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Oppression, Self-Marginalization and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Introduction

The human world is under constant analysis and one of the main reasons to inspect society is an aspiration to shed light on different issues that pose problems for individuals or groups of people. Some of the aspects of our social world that have been examined and analyzed within various academic fields deal with discrimination and marginalization, and many scholars have investigated the causes and effects of different forms of oppression in society. In literature, these types of societal issues are often expressed as themes and literary works can be imbued with social critique. There are also different literary theories that deal with various types of discrimination, marginalization and inequality. It is not uncommon for there to be multiple perspectives at play when individuals or groups of people are pushed or withdraw to the margins of society. For instance, bell hooks states that sexism and racism have more or less simultaneously shaped the foundation of social structures in the United States (*Ain't I a Woman* 15). This perspective suggests not only that inequality is deeply rooted in the foundation of American society, but that oppression needs to be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Furthermore, some literary works depict multiple grounds for oppression as well as a spectrum of marginalization, where different extents and forms of oppression and marginalization are detectable.

This spectrum and complexity of marginalization is reflected in many of Toni Morrison's novels. In *Paradise* (1997), Morrison tells the story of Ruby - a fictional town in Oklahoma with an all-African American population that bases its collective identity on a past of oppression. As a result of this painful emphasis in the creation of their identity, the townspeople isolate themselves from the rest of society and employ a strict set of rules and codes to live by. In parallel with Ruby, there is a mansion - the Convent - that has come to function as a refuge for women who face different forms of oppression and marginalization. According to bell hooks, oppressed peoples can use their position in the margin as a form of resistance to oppression (*Marginality as a Site of Resistance* 341-343). The women in the Convent manage to develop their marginalized position into a form of resistance to oppression. However, this resistance is met with violence by some of Ruby's male residents. I will argue that the residents of Ruby isolate themselves based on the pain of past oppression, which causes them to replicate the social structures that oppressed them. The men of Ruby redirect this oppression to the Convent women, who manage to transform their marginality into a site of resistance. Even though a group of Ruby men resort to violence to

maintain the social structures, the Convent women's resistance is powerful enough to lead to social change.

Background

As both the novel and the themes addressed in the thesis statement are complex, this section will serve to aid the analysis in clarifying significant events in the novel. *Paradise* was published in 1997 and raises important issues in intricate ways. The ancestors of Ruby were freedmen, former African slaves, who lived in Louisiana. As a result of Jim Crow laws, they were displaced and started to search for a new home. However, every community they approached judged them and denied them a place. As African Americans during a time of racial segregation, they were already marginalized in America, but these families were also what is referred to in the novel as "eight-rock," a term which encompasses African Americans who have what is considered to be a particularly dark shade of skin (Morrison 193). This left the families, above all the men, with emotional scars that propelled them to create a community of their own, called Haven. After having fought in World War II, however, the sons of the founding men of Haven came back to yet another traumatic experience of racism. Therefore, they decided to move their families to another location to start a new town, Ruby, in which they developed strict isolationist social codes.

In contrast, the Convent is a mansion seventeen miles from Ruby that has become a refuge of sorts for women who, in varying ways, have been marginalized or traumatized. The women are of different ages and backgrounds, but have a certain common ground through their experiences and how they relate to norms. The "Convent" used to be a Catholic school for Arapaho girls. However, the only characters who stay there after the school shuts down are Mary Magna, a nun who dies of old age, and Consolata. Through no intention of her own, Consolata becomes like a "mother" to women and girls who show up at the Convent needing help, to heal or just a place to be. These premises are monumentally different from those of Ruby and many residents of the town react against the Convent with judgment and general dislike, mostly because they do not consider the Convent women to be god-fearing, virtuous women like those of Ruby. The opening and closing scenes of the novel describe nine Ruby men entering the Convent with the intent to harm or murder.

