

RESEARCH ARTICLE**(Re-) constructing History: Amalgamating Fiction and Reality in Tony Morrison's 'Paradise'**

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Abstract:

History has been one of the notable factors of human civilisation at large. Every society, for that matter, gets enveloped by a particular historical truth which structures the living of the people. Human life, since its inception, has been the off-shoot of different historical traces which resurface within the ambit of human living. Considering Afro-American literature in general, the marginalised position of the native people has always found significant representation in various writings by stalwarts like Toni Morrison, Richard Wright etc. However, Morrison's captivating fictional piece Paradise seems to deal with an altogether different aspect of showcasing the subtle yet vivid process of reconstructing the history of the people. The novel can very rightly be regarded as the testament to the development of the history of a remote town Ruby in the suburbs of Oklahoma in the United States. This paper attempts at depicting the construction of history of Ruby by bringing in both fictional and real elements by Morrison. The paper makes use of the idea of "meta-code" by Hayden White to substantiate the analysis of the plot.

Keywords: Afro-American, history, reconstruct, real, plot.

Human living entails a lot of events which pertain to the broader realm of history of the people. Every society in this world has been the by-product of various kinds of historical ramifications which both regulate and guide the living of human beings. Literary pieces and writings can be regarded as the vehicle for the portrayal of the historical nuances of a particular

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civilisation which sometimes get suppressed under the weight and burden of development. Whenever there is the process of the development of history, there is inevitably the indirect attempt of dealing with the construction of identity of the people. The past of the people, irrespective of it being preferred or despised, plays a very important role in the larger picture of the regulation of the faiths and beliefs in a particular society. Thus, the reconstruction of a particular history also depicts an inherent process of the reconstruction of the cultural traits of the people residing in a particular society. Considering the different ramifications of history, Matt K. Matsuda has made the following remark

No history can be pure event, pure evolution; each is rather a repetition, a return to a story which must be retold, distinguished from its previous retelling. The past is not a truth upon which to build, but a truth sought, a re-memorizing over which to struggle. (16)

Tony Morrison's *Paradise* narrates a gripping tale of the vivid re-construction of a rural town called Ruby in the remote areas of Oklahoma located in the United States. Morrison employs the technique of dealing with a story in order to showcase the slow erection of the historical features of the town of Ruby. One of the significant aspects of the novel is the depiction of the role played by smaller attributes of history in connecting them to the larger scenario of the memory of the people. While reviewing the novel, Patricia Storace makes the following statements indicating the novel to be a great achievement as it concerns the reconstruction of the history of the people. In her words,

—*Paradise* ... draws that black presence forward from the margins of imagination to the centre of American literature and history. (64)

—the official national founding myth (of America's white Fathers') is a shadow of (African Americans') own, in a community where shadows are not dark, but white (65).

—Morrison is relighting the angles from which we view American history, changing very color of its shadows, showing whites what they look like in black mirrors. (69)

In the words of Hayden White, the process which is associated with narratology is “a metacode, a human universal (code) on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted” (13-14). Morrison showcases that the reconstruction of Ruby, which was the town of the native African people, consisted of a sense of rejection in it as it echoed the longing of the black people for a proper identity in the society. It was seen that there was an earlier town called Haven which no longer exists and the demolition of this town, as Morrison depicts, is what paved the way for the development of the town of Ruby. Thus, starting from the subjugated position of the blacks to the domination of the whites along with the construction of the historical features of the black town of Ruby, the readers can easily discern an edge-of-the seat narration in the novel. The readers find a very poignant narration of nine ex-slaves in the novel who always hankered after a proper identity in the white society. They were seen to be brutally tortured and ill-treated by the whites and were never given the stable identity which they

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were aspiring for.

Moreover, Morrison shows that the name Ruby was given after the twins of the Morgan family. Thus, it becomes vividly evident that the thread which binds the creation of the town of Ruby is nothing but the relegated position of the native people in the society. The novel, albeit subtly, hints at the palpable failure of the white rulers to exert the same influence and hold on the native people and it was indicated by showing the demise of the sister of the two Morgan brother, Ruby who was white. Ruby was illustrated by Morrison by saying, “the sweet modest laughing girl whom (Deek) and Steward had protected all their lives . . . died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her” (Morrison 113).

The act of naming a particular land in memory of the dead sister by the Morgan brothers leads to two glaring implications. Firstly, it becomes the representation of the love and affection which they had for their dear sister and secondly, it also becomes a symbol of their inherent desire to exert their dominance and control over the native blacks in the society. There is also a sense of power being associated with the place because it was seen that the Ruby men clearly stated that the history which is connected to their previous generations was nothing but a “controlling one” (Morrison 13). The character of the dead sister, Ruby was seen to be epitomising the intricacies of motherhood and love as she was seen to be relegated character in the novel who tolerated subjugation of the highest kind. Morrison does not portray any kind of support or a companion for Ruby who would act as her consoling figure and the lack of support in her life only heightens the sufferings of the girl.

The narration of the novel, if observed carefully, becomes a sheer platform of rescue for the readers as well to be attaining some kind of solace as the voice of Morrison appears to be a comforting one for the readers. Taking the idea of ‘meta-code’ into account by White, it becomes vividly evident that Morrison, in the entire plot of the novel, appears to be the watch dog as she seems to warn various characters in the novel and also plays the perfect foil in order to regulate the different events of the novel. As she states towards the end of the novel,

When the ocean weaves sending rhythms of water ashore, Piedade looks to see what has come. Another ship, perhaps, but different, heading to port, crew and passengers, lost and saved, atremble, for they have been disconsolate for some time. Now, they will rest before shouldering the endless work they were created to do down here in paradise (318).

Paradise, in this way, can truly be considered as a remarkable achievement by Morrison which is related to the reconstruction of both the identity of the people and the geographical location of Ruby as well. The moment a particular history is narrated; it simultaneously gets constructed as well and thus, Morrison reconstructs both the history of the people and the place. In short, there are concerns which are related to a particular nation at large which get postulated and delineated in the entire narration. In an interview with Salman Rushdie, Tony Morrison makes the following remark,

am not sure what the word “Negro” means, which is why I write books. What is black

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child/woman/friend/ mother? What is a black person? It seems to me that there are so many that inform blackness. One of the modern qualities of being an Afro-American is the flux, is the fluidity, the contradictions. (S. Russel 36)

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