive studies of the West-African culture, it was common for African tribes to value community higher than an individual. It would be impossible for an individual to survive without the help of others. The polygamous marriage gives rise to the importance of an extended family which does not include only children and parents. African traditions of storytelling, songs, and dance survive in the New World and are passed on to the next generations and regarded as the most important means of preserving the past, history, and identity. The older generation teaches the youth not to forget their racial origin and ancestral history.

However, after fighting for survival, African-Americans wanted to build themselves lives of their own in their new land. When they wanted to become a part of the mainstream

³² Magali, 21.

³³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London; New York: Verso, 1991) 1-7.

society it was impossible for them not to adopt the prevailing values. With capitalism, the Western society has started to value individual and not community, with individual's interests and financial success as the main priorities. The notion of the extended family and community disappears and it becomes something that is imagined rather than extant. Toni Morrison believes the white capitalist society and its values have been destructive for the African-Americans who after being freed were trying to become a valid part of the mainstream society. The following analyses of her books portray her criticism of both the racist, oppressive, white society and the black communities which are decaying under its pressure, as well as the development in her attitude towards the possible remedies against the disintegration of the once strong black communities.

3. *The Bluest Eye*

If she was cute – and if anything could be believed, she was – then we were not. And what did that mean? We were lesser. Nicer, brighter, but still lesser [...] What was the difference? What did we lack? Why was it important?¹

In her first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison tells a story of a little black girl who accepts the community's evaluation of her, viewing herself as ugly and believing that the only way she could be beautiful and visible was to have blue eyes. Morrison explores how little black girls learn about and later are forced to accept white standards of beauty and happiness, and how as a result the black community ostracizes and sacrifices members of its own community. The black community portrayed in the book is a closely knit one. People take care of each other and watch out for one another. However, Morrison is very realistic in her portrait, showing how cruel the community could be when it victimized and ostracized an individual. That, in turn, could have serious effects on the ostracized individual, especially in the case of children. We see how some members of the black community, as Pauline and Geraldine, accept the values of the dominant white society and how damaging that is. As Cynthia A. Davis claims, the characters exist in the world defined by their blackness and surrounded by white society that violates and denies it.² Being victims of white racism and being exposed to nothing else but white standards of certain phenomena, some of the characters react by giving up on their own race and accepting the standards of the white race. Looking at the novel, it will be argued that the community's self-hatred causes its members to lose touch with themselves and their identity. As a result, they choose a scapegoat, a small vulnerable girl named Pecola, within their own community, leading to violence and

¹ Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye* (London: Vintage Books, 1999) 57. Further referred to as *Eye*.

² Cynthia A. Davis, "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 23 No. 3 (Summer, 1982) 323.

subsequently to the scapegoat's mental breakdown. Pecola's sacrifice can be viewed as an example of René Girard's theory of scapegoats and violence in community. He believes that the community chooses a scapegoat in order to maintain or restore harmony and to prevent violence. It will be shown how his theory can be applied to Pecola, and how the community sacrifices her in order to reinforce the social fabric.³

3.1. Images of White Ideals of Beauty

The Bluest Eye starts with a paragraph from a well known American text book reader. "Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty. Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy" (*Eye*, 1). The Dick and Jane story is the only image of happiness, beauty, and success available to children, including black children. As Jane Kuenz points out, the image diminishes all those who do not match that ideal and very often it requires abdication of self or the ability to see oneself in the body of another. Kuenz further claims that because all the available models are white, all economic, racial, and ethnic differences are erased.⁴ The passage from the primer is repeated twice in the prologue but without spaces or punctuation, and eventually all its words run together. According to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, this break-down of language mirrors the breakdown of the twelve-year-old scapegoat – Pecola Breedlove. Parts of the story reappear throughout the novel, highlighting the contrast between Pecola's familial experiences and those presented in the Dick-and-Jane story of the ideal white family.⁵

Another symbol of this mass-produced image of white standards of beauty is Shirley Temple and the white dolls. When Pecola stays with the narrator's family, the McTeers, she and the older daughter, Frieda, adore the beautiful picture on the cup. However, Claudia, Frieda's sister and the narrator, who is younger than both Pecola and Frieda, "had not yet arrived at the turning point in the devolvement of [her] psyche which would allow [her] to

³ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (London: The Athlone Press, 1995), 8.

⁴ Jane Kuenz, "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity," *African American Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Women's Culture Issue (Autumn, 1993) 422.

⁵ Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* (Wesport: Greenwood Press, 1998) 32.

love her [Shirley Temple]. What [Claudia] felt at that time was unsullied hatred” (*Eye*, 13). At that point, Claudia still loves herself, including her skin color. She also hates the “big, blue-eyed Baby Dolls” she gets for Christmas. She is not able to play with the dolls and destroys them. Claudia claims she did not hate Shirley Temple because she was cute but because she “danced with Bojangles, who was [Claudia’s] friend, [her] uncle, [her] daddy, and who ought to have been soft-shoeing it and chuckling with [her]” (*Eye*, 13). As Davis claims, Claudia recognizes “the diversion of feeling from her self and world into the white values [...] She [is] fascinated by those images because they [are] ‘lovable’ to everyone but her.”⁶ Only Claudia seems to be aware of the force of these alien cultural images, according to Davis.⁷ However, even Claudia learns later on that violence towards and, the hatred of, the white dolls and other white images is shameful and that the best hiding place is love. “It was a small step to Shirley Temple. I learnt much later to worship her, just as I learned to delight in cleanliness, knowing, even as I learned, that the change was adjustment without improvement” (*Eye*, 16).

As Kubitschek points out, even informal education offers only white beauty. There are many references to movies in the book. Henry Washington, the MacTeers’ boarder, pretends to mistake Claudia and Frieda for Greta Garbo and Ginger Rogers. Pecola’s mother Pauline learns to despise her appearance by watching movies featuring white actresses and actors. The only movie with a black theme mentioned is *Imitation of Life*, which deals with the black characters’ hatred of their own blackness. Kubitschek calls this phenomenon “institutionalized racism.” She claims that it can be “unintentionally perpetuated by people who simply haven’t thought about racial issues, or by people who cannot progress beyond what they were taught.”⁸ This, supported by acts of personal prejudice, erodes the self-esteem of the characters as they internalize the mainstream’s picture of them as unimportant, inferior,

⁶ Davis, 328.

⁷ Davis, 328.

⁸ Kubitschek, 41.

and ugly.⁹ Having only white images of beauty available and nothing that resembles themselves, the black people turn to self-hatred.

3.2. Accepting White Standards of Beauty and the History of Racism

Morrison portrays four different characters that are somehow affected by racism, or by what Kubitschek refers to as “institutionalized racism.” All of them play a role in ostracizing Pecola – the ultimate scapegoat and victim. Morrison gives us their histories and the origins of their hatred, all of which seem to stem from direct or indirect acts of racism, namely the acceptance of white values and especially white standards of beauty, as they comprise the only image available.

One of the characters who contributes to Pecola’s breakdown is Geraldine. She is a middle-class, lighter-skinned “colored” woman, and the mother of Pecola’s classmate, Junior. Geraldine represents a prototype of a woman who is trying to get rid of the “funk.” Being ashamed of everything that is connected to the black race, she accepts white society’s standards. She distinguishes between “colored people” who are neat and quiet, and “niggers” who are loud and dirty.¹⁰ Women like Geraldine “wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc [...] smell like wood, newspapers, and vanilla [...] straighten their hair with Dixie Peach [...] [T]hey learn how to do the white’s man work with refinement” (*Eye*, 64). One of her biggest failures is her inability to show affection and raise her child with love and compassion, as getting rid of the “funkiness” means getting rid of passion, nature, and human emotions. Her son Junior suffers because he is brought up with no affection. He teases the cat Geraldine loves, and bullies children. One of children he bullies is Pecola, whom he lures to his house under the false pretence of showing her some kittens, only to hurt and humiliate her later. When Junior accuses Pecola of killing Geraldine’s cat, Geraldine sees Pecola as a prototype of the

⁹ Kubitschek, 40-41.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that in Morrison’s fiction, the people of mixed race who find value in their lighter skin are often viewed critically, as I will show in *Paradise*.

“niggers” she hates and as an embodiment of everything she is trying to deny: “Hair uncombed, dresses falling apart, shoes untied and caked with dirt. They had stared at her with great uncomprehending eyes. Eyes that questioned nothing and asked everything” (*Eye*, 72).

Geraldine passes the hatred of her own race onto Junior. By accepting white values, she despises everything connected to blackness. Junior longs for the company of children of his own race, but Geraldine forbids him to play with them:

More than anything in the world, he wanted to play King of the Mountain and have them [black children] push him down the mound of dirt and roll over him. He wanted to feel their hardness pressing on him, smell their wild blackness and say “Fuck you” with that lovely casualness. (*Eye*, 68)

Geraldine gives rise to his self hatred by confusing his racial identity. “Gradually he came to agree with his mother that neither Bay Boy nor P.L. was good enough for him” (*Eye*, 68). He seeks revenge through violence directed at his own black community since he is not allowed to be part of it. By calling Pecola “a nasty black bitch” Geraldine separates herself from her racially, leaving Pecola alone at the edge. Geraldine represents the older generation that teaches the younger generation to hate their race and by extension themselves which results, as Valerie Smith points out, in self-loathing. They direct their self-hatred at Pecola, choosing her as a communal scapegoat.¹¹

Another character that causes Pecola’s breakdown is her mother, Pauline Breedlove. Pauline grew up in a functional family, and was thus part of a wider community. However, her deformed foot isolates her from the rest of the family, and denies her the privilege of having a nickname or ever being the topic of family anecdotes. She takes pleasure in orderliness and cleanliness. When she leaves her family to go north with her husband Cholly,

¹¹ Valerie Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity” in Jan Furman ed., *Toni Morrison’s Song of Solomon* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003) 28.

she is isolated even more. “Everything changed. It was hard to get to know folks up here, and I missed my people [...] Northern colored folk was different too. Dicty-like. No better than whites for meanness” (*Eye*, 91).¹² Pauline does not get along with the colored women she meets. She tries to win their friendship by buying similar clothes, putting on similar make-up, and redoing her hair, but she is clumsy about it and they find her attempts rather amusing. While pregnant, Pauline goes to the movies to escape boredom and loneliness and she discovers physical beauty there, “probably the most destructive ideas in the history of human thought” (*Eye*, 95). She is presented with white ideals of physical beauty and romantic love. She grows to love these white ideals of beauty and believes that she is not beautiful and thus not worthy of romantic love. “She was never able [...] to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty, and the scale was one she absorbed in full from the silver screen” (*Eye*, 95). As Kuentz also points out, the absence of alternate images to those presented in the movies, and the absence of a network of family and friends cause that Pauline succumbs to the white images.¹³

Pauline accepts the white society’s ideals of beauty, believing herself to be ugly. “I let my hair go back, plaited it up, and settled down to just being ugly” (*Eye*, 96). Moreover, she passes her conviction on to her children, especially Pecola: “I knew she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair. But Lord she was ugly” (*Eye*, 98). Pauline loses interest in her family and isolates herself, finding solace in religion, and turning herself into a ‘martyr’ for staying with her violent, lazy husband. She finds a job with a white family to escape the poverty and ugliness of her own family and gives all her love and attention to them, finding “beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise” (*Eye*, 99) in the Fisher family. As Kubitschek suggests, Pauline is especially vulnerable to racism because of her permanent limp and the racist images she

¹² The theme of the difference between the North and the South reoccurs in Morrison’s books. The South seems to be associated for her with greater sense of community, and it appears that Morrison believes that the industrial North is more likely to destroy this sense and make an individual feel more alienated, especially in big, anonymous cities.