Aim and Approach

The aim of this paper is to analyze oppression and self-marginalization in regards to the residents of both Ruby and the Convent. Rather than comparing the two communities, the

analysis aims to examine their developments separately while also addressing some of the dynamics between them. This will be done through a close-reading of the novel. The two communities are the novel's present and the past will mainly only be analyzed in terms of what is relevant to the thesis statement. Therefore, rather than analyzing the transition from Haven to Ruby, I will focus on Ruby and the Convent.

In order to analyze the chosen themes in *Paradise*, it is necessary to apply theoretical tools that reflect the novel's complexity. To capture the intricacy of the novel and its relevant themes and topics, the analysis will rely on different concepts from various theoretical frameworks. The two most central concepts for this analysis are marginalization and bell hooks' idea that marginality can be used as a form of resistance.

There are characters and communities that are marginalized in *Paradise* and residents of both of the two main communities in the novel have marginalized themselves in order to escape oppression. Marcia Tucker writes that marginalization is a "complex and disputatious process by means of which certain people and ideas are privileged over others at any given time." (7). She goes on to define the term as "the process by which, through shifts in position, any given group can be ignored, trivialized, rendered invisible and unheard, perceived as inconsequential, de-authorized, "other", or threatening, while others are valorized (7). However, as Russell Ferguson argues, the margin needs by definition to be put in relation to a "center," which can be challenging to identify because "the place from which power is exercised is often a hidden place." (9). Although it may be hard to define, most marginalized peoples perceive that there is a norm at the center, the power of which pushes those who do not fall under its category to the margins. Audre Lorde defines this center as a "mythical norm," which in the United States is typically portrayed as "white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, christian and financially secure." (282). As the novel portrays characters that internalize their own oppression, a further relevant idea regarding marginalization is the notion of internalization,. According to Ferguson, marginalized peoples can be simultaneously oppressed by and internalize the norm that is in the powerful "center," which he defines as "the tacit standards from which specific others can then be declared to deviate, and while that myth is perpetuated by those whose interests it serves, it can also be internalized by those who are oppressed by it." (9).

How marginalization is dealt with by the Convent women, however, is a matter which will be examined with the approach that marginality can be used as a form of resistance. In her essay "marginality as a site of resistance," bell hooks states that the margin, while being a place of oppression, can also be transformed into a place of resistance for marginalized

peoples: “Though incomplete, I was working on these statements to identify marginality as much more than a site of deprivation. In fact I was saying just the opposite: that it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives.” (341). This idea is central to the analysis of *Ruby and the Convent*. Through the use of this concept, the analysis will illustrate in what ways Ruby’s self-marginalization is founded on its own oppression. It will also show that the town’s norms and values actually reinforce the norms and values that caused their marginalization to begin with. The women at the Convent, however, process the pain of marginalization, thereby freeing themselves from oppression. In doing so, they eventually succeed in transforming their place in the margin to a site of resistance.

The depiction of the town of Ruby provides a cautionary example of attempts at replacing the center rather than resisting the structure of centralized power vis-à-vis margin. Therefore, a certain critique of the term and concept of marginality is relevant to the analysis. One significant problem that should be mentioned here is the very use of the term “marginality” and its definition. According to Ashcroft et al., the concept “marginality” creates a false sense of geometric positioning which undermines the complexity of oppression and powerlessness (121). They go on to argue how this misconception can lead to misunderstandings as to how to resist oppression: “However, marginality as a *noun* is related to the verb ‘to marginalize’, and in this sense provides a trap for those involved in resistance by its assumption that power is a function of centrality. This means that such resistance can become a process of replacing the centre rather than deconstructing the binary structure of centre and margin” (121).

Considering the relatively small scope of this project, there are limitations to the reach of its findings. There are many themes, perspectives and events in the novel which are important, but have not been treated here. Furthermore, the concept of marginality is, like many theories dealing with our social world, immensely complex. To do this complexity any justice would require a far more extensive treatment of marginality and its related concepts.

Material and Previous Research

Paradise was published in 1997 and the copy that is used in this project is a 1999 Vintage (London) edition.