¹³ Kuentz, 426-7.

absorbed from the movies. She unconsciously hates herself so much she is not able to love any part of herself, even her children.¹⁴ This will later on contribute to her unwillingness to believe that Pecola was raped.

Another character who could be held responsible for Pecola's collapse is Cholly, Pecola's father. Contrary to Pauline, Cholly never knew what a real family was. Abandoned by his mother only a few days after he was born, he is brought up by his aunt. As a teenager, he becomes a direct victim of racism when he is caught by white armed men while having sex. The white hunters force Cholly to continue while they watch, mockingly cheer, and humiliate him. Instead of directing his hatred towards the white men, he directs it towards his black sex-partner. "Never did he once consider directing his hatred towards the hunters. Such an emotion would have destroyed him. They were big, white, armed men. He was small, black, helpless" (*Eye*, 118). According to Kubitschek, Cholly learns to displace his hatred of racist oppression from white men to black women. Moreover, it teaches him to connect sex with power, violence, and hatred.¹⁵ His humiliation can be connected to the white people's constant "demasculinization" of black men. As they were never allowed to be real men during slavery, they find it hard to maintain their identity or their maleness.

While trying to find his father, Cholly is abandoned for the second time during a game of craps. Now having no one, he "is free. Dangerously free" (*Eye*, 125). According to Kuenz, this dangerous freedom to do whatever he wants resulting from being abandoned by family and community explains his disinterestedness.¹⁶ Even though his marriage to Pauline is initially a happy one, he gradually loses interest in everything. When the children are born, he is helpless. He does not know how to raise children and does not even know what his

¹⁴ Kubitschek, 38.

¹⁵ Kubitschek, 37, 41.

¹⁶ Kuenz, 429.

relationship with them should be. However, as Kuenz further argues, this freedom allows him to see Pecola more clearly than anyone else, and to love her in spite of what he sees.¹⁷

The last character who experiences racism and fails to develop a solid self-image, and who contributes to Pecola's breakdown is Micah Elihue Whitcomb, known as Soaphead Church. His ancestors from The West Indies decided to separate themselves in "body, mind, and spirit from all that suggested Africa" (*Eye*, 133). He comes from a well-educated light-skinned family that intentionally "marries up" to lighten their skin tone. White racism teaches him to hate himself and he is not able to develop a solid sense of self. Since whiteness is connected to cleanliness for him, he finds any kind of physical contact with people repulsive. As Kubitschek points out, his confidence in himself and his hatred towards his racial identity is so strong he believes he can function sexually only with little girls,¹⁸ as their bodies were least offensive and were associated in his mind with cleanliness.

After his sexual failure with a grown-up woman and the collapse of his marriage he leaves for America. As white racism prevents him from receiving a good education and securing a job, he finally settles in Lorain where he becomes a reader, adviser, and interpreter of dreams. He cheats the community, claiming to have special powers, and he even believes he has the right to be corrupt. Even though people know he does not possess any supernatural abilities, they still find a way to "his door," failing to see the danger he presents. He molests little girls who come to seek his help and eventually uses Pecola to rid himself of a dog he hates but is not able to kill, which contributes to her final breakdown. On the other hand, as Kubitschek points out, he is the only one who realizes what racism has done to Pecola, her family, and him.¹⁹

¹⁷ Kuentz, 429.

¹⁸ Kubitschek, 35.

¹⁹ Kubitschek, 35.

3.3. The Breakdown

All the above mentioned characters accept the white racist ideals of beauty and white values, forsaking their own race, and further contributing to Pecola's breakdown. However, as Claudia later points out, the whole community is to be blamed. As I have already mentioned, Girard's theory of scapegoats can provide us with a better understanding of the reason why the community needed to choose a scapegoat in the first place, as well as the motive for choosing Pecola.

According to René Girard, the function of sacrifice is to suppress violence within the community and to prevent problems from breaking out. The victim the community chooses is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, but rather a substitute for the whole community, offered by the members themselves. It serves to protect the members of the community from their own violence and prompts the community to choose a victim outside itself. This is intended to restore harmony and to reinforce the social fabric. He further claims that the whole process of sacrifice "requires not only the complete separation of the sacrificial victim from those beings for whom the victim is a substitute but also a similarity between both parties."²⁰ Choosing Pecola as a scapegoat served as a safety mechanism which prevented the breakdown of the whole community.

As Kubitschek claims, the Breedloves and Soaphead learn to hate themselves and thus lose, or never claim, the potential to be responsible, nurturing adults as even the instinctual aspects of human nature such as sexual drive and protection of the young are distorted in these characters. Soaphead exploits the community financially and abuses little girls. Cholly's sexual assault is even more violent.²¹ As Girard points out, sexuality is one of those primary forces whose sovereignty over man is assured by man's firm belief in his sovereignty over it. Sexuality is accompanied by violence, and like violence, repressed sexual desire accumulates

²⁰ Girard, 8, 39.

²¹ Kubitschek, 41.

energy and when released can be destructive.²² As I will show, Cholly's sexual assault on Pecola ultimately contributes to her destruction.

The first step in Pecola's breakdown is her family's acceptance of their ugliness. The Breedloves live in a storefront not only because they are black and poor but also because they believe they are ugly. They:

[W]ore their ugliness [...] although it did not belong to them [...] [Y]ou looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction [...] [T]hey took their ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantel over them, and went about the world with it. (*Eye*, 28)

Pecola deals with her ugliness by hiding behind it, which seems to result in people ignoring her. She experiences a considerable amount of psychological violence from both the whites and the blacks. Pecola is ignored by teachers who do not even look at her, and is teased by other children. In order to escape the domestic violence and lack of love, she tries to make herself disappear. Pecola can make her whole body disappear, except for her eyes. She begins to believe that her eyes are the key to everything because "[t]hey were everything. Everything was there, in them. All of those pictures, all of those faces" (*Eye*, 34). She supposes that if she could change her eyes somehow to make them beautiful, she herself would be different. As the only image of beauty available for Pecola is the image of white beauty, beautiful eyes become a synonym for blue eyes. Every night, Pecola prays for blue eyes believing that having them equals having beauty and worthiness.

The black community accepts white racism and adopts white values and standards of beauty. As Kubitschek says, the black community as a whole shares racial experiences but

²² Girard, 34-35.

some have support that the Breedloves lack. Sensing their self-hatred, and agreeing that according to the racism's message the Breedloves are ugly and inferior, the community first ostracized the whole family,²³ and later only Pecola. The community experiences racism and most members fight back somehow. However, the Breedloves do not. As Girard points out, any community that has been stricken by some catastrophe searches for a scapegoat. They instinctively seek an immediate and sometimes violent cure and believe that their problems are the fault of a lone individual who can be easily disposed of. The victim has to resemble the object it replaces; however, the resemblance cannot be carried to complete assimilation, as that would lead to disastrous confusion. The human victims range from the dregs of society to its rulers. It seems that victims are somehow on the fringes of their society, they are isolated in some way.²⁴ Here, the community, upon experiencing racism, seeks revenge and chooses the most vulnerable victim - a black, female child.

When this second stage of the community's acceptance in the Breedloves' victimization is complete, Cholly ensures through his heinous act that Pecola alone is ostracized. Cholly interacts with his children by "reactions based on what he [feels] at the moment" (*Eye*, 127). Looking at Pecola washing the dishes one day, Cholly experiences a rollercoaster of different feelings; discomfort, revulsion, guilt, pity, and love. He suddenly sees her helpless presence, her unhappiness, which he interprets as an accusation, and wonders what he could do for her. His lack of experience with parental love prevents him from understanding what to do with her love for him. "How dare she love him? Hadn't she any sense at all? What was he supposed to do with it? Return it? How?" (*Eye*, 127). Pecola reminds him of Pauline when he first met her and "the confused mixture of his memories of Pauline and the doing of a wild and forbidden thing excited him [...]" (*Eye*, 128). It is obvious that Morrison tried to portray this horrific act in a partially sympathetic way, giving us Cholly's history and experience. Nevertheless, his act marks the beginning of Pecola's end.

²³ Kubitschek, 34.

²⁴ Girard, 7,11,12,76.

As Girard claims, incest is an extreme form of violence and it consequently plays an extreme role in the destruction of differences. It destroys the crucial family distinction. Incestuous propagation leads to formless duplications, sinister repetitions, and a dark mixture of unnamable things. The incestuous creature exposes the community to danger.²⁵ Raped by her father, Pecola does not get any sympathy from the supposedly closest and the most important person in her life, her mother. To the contrary, Pauline, who rejected and emotionally abandoned her daughter the day she was born, does not believe Pecola's account of the rape.

Being violated and rejected by her own family, Pecola turns to Soaphead for help. As I have already pointed out, like Pecola's parents, Soaphead internalized racist standard. As Kubitschek claims, he fails to protect Pecola. In fact, Soaphead failure to protect Pecola inflicts further damage on her.²⁶ Thus, when she comes asking him for blue eyes, he sees it as perfectly rational, as he also believes that this ugly girl would be beautiful if she had blue eyes. Not having any magical powers, he uses Pecola to rid himself of a hated dog by having her poison him, presenting it as an omen of God's message that her wish is to be granted. Even though he realizes the damage racism has done to Pecola, he does not take any action to avert it.

All these circumstances lead to Pecola's mental breakdown. As Davis says, she loses her mind as a result of her being outside the centre of the system, excluded from reality by race, gender, age, and personal history.²⁷ She creates an imaginary friend and believes she really has blue eyes. According to Kubitschek, Pecola goes mad as she is victimized by everyone, although the rejection and victimization by the adults were more significant than the children's actions. Being abandoned by her own mother in favor of a white child and raped by her father, the community gossips about her own responsibility for her father's

²⁵ Girard, 74-75.

²⁶ Kubitschek, 42.

²⁷ Davis, 331.

actions.²⁸ The grown up Claudia thinks back at the end of the novel, considering the causes of Pecola's madness. She remembers that when Pecola was impregnated by her father Cholly, she wanted the baby to survive: "More strongly than my fondness for Pecola, I felt a need for someone to want the black baby to live" (*Eye*, 190). Together with her insight into the internalization of the white ideals of beauty, Claudia understands her African legacy and therefore embodies the sentiments of the survival of the black community. She holds family sacred, appreciates her parents' singing and storytelling and is able and willing to see the graveness of Pecola's tragedy. However, she holds the whole community, herself not excluding, responsible for Pecola's tragedy:

All of us - all who knew her - felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness [...] And she let us, and thereby deserved our contempt. We honed our egos on her, padded our characters with her frailty, and yawned in the fantasy of our strength (*Eye*, 163).

3.4. Conclusion

Morrison points out in her book how white society violates black communities and how damaging and destructive it is when the black community gives up and accepts white social values. The possible remedies for this are not strongly articulated, even though we can trace some. There is, for instance, the narrator's family, which is still functioning both as a family and as part of a wider community. As Kubitschek points out, the family's love and support enable Claudia to survive psychically and be independent from an early age.²⁹ They also help other members of the community when they are in need. Claudia's family is still trying to preserve African culture and pass down the traditions in the form of music, storytelling, and

²⁸ Kubitschek, 39.

²⁹ Kubitschek, 40.

belief in the supernatural. Mrs. MacTeer always sings, her father plays the violin, both parents tell them stories, and the girls cast a spell to save Pecola's child. Another example is Cholly's friend and mentor, Blue, who "used to tell him old-timey stories about how it was when Emancipation Proclamation came [...] and ghost stories"(104). However, the African values are not presented as a remedy as explicitly as in Morrison's later works, even though she lays foundations to this idea already in her first novel.

4. *Song of Solomon*

The epigraph “The fathers may soar and the children may know their names”¹ suggests that the main concern of the book is again family and African heritage. Morrison explores mainly the loss of touch with one’s identity and the quest for its retrieval in this novel. Again, as in the previous novel, the main reason for the loss seems to be the fact that some of the characters forsook their racial identity and adopted the values of the dominant white, capitalistic society. As Gay Wilentz puts it, Morrison questions the imposed values and perceptions of the dominant white capitalistic society and offers alternative cultural knowledge based on African traditions and heritage.² The return to African traditions and values means especially the return to African form of extended family and its importance as well as the importance of the whole community. Moreover, she praises oral history and tradition including singing and belief in magic, ghosts, and traditional African healing. Lastly, Morrison stresses the importance of remembering and passing on African and familial history. In comparison to her first novel, she expresses the notion of return to African values as a remedy for the decaying African-American community explicitly, which she connects with the South. What has been a mere sketch or hint in her first book becomes a fully developed and articulated argument in *Song of Solomon*.

4.1. The Deads

As noted above, one of the main issues portrayed and criticized in this book is the abandonment of the traditional African idea of extended family and adoption of the model of a nuclear family common in capitalist white society. The difference between nuclear and extended family is that nuclear family takes into account only parents and their children, whereas extended family takes into account the relatives of the two spouses, as Andrew

¹ Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon* (London: Vintage Books, 2006) 1. Further referred to as *Song*.

² Gay Wilentz, “Civilization Underneath” in *Casebook*, 141.

Billingsley explains in his study.³ The nuclear type of family is, according to Adama Soro, more typical for Western, capitalist society with which the more common extended African pattern is in conflict, not only for its extended nature, but also because of the place it accords to women.⁴ As I have already pointed out, women in African, and later in African-American, families enjoyed greater independence as they played an important economic role in addition to taking care of the education and upbringing of the children. As Herskovits notes, the important economic role played by women in West Africa was reinforced under slavery because the plantation system did not discriminate between male and female slaves. Herskovits further claims that this economic independence of women led to their sexual independence because they no longer depended on their husbands.⁵ Moreover, as I have already mentioned while discussing Cholly's humiliation by white men, the rather "inferior" position of men in African-American communities (in contrast to Western white capitalist societies) was caused by their demasculinization during slavery. All these aspects have a great influence on the nature of African-American families and contribute to the substitution of the extended family by the nuclear type. Morrison portrays both types of families in *Song of Solomon*, showing that the adoption of the nuclear type is damaging for black families and that the extended notion of family with strong female figures is nurturing and life-saving.

Another white value Morrison views as destructive to the black family or/and community is the importance of commercial success, wealth, and social position. The adoption of these characteristics results in valuing individuals higher than the community. As Soro points out, there is a strong sense of community in West African tradition, stemming from the belief in the unity of all natural elements. In these communities, an individual has to pattern his behavior on the rules of tradition, as his deeds could affect the whole community.⁶ As well as the adoption of the nuclear type of family, Morrison portrays the adoption of

³ Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (New Jersey: Eaglewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1968) 16.

⁴ Soro, 295.

⁵ Herskovits, 223.

⁶ Soro, 299.

commercial success on two families – the Deads and the Fosters. She shows through these two families how the adoption of the white, capitalist values leads to the destruction of the large West African family and the sense of community.

Macon Dead's family is the embodiment of the adoption of both the capitalist type of nuclear family and the capitalist values. As the name suggests, his family is emotionally dead. However, the loss of touch with their African past seems to stem from the loss of the family name. Macon father's name was changed by a drunken Yankee officer at the Freeman's Bureau when the officer wrote the given information into the wrong columns. His father's wife, Sing, insists on keeping the new name, as it "would wipe out the past. Wipe it all out" (*Song*, 54). They are trying to wipe out the slavery past as well, in order to start a new "free" life without the burden of the past. Nevertheless, as Catherine Carr Lee points out, by changing the family name, the family becomes disconnected from their ancestors, which results in their loss of history, community, and tradition.⁷ Macon's father works incredibly hard on his farm and Macon works "right alongside with him. From the time [he] was four or five [they] worked together. Just the two of [them]" (*Song*, 51). Unfortunately, his father is shot by white people who want his farm. Macon and his younger sister Pilate run away and hide, but they eventually split up, quarreling over keeping a bag of gold. For Macon, the gold means "life, safety, and luxury" (*Song*, 170) and he believes it can "keep [them] for life [...] [They] can get [themselves] another farm" (*Song*, 171). For Pilate, it is unjustifiable to take something that is not yours. As both Pilate and the gold disappear from the cave where Macon and Pilate were hiding, Macon assumes Pilate took the gold and he cannot forgive her for doing so.

Feeling tricked and betrayed, Macon leaves the South and works hard his whole life to acquire what possession of the bag of gold represented for him – money, safety, power, and luxury. As he gradually achieves his goals he slowly adopts the values of white capitalist

⁷ Catherine Carr Lee, "The South in *Song of Solomon*" in *Casebook*, 46.

society. The most important things for him are financial success and power. He owns houses and cooperates with white people, turning down people from his own community, since it does not fit his financial interests. As one of the characters comments, even though Macon is black, he “behaves like a white man, thinks like a white man” (*Song*, 223). When Macon believes he possesses enough, he marries Ruth Forster, daughter of the “biggest” black man in town. Even though Ruth’s father is the most respected black man in town, Macon feels worthy of Ruth in as much as he owns something. He believes possessions are the most important things. As Macon explains to his son: “Let me tell you right now the one important thing you’ll ever need to know: Own things, and let the things you own own other things. Then you’ll own yourself and other people too”(*Song*, 55). As Valerie Smith points out, Macon comes to believe that property and money is what is real in this world and his financial success costs him his capacity for communication and emotion.⁸ He is cold and cruel as a businessman, and offers mercy to no one. When one of his tenants asks him for help, she observes that: “A nigger in business is a terrible thing to see. A terrible, terrible thing to see,” (*Song*, 22) as he rejects the common notion of helping others in need in black communities. As Smith notes, Macon treats his tenants as if they were mere objects or another form of property.⁹ Adopting the values of the white capitalist society, Macon believes that his own success is more important than anything and everyone else, and he does not have any compassion for the people in his community.

Macon treats not only his tenants like objects, he also objectifies his family. He isolates his family and does not want them to associate with people of lower classes. It seems that his need for possession is actually the need to possess something for the sake of owning it, not to enjoy or use it. He takes his family for rides in his big Packard to “satisfy himself that he was indeed a successful man” (*Song*, 31). He never drives over twenty miles an hour and uses the car only to show off. He also uses his own family for the same purpose. He takes

⁸ Valerie Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity” in *Casebook* 34.

⁹ Valerie Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity” in *Casebook* 34.

his daughters Lena and First Corinthians all dressed up to an ice house, just so “they could see us, envy us, envy him” (*Song*, 216). However, as soon as the girls try to associate with a child who is “barefoot, naked to the waist, dirty” he puts an end to it immediately. As Lena says, he first “displayed [them], then he splayed [them] [...He] would parade [them] like virgins through Babylon, then humiliate [them] like whores in Babylon”(*Song*, 216). This isolation includes his sister Pilate, who comes back to town and who is “a regular source of embarrassment” (*Song*, 20) for him. He is ashamed of her as she is unkempt, odd, murky, does not have a regular job, and because both Pilate and her daughter Reba have children but no husbands. He “trembled with the thought of the white men in the bank [...] discovering that this raggedy bootlegger was his sister” (*Song*, 20). Obviously, the white men in the bank and their opinions are more important for him than his own family.

Ruth Foster, Macon’s wife, also grew up only with her father. Her mother died when she was a child and Ruth never knew what an extended family or the whole community was. She grew up isolated from the outside world, idolizing her father. Even though her father was very fond of her, as she grew older he “began to chafe under her devotion” (*Song*, 23). Apparently, her devotion amounted to obsession and at the age of sixteen, the father realized that the good night kiss Ruth still insisted on was inappropriate. As Soro argues, the lack of an extended family favored these incestuous relationships, as there was no one to check on the relationship between the daughter and the father. Moreover, as Soro notes, the lack of relatives made Ruth consider her father the centre of the universe, making it almost impossible for her to live without him.¹⁰ Thus, Ruth’s father is glad when Macon comes and marries her, not really caring about Macon’s property and social position. However, when Ruth’s father dies, Macon catches Ruth licking her father’s fingers, concluding that they must have been involved in an incestuous relationship. From that moment on, Macon does not

¹⁰ Soro, 297.

touch his wife, hates her and beats her, causing her to become extremely frustrated and isolated.