Toni Morrison’s work has been analyzed, discussed, critiqued and acclaimed by many scholars. *Paradise* has mainly been examined in terms of its treatment of racism and sexism,

but the complexity of the novel allows for a much more multi-faceted approach. Some scholars, such as Channette Romero and Ana M. Fraile Marcos, focus on the religious overtones of the novel. Others, such as Missy Dehn Kubitschek, treat the town's isolationism and the novel's use of polar opposition in terms of "good" versus "evil."

Oppression has many layers in the novel and is related to additional matters such as normativity and Christianity, among other subjects. The arguments in the analysis will draw on ideas developed by Peter Widdowson in his article "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*," where he examines the novel's function as "a fictional intervention in contemporary American historiography" (318). Most central to the analysis are his notions of how the town of Ruby replicates the oppressive structures that the inhabitants sought to protect themselves from. Related to this theory is the argument that *Paradise* illustrates a need for decolonization. Therefore, parts of the analysis will rely on Richard L. Schur's article, where he brings up the novel's theme of decolonization of the mind in relation to both Ruby and the Convent. Schur's arguments will be used to support the thesis statement in terms of holding on to trauma as well as in terms of what bell hooks states is needed for marginality to successfully function as a form of resistance.

Analysis

The analysis consists of two main sections. The first section deals with the town of Ruby and analyzes the relationship between the townspeople's past and the present social structures of their community. The second section of the analysis focuses on the Convent women and analyzes how their self-marginalization develops into a form of resistance towards oppression. The analysis will also examine the relationship between the two communities and ultimately show how the Convent women's resistance leads to change.

Ruby: Pain, Oppression and Self-marginalization

The main objective of the first part of the analysis is to examine the relationship between Ruby's past and its current state of self-marginalization. I will argue that past experiences of oppression are still part of the Ruby residents' present identity. In addition to this, there will be a discussion of how the townspeople internalize their oppression in trying to protect themselves from discrimination. I will also argue that although the margin can be used to

resist oppression, Ruby fails to do so as their self-marginalization is based on the pain of having been excluded in the past.

The pain of having been rejected by both African Americans and other communities is remembered as a pivotal part of the townspeople's history and therefore continues to shape the townspeople's identity. All the founding men and various townspeople are narrated as having flashbacks that depict traumatic events, indicating the close relationship between past deprivations and the current dynamics between the community and the rest of the world:

On the journey from Mississippi and two Louisiana parishes to Oklahoma, one hundred and fifty-eight freedmen were unwelcome on each grain of soil from Yazoo to Fort Smith. Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from N*** towns already being built. (Morrison 13)

This depiction of their past rejection suggests a number of key factors that shaped the rigid social rules of Haven and, later, Ruby. Groups and individuals belonging to different social strata are described as denying the families' entry, thereby effectively marginalizing them from having an axiomatic place in the changing American society. The fact that these particular social groups are mentioned, illustrates a certain hierarchy among the marginalized communities. Since they are rejected by prostitutes and chased by dogs, for instance, the novel shows that they are treated badly by other marginalized social groups as well as animals. This suggests that the characters in the novel are considered to be at the very bottom of this hierarchy. The emphasis, however, is on the pain of being rejected by *African Americans*, suggesting that an intersectional perspective is needed to deconstruct the marginalization of the founding families of Haven. Not only are they poor, displaced and African American, but their darker skin means that there are multiple grounds for their marginality. This rejection is manifested in Ruby's collective identity, as many of the rules agreed upon in Ruby's present are shaped by past events of multiple discrimination. The flashbacks not only show that Ruby residents are reliving the trauma of these past events in their everyday lives, but also that this trauma is an integral part of Ruby's foundation.