Nevertheless, Ruth is not the only member of the family who is frustrated and isolated. All the members of Macon Dead's family fear him. "His hatred of his wife glittered and sparkled in every word he spoke to her. The disappointment he felt in his daughters sifted down on them like ash [...]" (*Song*, 10). His daughters never marry, as no one is good enough for them according to Macon. As Morrison says herself, they were trained to be children.¹¹ They live in their parents' house, making velvet, never even finding a real job. Macon's only son, Milkman, fears him and respects him at the same time, but he believes he can never compare to him. Thus, he decides to differ from his father as much as he could: "Macon hated tobacco. Milkman tried to put a cigarette into his mouth every fifteen minutes, Macon hoarded his money, Milkman gave his away" (*Song*, 63). However, as Valerie Smith points out, even though he tries to be different from his father, he adheres to the same rigid, materialistic, Western values.¹² Growing up in a nuclear family surrounded by hatred and fear, Milkman is ignorant and strangely disconnected from his family and the whole community.

Milkman's ignorance stems from his discovery that "only birds and planes could fly" (*Song*, 1). Flying being the only thing Milkman is interested in, he loses interest in everything and everyone else, including himself. His fascination with flying foreshadows his connection to his forefathers, the flying Africans (which I discuss later on). Ruth uses her son to get over her sexual frustration, breastfeeding him longer than necessary, realizing after years that she never considered him as a separate human being: "Then she realized that he really didn't tell her anything, and hadn't for years. Her son had never been a person to her, a separate real person. He had always been a passion" (*Song*, 131). When she finally opens up to him and

¹¹ Toni Morrison in Anne Koenen "The One Out of Sequence" from *History and Tradition in Afro-American Culture*, Gunther Lenz ed. (Frankfurt: Campus, 1984) reprinted in *Conversations*, 69.

¹² Valerie Smith, "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity" in *Casebook*, 33.

tries to explain her relationship to her father, instead of trying to understand his mother, Milkman feels used:

Deep down in that pocket where his heart hid, he felt used. Somehow everybody was using him for something or as something. Working out a scheme of their own on him, making him the subject of their dreams of wealth, or love, or martyrdom. Everything they did seemed to be about him, yet nothing he wanted was part of it. (*Song*, 165)

His father also tries to tie Milkman to himself as much as possible. He asks Milkman to help him in his office, content that his wife has less control there over her son. Macon also wants to teach Milkman everything he considers important, so that Milkman can take over his real estate business one day. However, Milkman does not feel any emotional closeness to his father. When Milkman hits his father for beating Ruth, Macon realizes he needs to know more about Ruth and her relationship to her father, which Macon still believes might have been incestuous. However, Milkman does not feel any compassion for his father and his story:

He felt curiously dissociated from all that he had heard. As though a stranger that he'd sat down next to on a park bench had turned to him and begun to relate some intimacy. He was entirely sympathetic to the stranger's problems – understood perfectly his view of what had happened – but part of his sympathy came from the fact that he himself was not involved or in any way threatened by the stranger's story. (*Song*, 74)

Milkman's only true companion is his friend Guitar. Older than Milkman and lower class, he becomes Milkman's guide. With Guitar's help Milkman realizes that his life is empty and pointless. He even admits that he does not "concern himself an awful lot about other people. There [is] nothing he [wants] bad enough to risk anything for, inconvenience

himself for” (*Song*, 107). Guitar has strong political opinions and tries to make Milkman aware of the political situation, but Milkman has no interest in these matters. There seems to be nothing Milkman lives for. At the age of thirty he still lives with his parents, works at his father’s office even though he knows real estate does not really interest him, and he is not even serious about his love relationship. His ignorance is probably most apparent from his love affair with his own cousin Hagar, ignoring the inappropriateness of this relationship for which he is condemned by the town’s people: “After all, it served him right, messing with his own cousin” (*Song*, 129). According to Guitar, Milkman lives in a shell and “somebody got to bust [his] shell” (*Song*, 116). He compares Milkman to peacock, which has too much tail to be able to fly as “all that jewelry weights it down. Like vanity. Can’t nobody fly with all that shit. Wanna fly, you got to give up the shit that weights you down” (*Song*, 179). Fittingly, it is Milkman’s friend Guitar who brings him to the house of Milkman’s aunt Pilate, who later becomes his “pilot.” As Soro points out, thanks to the discovery of the extended family members, Milkman is able to cast away his father’s capitalistic and individualistic principles and embrace the communal values of black culture.¹³ Even though Guitar becomes Milkman’s first guide, his way is not the right one. If the Deads represent the blacks’ assimilation, Guitar and his group Seven Days represent radical separation. They kill random white people, whenever there is a black man killed, to maintain the balance. The right way for Milkman, as Soro points out, is the return to West African traditional values offered by Pilate, as an alternative to separatism and radicalism presented by Guitar.¹⁴

4.2. Pilate’s Family

Macon Dead’s sister, Pilate, and her family serve as a counterpart to the Deads and represent traditional African values. According to Valerie Smith, Pilate’s house is a source of spiritual nourishment. She introduces vitality and magical presence into the lifelessness of

¹³ Soro, 297.

¹⁴ Soro, 295.

Macon's family.¹⁵ She is also one of Morrison's typical strong female figures, who represent African culture. Pilate is different from other people in many respects but what isolates her from the beginning is her body. Born after her mother had died, Pilate "delivered herself." As a consequence, she does not have a navel. Valerie Smith sees this as symbol of Pilate's independence, since she does not need to rely on anybody else for sustenance.¹⁶ Yet her difference isolates her as other people are scared of her. "Men frowned, women whispered and shoved their children behind them" (*Song*, 148). For she yearns for companionship and community, she learns to hide her stomach. She manages to hide it and finds refuge on an island in Virginia, where she settles for a while and has a baby girl, Reba. However, Pilate refuses to marry Reba's father because she is afraid he would discover her defect and leave her. Pilate gets restless after a while and begins to travel and does not stop except for the time when her daughter has a baby, Hagar. By that time, she no longer worries about her stomach and throws "away every assumption she had learned and begun at zero" (*Song*, 149). She decides to live her life according to her own rules. She cuts her hair and stops worrying about table manners and hygiene, and starts to be concerned about human relationships:

[She] tackled the problem of trying to decide how she wanted to live and what was valuable to her. When am I happy and when am I sad and what is the difference? [...] [S]ince death had no terrors for her (she often spoke to the dead), she knew she had nothing to fear [...] [H]er alien's compassion for other people ripened her and [...] kept her just barely within the boundaries of the elaborately socialized world of black people. (*Song*, 149)

As Kubitschek points out, Pilate does not see her social marginalization as victimization, but rather as freedom to explore herself. Even though she often makes mistakes, she never stops

¹⁵ Valerie Smith, "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity" in *Casebook*, 35.

¹⁶ Valerie Smith, "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity" in *Casebook*, 36.

learning, loving, and developing.¹⁷ She respects other people's privacy, stares into their eyes but never makes an impolite remark, and she "never had a visitor to whom she did not offer food before one word of conversation - business or social - began" (*Song*, 149). According to Soro, her hospitality can be traced back to West African tradition, where hospitality was a sacred duty. Moreover, Soro also points out that Pilate fits in with the West African image of womanhood. She is strong and wholly economically independent, as was common for African women.¹⁸

Pilate differs from the Deads in every respect, in as much as she represents the African traditional culture. According to Kubitschek, her values provide Milkman with an alternative, which is stifled by his father's materialism and Guitar's radicalism.¹⁹ Compared to Ruth and what she represents, Pilate is a complete opposite: "One well read but ill travelled. The other had read only a geography book, but had been from one end of the country to another. One wholly dependent on money for life, the other indifferent to it" (*Song*, 139). As Valerie Smith points out, Pilate is self-made like her brother. However, her self-creation does not coincide with, but rather departs from, the American myth, cherishing African values instead.²⁰ She decides to find her brother after years of separation because of the importance she places on the family claiming: "[T]he child, Hagar, needed family, people, a life very different from what she and Reba could offer" (*Song*, 151). Although Pilate finds her brother embarrassed by her and unforgiving, as I have already highlighted, Pilate stays for the sake of Ruth. With her help, Macon returns to Ruth's bed for a week and Ruth becomes pregnant, as Pilate knows that Macon "ought to have a son. Otherwise this be the end of us" (*Song*, 125). For Pilate, family is the most important thing, even though her idea of it differs from Macon's. She lives in a house with her daughter and granddaughter without men and supports the whole family financially, recalling the idea of an extended family typical for the West African communities.

¹⁷ Kubitschek, 78.

¹⁸ Soro, 299, 297 – discussed in detail in the first chapter

¹⁹ Kubitschek, 79.

²⁰ Valerie Smith, "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity" in *Casebook*, 36.

When Pilate meets Milkman, she introduces him to Hagar as her brother. When corrected by her daughter Reba, she insists: “I mean what’s the difference in the way you act toward ‘em? Don’t you have to act the same way to both?” (*Song*, 44). For Pilate, brother and cousin are the same, confirming her belief in extended family.

Apart from Pilate’s belief in extended family, knowledge of magic and healing, we can trace African traditions in the shape of Pilate’s house and household. There is no electricity or gas. Instead, they use candles, kerosene lamps, and wood and coal for heating and they get water from a well. Even Macon is drawn to this atmosphere. When the three women sing, work, and gossip together, it reminds him of his home. To Ruth, her house is like “an inn, a safe harbor” (*Song*, 135). They do not lock their house; it is always open to everyone. When Milkman finally finds what he has been missing in his family at Pilate’s house:

[for] the first time in his life [...] he remembered being completely happy. He was with his friend, an older boy – wise and fearless. He was sitting comfortably in the notorious wine house, he was surrounded by women who seemed to enjoy him and who laughed out load. (*Song*, 47)

As Joyce Irene Middleton points out, Pilate represents the importance of the oral tradition in African culture. Occasionally, Macon’s memory “stirs his desire for song, warmth, intimacy, and rituals” but he “learns to ignore and suppress the inner, cultural voices of survival from his past.”²¹ However, Pilate becomes a source of oral culture for Milkman when she tells him stories and sings him songs.

²¹ Joyce Irene Middleton, “From Orality to Literacy: Oral Memory in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*” in Valerie Smith ed. *New Essays on Song of Solomon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) 27. Further referred to as *New Essays*.

Even though Milkman enjoys his visits to his aunt's house, he does not learn Pilate's lesson and is not able to overcome his ignorance. He feels that everyone is weighing him down with their needs. One of them is his cousin Hagar, with whom he is involved in a love affair. In the end, he decides to end the relationship, sending Hagar a thank you note. As I have already pointed out, the relationship is doomed by its inappropriateness as the two of them are closely related. However, it is Hagar's conviction that Milkman does not like her because she does not fit the standard ideal of beauty that destroys her. She spends all the money the family has in an unsuccessful attempt to live up to this ideal. She believes that if she had "silky hair the color of penny," (*Song*, 315) Milkman would still love her. The reason why Hagar did not resist the pressure of the surrounding values of the white society is that she needed more than just her mother and grandmother. Pilate knew that Hagar needed family and she was willing to reconcile with her brother, but he was not willing to reconcile with her. However:

Neither Pilate nor Reba knew that [Hagar] was not like them. Not strong enough like Pilate, nor simple enough like Reba, to make up her life as they had. She needed what most colored girls needed: a chorus of mamas, grandmamas, aunts, cousins, sisters, neighbors, Sunday school teachers, best girl friends, and what all to give her the strength life demanded. And the humor with which to live it. (*Song*, 307)

Kubitschek points out that as with Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, once Hagar internalized a standard of beauty that defines her as being ugly, no one could save her.²² Moreover, as Morrison claims herself, Hagar suffered from the absence of ancestors and male figures that Pilate had through her relationship with her father and her brother.²³

²² Kubitschek, 81.

²³ Toni Morrison, in Nellie McKay, "Conversation with Toni Morrison" in *Conversations*, 144.

There are three main things that lead to Milkman's decision to leave town. One of them is Hagar's constant clinging and attempts on his life. Milkman knows that "either [he is] to live in this world on [his] own terms or [he] will die out of it. If [he is] to live in it, then [he wants Hagar] dead" (*Song*, 129). Another fact is that he is leaving to find gold which he imagines would bring him new life, free him of his family, and he would be able to leave them all behind with all their needs and claims. Moreover, as Valerie Smiths points out, Milkman believes the gold will provide him with a clean-lined definite self, the first sense of identity he would ever have known in his life.²⁴ Lastly, there are two incidents that slowly begin to open his eyes. The first one is connected to his attempt to steal from Pilate what he thinks is a bag of gold. When he is arrested, he needs his father and Pilate to save him. Milkman feels genuine shame for stealing from his aunt, for being arrested, and for having his father help him, but "nothing was like the shame he felt as he watched and listened to Pilate. Not just her Aunt Jemima act, but the fact that she was both adept at it and willing to do it – for him" (*Song*, 200). The second incident involves his sister, who finally speaks out and accuses him of "peeing" on the whole family, ruining First Corinthians' life, and of being thoughtless and ignorant to the whole family. Thus, he begins his quest in search of the gold that will change his life.

4.3. Healing

Milkman sets off on his journey as an ignorant, thoughtless, selfish man who considers most people around him to be a burden. However, on his journey to the South in search of a bag of gold, Milkman finds something more precious – his identity and his African and family heritage. Milkman undergoes a great change which begins with his ability to find a connection to people, and then to the earth and nature. Upon the discovery of these connections he is finally able to take interest in things and other people, and he manages to understand his ancestral and familial past and history. He learns that "If you kill the ancestors,

²⁴ Valerie Smith, "The Quest for and Discovery of Identity" in *Casebook*, 38.

you've killed everything. It's part of the whole nurturing thing."²⁵ Lastly, he ascertains the uppermost importance of knowing one's name, discovers his identity, and finds a connection to community. Generally speaking, as Smith points out, Milkman discovers that in his ancestors' land, communal and mythical values prevail over materialism and individualism.²⁶ Eventually, he is able to appreciate and adopt these values. Again, the rural South is portrayed as a place where the sense of community has not yet been destroyed. The South is the source of the still persisting African traditions and values.

As I have mentioned earlier, Milkman never feels any connection to his family or the community and, as Smith points out, he perceives the world in materialistic, unyielding terms.²⁷ In his hometown, he feels trapped: "[On] the ground [...] the wings of all those other people's nightmares flapped in his face and constrained him" (*Song*, 220). However, on the airplane, away from real life, Milkman feels free. He believes he does not deserve any of the ill-treatment and dependency of other people and is eager to get away from all of them and their problems. Surprisingly, as soon as Milkman comes to his father's hometown, he gradually changes. "Milkman felt as awkward as he sounded [...] and did not remember ever asking anybody in the world how they were" (*Song*, 229). He feels good coming to a strange town and meeting people who know his name, his family, and his ancestors. "He hadn't known what it meant: links" (*Song*, 229). As his father would not even let Milkman associate with his aunt Pilate, Milkman never knew what it was to know and feel connected to his "people." Slowly, he comes to understand what Macon was trying to tell him when he talked about how he worked right alongside with his father: "[T]hat he loved his father, had an intimate relationship with him, and that his father loved him, trusted him, and found him worthy of working "right alongside" him" (*Song*, 234). The more he learns about his father and grandfather, the more he realizes there has been something missing in his life.

²⁵ Toni Morrison in *Conversations*, 131.

²⁶ Smith, "Introduction" in *New Essays*, 12.

²⁷ Smith, "Introduction" in *New Essays*, 12.

Upon slowly finding a connection to people, Milkman undergoes yet another change – he discovers a link to the earth and nature, gradually losing the destructive connection to city and materialism. He experiences a real hunger for the first time when trying to find the gold. On his journey, he loses the small conveniences he is carrying around with him, including his cigarettes, good shoes and clothes. When he does not find the gold, he decides to go to his ancestor’s hometown, Shalimar or Solomon. The initial contact in Shalimar is hostile, but it leads to another step in his rite of passage. He takes part in a hunt to which he is invited by the older men in Shalimar. There, absolutely exhausted, he begins to question his attitude. Initially angry and feeling he does not deserve their hostility, he suddenly understands that it “sounded old. *Deserve* [...] Now it seemed to him that he was always saying or thinking that he didn’t deserve some bad luck, or some bad treatment from others” (*Song*, 276). Finally, he comes to understand that he “deserved” it all. He realizes it is natural for his parents to tell him about their personal problems and that Hagar did have the right to want to kill him. He always thought he deserved to be loved from a distance, while being unwilling to do anything in return. There, “under the moon, on the ground, alone [...] his self – the cocoon that was ‘personality’ – gave way” (*Song*, 277). He slowly discovers his new self there, feeling exhilarated just by walking the earth.

When Milkman’s connection to other people and the earth is established, he is able to see that he has been blind his whole life. In the town of his ancestors, he is finally able to see, hear, listen, understand, and care. Spending a night with a local woman, he is suddenly able and willing to do something for her in return: “She put salve on his face. He washed her hair. She gave him gumbo to eat. He washed the dishes [...] She kissed his mouth. He touched her face” (*Song*, 285). He finally admits that “It wasn’t true that [...] it wasn’t important to find his people [...] His interest in his own people [...] has been growing” (*Song*, 293). He even feels homesick, missing Pilate and his parents and realizes why his father loved acquiring things so much. “As a son of Macon Dead the first, he paid homage to his own father’s life

and death by loving what his father had loved: property [...] He loved these things to excess because he loved his father to excess” (*Song*, 300). Milkman even acknowledges his ill treatment of Hagar. He regrets not talking to her honestly and admits that “he has used her – her love, her craziness – and most of all he had used her skulking, bitter vengeance [because] it made him a star” (*Song*, 301). According to Linda Krumholz, Milkman has to learn the connection between obtaining knowledge, interpreting signs, and constructing his sense of self²⁸ which he is about to achieve.

Upon this revelation, Milkman is eventually able to find and claim his identity. Listening carefully to the local children playing an old game, he realizes that they are singing about his ancestors. Valerie Smith believes this to be the key element in his discovery of identity. His connection to earth during the hunt and his own past would not be sufficient. He has to learn to complete, understand, and sing his family’s song. Knowing the whole song he can sing it to Pilate later and assume his identity.²⁹ According to the legend, some men were said to have the ability to fly. Some of them flew back to Africa while on the ship to America; others used their power during slavery. Some are told to fly away on their own, others taught the whole group how to fly so they all could escape the hardships of slavery and return to Africa. Just as in the legend, Milkman’s great-grandfather, Solomon, unsuccessfully trying to grow cotton, decides to fly back to Africa. He wants to take his youngest son Jake (a.k.a. Macon Dead the first) with him, leaving behind his wife and twenty other children. However, he drops Jake and flies away on his own. Initially, Solomon is a hero to Milkman, as Solomon just flew back to Africa and left everybody behind. However, Milkman realizes later on that Solomon was not a hero because “Jesus Christ, he left twenty-one children! [...] And [his wife] Ryna [...] lost her mind, and was still crying in a ditch” (*Song*, 332). He understands now that Pilate’s father was not telling her to sing, but rather calling his wife, Sing, and that the message that one should not just fly off and leave a body behind, which Pilate understood as a

²⁸ Linda Krumholz, “Dead Teachers” *Casebook*, 203.

²⁹ Valerie Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity” in *Casebook*, 40.

responsibility for life that has been taken away, actually means that his father should not have flown away and left his entire family behind. As Soro puts it, Milkman understands that even though Solomon's flight meant glory and escape, it also meant desertion and denial of communal ties.³⁰ Milkman is eventually able to find and claim his identity and acknowledge the importance of communal bonds.

Lastly, Milkman finally realizes the importance of knowing and understanding one's name. Milkman learns that there are names that have meaning and that when "you know your name, you should hang on to it, for unless it is noted down and remembered, it will die when you do" (*Song*, 329). Milkman acknowledges the mistake of grandfather, who kept a name that was not his so he could wipe out his past. However, Milkman's realizations cannot change the past. Nonetheless, through learning the importance of singing and of knowing his name and history, Milkman can change the future. According to Davis, Milkman had to conceive of himself both as an individual and as a member of community and he becomes a part of the historical process by which the struggle for self-definition is both complicated and fulfilled. At the end, he restores the family name, recovers their song, and is ready to even die for his community and its ideals.³¹

4.4. Conclusion

Morrison portrayed in her book two different ways to deal with the pressure of the dominant white capitalist society - the blind assimilation and radical separatism. Macon Dead's family represented the blind assimilation with adoption of the white capitalist society's values. Adoption of capitalistic values and mainly the western type of family lead to the loss of racial identity and disintegration of the family and community. Even though radical separatism represented by Guitar and the Seven Days did not adopt the white capitalist values, the way they fought was not successful either. Pilate represents the correct path - the

³⁰ Soro, 301.

³¹ Davids, 334.

return to traditional African values and culture. Pilate was able to pull the individual into the group and recognize individuality at the same time. Her dying words “I wish I’d a knowed more people. I would of loved ‘em all. If I’d a knowed more, I would a loved more” (*Song*, 336) stress the commitment to others that she teaches Milkman. As Soro suggests, Morrison urges the black community to return to their traditional sense of community and solidarity through Pilate. For Pilate, human relationships were the most important thing, whereas Macon based all of his relationships on profit.³² However, according to Davis, Pilate does not have the compassion and independence of a hero.³³ According to Smith, Morrison questions Western conceptions of individualism and offers a more fluid, destabilized construction of identity through Milkman’s story. As she further claims, Milkman’s sense of identity emerges only when he allows himself to accept his personal and familial extended past. Milkman finally breaks away from Western individualistic conception of self and accepts the rich complexity of collective sense of identity.³⁴ As Davis points out, Milkman has to find his identity and to find a connection to community.³⁵

Coming back to the epigraph of the book, as Wilentz also points out, there is one group missing – the mothers. They are left there to teach the children the stories and to sing of home. Thus, Pilate represents Milkman’s female ancestor, who was left behind to teach and to pass on to the children the ancestors’ story.³⁶ Moreover, Milkman has to learn to become the milk-man, the nurturer, as his name suggests. Therefore, as Linda Krumholz suggests, the significance of his name changes from a mama’s boy to nurturer who supplies “milk” to the future generations.³⁷

³² Soro, 299.

³³ Davis, 339.

³⁴ Smith “Introduction” in *New Essays*, 13 and Smith, “The Quest for and Discovery of Identity” in *Casebook*, 40.

³⁵ Davis, 340.

³⁶ Wilentz in *Casebook*, 143.

³⁷ Krumholz in *Casebook*, 209.

Comparing *Song of Solomon* to *The Bluest Eye*, we could see a development as far as the notion of a cure for the damaged black community is concerned. Whereas in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison only hinted at the traditional African values as being a possible community and life saver, *Song of Solomon* explicitly praises those values. The South is an important source of these values as they still seem to operate there. Morrison also seems to focus less on pointing her finger at the white capitalist society, and instead shifts her attention to the black community. Even though she still believes the white society is oppressive, she seems to be critical of the black community as well. Moreover, her books seem to address political issues more explicitly. It is apparent that Morrison does not agree with either blind assimilation of the blacks or with radical separatism. This will be even more evident in her following book.

5. *Paradise*

According to critics such as Kubitschek or Romero, Morrison explores excessive religious love in her novel *Paradise*. However, even though religion is a prominent motif in the book, it is not a subject of the following analysis. Instead, this chapter will address Morrison's exploration of what happens when "oppressed minorities adopt Western notions of kinship and the hierarchical power dynamic that accompany them and, consequently, create communities that require and support a patriarchal and racist power dynamics," as Michael Magali puts it.¹ *Paradise* introduces an all-black imaginary town of Ruby, Oklahoma, which separates itself from the rest of the world and excludes and/or marginalizes everyone who does not fit the town's strict racial blood code or/and behavior. Again, adopting the Western capitalism, patriarchy, and, slowly, individualism, the community gradually deteriorates and destroys its original purpose. If we understand the town of Ruby as a microcosm of America, as Romero suggests,² we can see the emergence of an alternative community near the town as the consequence of the town's separatism, exclusionism, and racism. An all women community is created in a nearby abandoned mansion known as the Convent. Women who are, for different reasons, ostracized and marginalized by the mainstream society come there and learn how to heal their pains. They are, however, viewed as a threat by some of the male leaders of Ruby's community.

As I have already pointed out, *Song of Solomon* is a more political book than *The Bluest Eye*. In *Paradise*, it is clear that Morrison continues to express her political ideas in her books. Morrison criticizes the radical separatism represented by the Seven Days group in *Song of Solomon*, and she further explores the idea of separatism in *Paradise*. Apart from separatism, she also further delves into the issue of the adoption of capitalist values. *The Bluest Eye* first introduces the notion of African values as a cure for the black community,

¹ Magali, 151.

² Romero, 420.

and *Song of Solomon* praises it as the only possible way to restore the balance in the black families and the black community as a whole. Even though African American values and cultural heritage are present in *Paradise*, they are portrayed very marginally. Thus, they are not understood as an effective remedy for the deteriorating community any more. Morrison seems to call for a major change in our conception of community. As Romero points out, she believes that communities need to stop being exclusive and practicing violent marginalization, but rather be more inclusive and flexible.³

According to Magali, Morrison's *Paradise* is a reaction to an American culture that in the 1960s and 1970s offered naïve, artificial, and short-lived forms of communitarianism. Later, in the 1980s and 1990s, American culture emphasized individualism and materialism as the core values. As he further claims, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, the gap between the rich and the poor widened, comprised mainly of single mothers, children, and ethnic/racial minorities. Along with the increasing diversity in demography, this led to a renewed interest in communities as a means of survival and securing the good life promised by the American dream. According to Emilia Martinez-Brawley, people in America regarded membership in a community as a means of escaping the "freedom" of individuality which was rather a burden for them and as a source of a sense of belonging and well-being among people in a culture that otherwise was characterized by fragmentation, dislocation, individualism, globalization and capitalism.⁴ This, in Magali's view, creates an urge to seek one's roots, identity, and need for belonging. However, as Magali claims, communities arising from the need of belonging tend to be exclusionary. Those communities then seek homogeneity, leaving no room for individuality and creativity. Magali argues that Morrison explores in *Paradise* possibilities for communities that are more inclusive and embrace diversity and thus promote individuality, not individualism. These alternative communities see an individual engaged in a relationship of interdependence with the community through a process of care

³ Romero, 423.

⁴ Emilia Martinez-Brawley, *Perspective on Small Communities*, 25, 50 in Magali, 15-16.

and responsibility, and an acceptance of others and their diversity. Such communities are constructed on processes such as caring, loving, and nurturing others. Moreover, these communities are trying to move toward new forms of nonhierarchical justice and envision reconception of power in collective, rather than in individualistic terms, as power *with* rather than power *over*.⁵

5.1. Ruby

According to Magali, *Paradise* demonstrates that the move towards racial separatism is a complex reaction to a material form of racist oppression.⁶ The book portrays a group of freedmen from the South trying to secure a better life for themselves and their families in the West.⁷ The group decides to join some of the all-black towns, but are rejected everywhere. They are prepared to be “turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites,”⁸ but they are not prepared for “aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns” (*Paradise*, 13). They learn that they are too poor to enter or reside in these communities. However, they begin to suspect that the reasons why they are rebuffed are not only monetary. Pat Best, even though a descendent of one of the original founding families, is an outsider of a kind who gives us more objective insights into the town’s history. Pat slowly reveals that the reason for the discrimination against the families, known as the “Disallowing,” was not their poverty, but the color of their skin. As all the original families are so-called eight-rock – a deep level in coal mines and equivalent for people of blue-black color – they notice the Disallowing comes from fair-skinned blacks “[blue]-eyed, grey-eyed yellowmen in good suits” (*Paradise*, 195). As Kelly Reames claims, the alleged prejudice represents the internalized racism that values lighter skin as well as the practical realization that those with lighter skin were more likely to be able to deal profitably with whites.⁹ As Herskovits argues, the greater opportunities

⁵ Magali, 1-38.

⁶ Magali, 152.

⁷ The move from the South is portrayed again, as we have already seen in *The Bluest Eye* and *Song of Solomon*.

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (London: Vintage Book, 1998) 13. Further referred to as *Paradise*.

⁹ Kelly Reames, *Toni Morrison’s Paradise* (New York: Continuum, 2001) 28.

enjoyed by mulattoes go back to the slavery era, when they were usually trained servants, whereas the darker skinned slaves were usually field hands. Mulattoes were considered to be more intelligent by the whites and came to take pride in their white blood.¹⁰ This pride in light skin and racism towards people of darker skin is what is viewed critically by Morrison. The rejected group carries this discrimination as a bullet in their brain and it explains why they cannot tolerate anybody but themselves:

For ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew it was a difference in the minds of the whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence for Negroes themselves [...] The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain. (*Paradise*, 194)

As a consequence of the constant rebuff by whites, Native Americans, and light-skinned blacks, the dark-skinned group becomes “a tight band of wayfarers bound by the enormity of what has happened to them” (*Paradise*, 189). Therefore, as Magali points out, they want to create a place where their skin color will not be equated with economic poverty and denial of social opportunity.¹¹ Thus, when the towns of Haven, and later Ruby, are founded, they are grounded in dogmatic, racist, and patriarchal terms that reverse the hierarchy of racism. The immediate reaction to the rebuff is thus racism, patriarchal power, and adherence to the past. As a result, conflicts arise between the older and younger generations, the town’s women’s views also divert from the men’s, and the community slowly deteriorates.

¹⁰ Herskovits, 126, 134.

¹¹ Magali, 160.

Even though it is never spoken of, the town's leading men exclude others on the basis of an inversion of the infamous one drop rule, as Magali says.¹² According to Kubitschek, the origins of the separatism are treated sympathetically, but it is ultimately destructive. Separatism and exclusion give rise to the division of "us" and "the others." Naturally, the town and its citizens perceive themselves as the good ones and everything and everyone else as evil.¹³ Pat realizes that the blood rule and purity they are trying to maintain was the reason why the leading men of the town made one of the members give up a woman he loved and wanted to marry. He later develops a drinking problem, attributing it to his Vietnam memories, but it becomes clear that he never got over the loss of the "sandy haired" girl from Virginia he loved. Similarly, people do not hate Pat's family because her father prepared her mother's funeral. "They hate us because she [her mother] looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me, and although I married Billy Cato, who was an 8-rock like you, like them, I passes the skin on to my daughter" (*Paradise*, 196). Inheriting her light skin, Billie Delia, Pat's daughter, is also ostracized in the town. Her reputation was supposedly ruined when she took off her underwear when she was about to ride a horse. She was immediately considered "a loose woman," even though she was only three years old. Her mother now realizes that if she had been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. Pat also realizes that only "unadulterated and unadulteried 8-rock blood held its magic as long as it resided in Ruby. That was their recipe. That was their deal. For immortality" (*Paradise*, 217).

Moreover, the racism the group suffered from is immediately understood by the men in terms of patriarchal power. The town of Ruby is controlled exclusively by men, especially by the twins Steward and Deacon Morgan. When Arnette, a young eight-rock girl, is assaulted in public, the consequences are discussed without her. Moreover, the men not only exclude the women from discussions, they believe that they also have an absolute power over their

¹² Magali, 157.

¹³ Kubitschek, 180.

decisions when Arnette's father claims: "I'm her father. I'll arrange her mind" (*Paradise*, 61). Pat Best also notices that women in her town often do not have last names and that others have generalized last names. She believes that identity of Ruby's women "rested upon the men they married" (*Paradise*, 187).

Another reaction to the rebuff is the town's older men's inability to accept any kind of change, and a rigid adherence to past. The older generation resents any kind of change and is willing to do anything, including the use of violence, to keep things as they are. Originally, the town of Haven is based on communal spirit and values, in rather African style. The residents "refused each other nothing and were vigilant to any need or storage" (*Paradise*, 109). A symbol of this is the communal Oven. It is a place of social gatherings used for communal cooking, and people often "stayed to gossip, complain, roar with laughter and drink walking coffee in the shades of eaves" (*Paradise*, 15). There, the traditional African values are still cherished. People gather to talk about their dreams; elders tell the younger generations stories to pass on the communal past. As Reames points out, the Oven in the original town of Haven unified the townspeople. When Haven fails, the men take the Oven with them, as a reminder of their determination to succeed where Haven had failed. However, the Oven ultimately becomes a focal point of disagreement between the older and younger generations.¹⁴

As a consequence of racism, patriarchal power, and insistence on the past, a conflict between the older and the younger town's generations arises. The older generation cannot see that nothing can stay the same forever and that the younger generation wants and believes in different things. When a group of young people try to change the original inscription on the Oven, understanding it in a more active way, the older generation is appalled. The young people believe that change could not be reached by constant submissiveness; they think that people need to fight for their rights. The younger generation is influenced by the only outsider

¹⁴ Reames, 26.

living in Ruby, the new Baptist minister Reverend Misner. He encourages active participation in the Civil Rights movement and brings new perspective to the rigid town. As Reames points out, it becomes clear that the town's isolation cannot secure immunity to the changes in the country; their separatism does not provide protection.¹⁵ The old generation believes changing the meaning of the inscription means killing its meaning and history. Regardless the plausibility of the young people's interpretations and arguments, Steward ends the discussion with a threat: "If you, any one of you, ignore, change, take away, or add to the words in the mouth of that Oven, I will blow your head off just like you was a hood-eye snake" (*Paradise*, 87). As Rob Davidson argues, for the members of the older generation the inscription includes every fact about how the 8-rocks got to Haven and the meaning of that ordeal, and they are not willing to let the younger generation change it. For the young generation, history is open and dynamic.¹⁶

Another consequence seems to be the divergence of the town's women's opinions. Even though they are under the power of their husbands, the women seem to have separate identities and opinions, and are able to see their husbands' shortcomings. Moreover, as Magali points out, they are more inclusive of others than their male relatives.¹⁷ Nevertheless, they are not able to act upon their realizations. Dovey Morgan, Steward's wife, can see that the more her husband acquires financially, the more visible are his losses. Her sister and sister-in-law Soane can also see her husband Deacon being changed by the money he has. Capitalism and power cause him to forsake his friends and members of his community. "She'd meant she didn't understand why he wasn't worried enough by their friends' money problems to help them out" (*Paradise*, 107). However, even though the sisters are aware of

¹⁵ Reames, 43.

¹⁶ Rob Davidson, "Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001) 358.

¹⁷ Magali, 164.

these changes and their husbands' limitations, they believe that any kind of threat to the peaceful existence of Ruby is external, as Reames argues.¹⁸

The women also have their own opinions on the Oven issue. Both Soan and Dovey can see the changes the Oven and the whole community have been undergoing throughout the years. Even though the town's women "nod" when the men decide to take the Oven along from Haven to Ruby, they know that it has no real value in Ruby. It is not used for communal cooking any more or for social gatherings. They tolerate the men's devotion to it but understand that "A good thing [...] as far as it went, but it went too far. A utility became a shire" (*Paradise*, 103). Dovey thinks that "Specifying it [the inscription] particularizing it, nailing its meaning down was futile. The only nailing needing to be done had already taken place. On the Cross" (*Paradise*, 93).

All these factors lead ultimately to the community's slow deterioration. Misner, the only outsider, can see objectively the changes the community undergoes. When he first comes to Ruby, the community is "tight as wax, when there [is] a problem, a delegation [is] formed to see about it and keep people from falling apart" (*Paradise*, 207). They value tradition and desperately try to be worthy of their forefathers' legacy. The founders are proud of their town, which is unique and isolated. It does not need a jail, as there are no criminals, and the individuals who act up or humiliate their families are taken care of. The residents believe that because the people in Ruby were free and protected from the beginning, there is no threat to their safety in the town. "A sleepless woman could always rise from her bed [...] and sit in the steps in the moonlight [...] Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey" (*Paradise*, 8). As Misner puts it:

They were different from other communities in only a couple of ways: beauty and isolation. All of them were handsome, some exceptionally so. Except for three or four,

¹⁸ Reames, 42.

they were coal black, athletic, with noncommittal eyes. All of them maintained an icy suspicion of outsiders. Otherwise they were like all small black communities: protective, God-loving, thrifty but not miserly. They saved and spent, liked money in the bank and nice things too. (*Paradise*, 160)

Misner can, however, see that the community is changing and people are less and less approachable. Pat tries to convince him that the townspeople just keep more to themselves and reminds him that in Ruby, being an outsider is the same as an enemy. According to Misner, Ruby is a fortress they have built up and the townspeople have to keep everybody locked in or out. As another character points out, instead of trying to fix the intolerable ways in which the town is changing by extending a hand in fellowship and love, the leading men decide to get rid of what they consider the source of the deterioration and ruination of the town – the Convent women. The men could not tolerate them, because they lived without men and God and therefore considered them to be the source of all evil happening in the town.

5.2. The Convent

When we consider Ruby to be a depiction of the whole American society, the separatist, exclusionary, and patriarchal nature of Ruby can be seen as the reason for the necessity to invent alternative communities that, as Magali says, are more inclusionary and based on love. In contrast to the closed community of Ruby, the Convent invites all to join in continuously recreating its dynamic, diverse community.¹⁹ Each woman living in the Convent is an outcast from some other place who is haunted by the past horrors that she experienced. The first sentence of the novel “They shoot the white girl first” (*Paradise*, 1) makes the point that the group of women living in the Convent is racially diverse. Besides Connie who comes from a Latin American country, there is one white woman there as well. However, it is not clear who the white woman is, as Morrison intended, concealing her identity. As Magali

¹⁹ Magali, 152, 174.

points out, this suggests that within the context of the convent community, skin color is not important, in contrast to Ruby where skin color dominates its identity.²⁰

Apart from Connie, all the women end up in the Convent by accident, not by their own choice. Piece-by-piece Morrison gives us the details of the traumatized pasts of each of the Convent residents. The first woman to come to the Convent is Mavis, who runs out of gas and seeks help in the Convent. Mavis's story opens with an interview she gives after the tragic death of her baby twins. It is clear from the interview that Frank, the father of her children, is an alcoholic who abuses her and beats her regularly. Being scared of him, she wants to do everything right so he will not get angry. When he comes home and wants dinner, Mavis rushes out and takes the twins with her, so that their crying would not bother Frank. Unfortunately, Mavis leaves them in the car, where they suffocate. Mavis finds it impossible to live with her family after the tragedy, believing they want to kill her. She runs away, seeking refuge and understanding with her mother. However, Mavis overhears her mother's conversation with Frank and realizes that she will not receive any sympathy from her mother. When Mavis thinks she sees Frank at a gas station, she panics and gets lost. She then runs out of gas near the Convent, where she intends to stop only for help. However, she feels safe in the kitchen, where she hears her dead children, and decides to stay at the Convent.

The next woman to come is Grace or Gigi, a spirited and openly sexual girl who is initially involved in the Civil Rights movement with her boyfriend Mikey. When Mikey is arrested Gigi searches for sexual symbols around the country, arriving in Ruby. She is disappointed by Ruby and wants to leave immediately. On her way to the train station, she comes to the Convent again and is asked by Connie to stay and watch out for her while she sleeps, and Gigi agrees to do so. She is fascinated by the sexually suggestive statues in the house. Even though Gigi herself is comfortable with her sexuality, she recognizes the potential threat in the statues. As Reames points out, sexuality implies menace for the

²⁰ Magali, 170.

Convent women. Their experiences reflect the pervasive danger sex poses to women in a male-dominated society.²¹

Seneca was abandoned by her mother when she was five years old, not even knowing that the woman who abandoned her was her mother. Seneca believes that she was abandoned because she misbehaved and “if she did everything right without being told, either Jean would walk in or when she knocked on one of the apartment doors, there’d she be!” (*Paradise*, 127). When she is later abused in a foster home, she receives sympathy for a bloody scratch but is sent away when she talks about the abuse. She believes it is something in her that makes boys snatch her and men flash her. As Reames points out, Seneca’s vulnerability makes her an easy target for people who want to use her. She is repeatedly sexually assaulted by men and assumes that she attracts the abuse and that it is her fault.²² She finds peace in the entirely female Convent, but her peace is disturbed by the new girl, who constantly cries, whereas Seneca never cried in her life.

Pallas is another sexually abused girl betrayed by the supposedly closest person in her life – her mother. She is brought up by her wealthy father, as her mother left them when she was small. She decides to visit her mother for Christmas and brings along her new boyfriend, who is an artist like her mother. When Pallas finds her boyfriend and her mother having sex, she flees and is raped. Pallas is brought to the Convent by Billie Delia, who knows Pallas will receive help there. Billie Delia knows the Convent is a place where “you can collect yourself [...] think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you all the time. They’ll take care of you or leave you lone – whichever way you want it” (*Paradise*, 176). Pallas is seriously disturbed when she arrives at the Convent and does not talk at all for the first three days there. However, she feels the “blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here – an unbridled authentic self [...]” (*Paradise*, 177).

²¹ Reames, 36.

²² Reames, 47.

Connie, who becomes the Convent women's healer, was also a victim of a sexual abuse. Raped at the age of nine, she was found by Mary Magna who refused to leave Connie in the garbage and took her with her. Connie devotes her life to Mary Magna and to God and when Mary Magna dies, she is unable to carry on without her. Connie has magical powers, as she can tell people's pains, heal them, and raise the dead as well. At first, Connie is scared by her gift, as it is against her religious beliefs. However, Lone, who also possess similar skills, teaches Connie to accept her role. All the women who come to the Convent feel safe with Connie and sense her healing power. Even Pallas, who would not talk to anyone "went to her, sat on her lap, talk-crying at first, then just crying [...] it was backward and punctured and incomplete, but it came out – little one's story of who had hurt her" (*Paradise*, 173). After years of waiting for death and drinking, Connie transforms and takes charge of the women's active healing. She calls herself Consolata Sosa, prepares a feast, and instructs the other women to clean the cellar floor and makes them lie there naked. She teaches them the unity of the body and soul and warns them never to separate those two: "[N]ever break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve" (*Paradise*, 263). The healing process continues as a loud dreaming. Finally, the women are able to tell their stories out loud or paint them and eliminate the effects of their traumas. As Romero points out, it is the more inclusive and accepting spirituality that Consolata teaches the women that helps them to overcome their traumas and to create more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusion of Ruby.²³

The exclusionary and separatist community of Ruby considers the alternative community of Convent women that emerged because of the male-dominated exclusionary society they lived in to be a threat. According to Magali, the patriarch's suspicion is also a function of their desire to retain control over the separatist enclave grounded in racial purity.²⁴ The Ruby men come to the Convent to make sure that "nothing inside or out rots the one all-

²³ Romero, 418.

²⁴ Magali, 159.

black town worth the pain” (*Paradise*, 5). The Ruby leading men believe that the Convent women are the source of all evil happening in Ruby. As Kubitschek points out, because Ruby has to be perfect, the results of all imperfect behavior have to be dealt with in the Convent. That leads to demonization of the Convent women by the leading men of Ruby, allowing them to ignore its homegrown sources of conflict.²⁵ The men kill the women claiming they are doing it for the good of the whole community. Pat believes that the Ruby men killed the Convent women because the men considered the Convent residents impure, unholy, and because they could, “which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the ‘deal’ required” (*Paradise*, 297). As Davidson argues, the men killed the women not for moral reasons but as a demonstration of strength and to show everyone who is in charge.²⁶ Moreover, as Romero argues, the Convent women became a convenient scapegoat for Ruby, as they accepted different ideals, behaviors, and races, while retaining economic autonomy, and thereby calling into question the necessity of Ruby’s rigid code of behavior. The women’s ability to overcome their past traumas exposes the failure of Ruby’s citizens to come to terms with their own traumatic histories.²⁷

The murders, however, seem to be a breakthrough of a kind for Ruby. Even though Steward is unapologetic, Deacon takes full responsibility for his action and is willing to repent. It nevertheless creates permanent damage in the Morgan twins’ relationship, as well as between their wives, Soan and Dovey. Finally, as Reames points out, the townspeople are able to see that the original purpose of their town has been destroyed.²⁸ When they find out the dead bodies have disappeared, they believe Ruby is given another chance. Misner decides to stay in Ruby, as he is finally able to see their biggest flaw and does not want to give up on them: “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. And when

²⁵ Kubitschek, 181.

²⁶ Davidson, 368.

²⁷ Romero, 419.

²⁸ Reames, 59.

the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause” (*Paradise*, 306). He does not believe this hard-won heaven, defined by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy, and the strange, can hold together. Only Billie Delia understands that the Convent women are somewhere there, getting ready for battle to “stomp down this prison calling itself a town [...] A backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where” (*Paradise*, 308). The ending suggests that Ruby will in the end probably open itself to the world, there will be roads and a gas station built and, perhaps, with the help of the Convent women, they will be able to create a community that is less exclusionary and more open to diversity and imperfection.

5.3. Conclusion

Morrison clearly wants to show in *Paradise* the danger of isolation which, according to her, “carries the seed of its own destruction.”²⁹ What is striking about the ending is the fact that the Convent women re-appear carrying guns, suggesting that violence might be necessary in their fight. Moreover, contrary to *Song of Solomon*, African cultural heritage does not serve as a remedy for the damaged community, even though it is still present in the novel in the form of communal gathering, storytelling, and support. For most people in Ruby, Africa is “a foreign country” and they do not believe “some stupid devotion to a foreign country [...] is a solution” (*Paradise*, 210). They resent the young generation’s interest in Africa and their belief that they can fight the whites more effectively. According to Reames, the attraction to Africa as a homeland is perceived as dangerous by those who recognize the racial heritage theory and exclusion.³⁰ Identifying with Africa supports the idea of radical separatism, which proves to be destructive. As Kubitschek points out, *Paradise* also demonstrates the falsity of separatism’s opposition and re-examines the ideal of self-governing all-black towns and argues that previous works of other writers such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *The Eyes were*

²⁹ Toni Morrison cited in Reames, 29.

³⁰ Reames, 55.

Watching God have romanticized them.³¹ The ultimate remedy is thus the more inclusive community the Convent women were unconsciously trying to build. The Convent community emerges as result of violence done to the women who are all outcasts. They have to learn to come to terms with all their pains, accept their imperfections, and treat other people the same way. They have to value individuality, but not individualism. The Convent community serves as an example of a community that is based on inclusive and communal care. Morrison does not forsake the African heritage and values, but they have apparently become ineffective tools as the community and society have changed over the years and have come to demand a more efficient solution.

³¹ Kubitschek, 179.

6. Conclusion

Toni Morrison has published ten novels since 1970. In 1993, she won the most prestigious literary award - The Nobel Prize. She has also published a number of non-fictional works, such as *The Black Book*, *Playing in the Dark*, and a play, *Dreaming Emmet*. Morrison was also a distinguished editor and university professor and at the same time she raised her two sons. Her books have received critical acclaim and remained popular with the readership. Right now, she is working on her eleventh novel, *Home*.

As Danielle Taylor-Guthrie points out in her introduction to the *Conversation with Toni Morrison*, Morrison considers her “call” to write not only as a personal vocation, but also as something that serves the whole community.¹ Community has always been an important issue in her books. As early as 1976, in an interview with Childless, Morrison claimed that novels should bear witness. Yet, looking at three of Morrison’s novels from different time periods, we can see a significant change in her perception of community and the possible cures. Her novels thus bear witness not only to the changes the community and society are undergoing, but to the development of her attitude to them as well.

Toni Morrison claimed in her interview with Vinson in 1985 that she feels communities and neighborhoods have changed in a significant way and they continue to be in flux. It is difficult, according to Morrison, to keep family and community together. The old stories and songs do not work any more. In her opinion, this is where the importance of writing comes in. A novel written in a certain way can do what spirituals used to do for the black community. “It [a novel] can do exactly what blues or jazz or gossip or stories or myths or folklore did.”² Thus, her novels attempt to keep the African heritage alive, point out what is wrong in society, and also suggest possible solutions. However, my analyses of her novels show her ideology has changed over the years. She still believes in the importance of the

¹ For Morrison, as Taylor-Guthrie continues, books have to be political. Morrison does not believe there is any contradiction between fiction being political and beautiful. Her fiction, like all art, is inherently political yet beautiful. She does not sacrifice aesthetics for polemics. (Taylor-Guthrie, *Conversations*, viii)

² Toni Morrison in *Conversations*, 183.

African cultural heritage, and in the importance of knowing one's history in order to be able to maintain one's identity. She also still holds true that nuclear family is not enough for a proper upbringing of a child, neither for black nor for white families. In an interview with Bonnie Angelo in 1989 she said: "Two parents can't raise a child any more than one. You need a whole community – everybody – to raise a child. [The nuclear family] isolates people into little units – people need a larger unit."³ She believes that the families need to pass this knowledge on to their children, as she does in her own family:

It is important that my children participate in that [...] That's part of knowing who they are and where they come from. It enhances them in a particular way and when they have children on their own it won't be this little nuclear you and me, babe.⁴

However, it seems that she does not believe that the return to African values itself can help to keep the community alive any longer.

We could see in her first book, *The Bluest Eye*, that she considered the dominant white society that imposed its values and standards on the black community to be oppressive. She nevertheless accuses the black community of adopting the white standards and values instead of maintaining their own. However, I believe that in *The Bluest Eye*, she holds white, racist society responsible for the damage done to the black community. She introduces the idea of such African traditions as storytelling, singing, communal support, and belief in magic as life-nurturing and community-saving. This emphasis on African American heritage is even more prominent in the second analyzed book, *Song of Solomon*. The return to African traditions and values is portrayed as the only right way to maintain one's identity and the cultural and familial heritage. The significance of knowing one's name, history, and past is stressed and argued to be crucial for claiming and maintaining one's identity. In *Paradise*, African heritage

³ Toni Morrison in *Conversations*, 260.

⁴ Toni Morrison in *Conversations*, 104.

is still present in the form of communal gatherings, belief in the power of storytelling and the supernatural, and communal support. Nonetheless, it is a remedy that seems to be ineffectual. She criticizes communities based on exclusiveness, isolationism, and patriarchal power, and calls for a community that is based on understanding, communal healing, and greater inclusiveness. As Romero points out, she explores the idea of “paradise” that in her opinion functions on the basis of exclusiveness, giving rise to the emergence of groups or individuals that will be left out. Instead, she imagines a “paradise” on earth that would be for everyone.⁵

⁵ Romero, 421.

Bibliography:

- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London; New York: Verso, 1991.
- Billingsley, Andrew. *Black Families in White America*. New Jersey: Eaglewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1968.
- Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- Davis, Cynthia A. "Self, Society, and Myth in Toni Morrison's Fiction." *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 23 No. 3. Summer, 1982.
- Davidson, Rob. "Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 47, No. 3. Autumn, 2001.
- Gates, Henry Louis Jr. Preface to *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present* in Gates, Jr., Henry Louis and K. A. Appiah ed. New York: Amistad, 1993.
- Girard, René. *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory. London: The Athlone Press, 1995.
- Furman, Jan ed. *Toni Morrison's Song of Solomon: A Casebook*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Harris, Collin. "The Pathological Psychology of Western Capitalism," May 31, 2010, 18 Feb 2012 <http://www.zcommunications.org/the-pathological-psychology-of-western-capitalism-by-collin-harris-1>.
- Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of a Negro Past*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1990.
- Holloway, Karla F.C. and Demetrakopoulos, Stephanie A. *New Dimensions of Spirituality*. Westport: Greenwood, 1987.

- Kauenz, Jane. "The Bluest Eye: Notes on History, Community, and Black Female Subjectivity." *African American Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3, Women's Culture Issue. Autumn, 1993.
- Kubitschek, Missy Dehn. *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.
- Magali, Michael. *New Visions of Community in Contemporary American Fiction: Tan, Kingslover, Castilo, Morrison*. Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2006.
- Morrison, Toni. *The Bluest Eye*. London: Vintage Books, 1999.
- Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. London: Vintage Books, 2006.
- Morrison, Toni. *Paradise*. London: Vintage Book, 1998.
- Reames, Kelly. *Toni Morrison's Paradise*. New York: Continuum, 2001.
- Romero, Channette. "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*." *African American Review*. Vol. 39, No. 3, 2005.
- Secombe, Wally. *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe*. London: Verso, 1992.
- Smith, Valerie ed. *New Essays on Song of Solomon*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Soro, Adama. "Living Together: African Community-Based Values in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*." *Sciences sociales et humaines, Revue du CAMES Nouvelle Série B*. Vol. 9, No. 2, 2007.
- Taylor-Guthrie, Danielle ed. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.