Ruby's residents attempt to protect themselves from oppression through self-marginalization, but they also carry their own oppression with them in this act. Having been rejected by other marginalized communities, they are made to feel as if they are at the bottom of the hierarchy, or differently put, at the edge of the "margin." Richard L. Schur argues that the characters in the novel are "haunted" by "the idealization of whiteness" (277). However,

the historical events that ultimately led to the creation of Ruby show that this haunting effect manifests itself in decidedly diverse ways. Ferguson writes that the concept of marginalization rests on there being a “center,” which is often imagined to be white and male, among other attributes (7). As “whiteness” is idealized, the African Americans who have more “white” features will be closer to the center - the dominant culture - than those, such as the founders of Haven and Ruby, who do not. Thus, the novel depicts the Haven founders’ experiences of oppression as markedly different from those of lighter-skinned descendants of freed slaves. It is the pain and trauma of this unique experience of oppression that follows them and causes a process of self-marginalization. The idealization of whiteness “haunts” them by constantly reminding them that they are the furthest from the white norm. According to Channette Romero, “The citizens of Ruby guard against further oppression by establishing a rigid, isolationist code of behavior” (415-416). While this statement rings true, it does not explain the steps *between* wanting to be free from discrimination and creating a strict and isolated town in the margins of American society. At the core of this process is a need to *resist* oppressive forces, which, as mentioned earlier, can be done by purposely positioning oneself in the margin. In an attempt to resist being marginalized by others, the founding men try to take control of what defines them by strategically placing themselves in the margins of American society at large: “They liked being off the county road, accessible only to the lost and the knowledgeable.” (Morrison 186). What is expressed here is self-marginalization in quite a literal sense, as the community has a geographical position that spares it from being easily detected. They want nobody to find them except those who happen to find them by chance and the “knowledgeable” - a term which encompasses only the people who have roots in the town.

However, as Ruby’s self-marginalization is based on their experiences of discrimination, they fail to use their place in the margin as resistance to oppression. Bell hooks states that, for the marginality to be transformed into a space of resistance, the oppressed must separate that space from the pain of oppression: “If we only view the margin as sign, marking the condition of our pain and deprivation, then a certain hopelessness and despair, a deep nihilism penetrates in a destructive way the very ground of our being.” (342). As the founders of Haven, and later Ruby, so ardently hold on to the trauma of their oppression, it becomes the fuel that ultimately leads to the next generation purposely marginalizing themselves in a rigidly isolated town: “[T]hey carried the rejection of 1890 like a bullet in the brain.” (Morrison 109). The phrase “bullet in the brain” is symbolic for the Ruby residents’ pain of rejection because a bullet cannot be extracted from the brain and

must therefore be left there. Just as one cannot be free from a bullet that is lodged in the brain, Ruby residents fail to free themselves from oppression by failing to process and work through their trauma. Furthermore, the phrase paints quite a violent image and is a testament to how destructive the pain of oppression can be when it is allowed to control and rule. Both their chosen marginality and the strict moral and social codes are propelled by the traumatic experiences of discrimination.

Ruby: The Replication and Internalization of Oppression

The second part of the analysis will focus on how Ruby's self-marginalization develops into an appropriation of the same type of social structures that caused the discrimination of its inhabitants in the past. I will focus on the town's adoption of racial purity doctrines as well as patriarchal structures. These will also be put in relation to the concepts of center and margin. Lastly, I will discuss the implications of Ruby's replication of oppressive structures and argue that it illustrates that oppression is an integrated part of American culture.

The townspeople of Ruby adopt and emphasize institutions, concepts and structures such as traditional family, racial purity, patriarchy and capitalism, thereby appropriating the very framework of their oppressors. In portraying the mechanisms behind the creation of Ruby in this manner, Morrison shows that the margin cannot function as a place of resistance if it is built on the trauma of oppression: "They think they have out-foxed the white man when in fact they imitate him." (Morrison 306). This criticism suggests that as long as the inhabitants of Ruby replicate the oppressive structures they will not be truly free from oppression, which Peter Widdowson agrees with: "The ironies and ambivalences multiply here: a triumphant history of repelling racial injustice and violence has resulted, by way of its own virtues, in a situation which imitates the one it has been escaping from." (324-325). One of the most telling examples of this imitation is the town's strict rules concerning racial purity. These rules are, in many ways, a direct replica of racial segregation doctrines imposed by white Americans. This is an example of the problems that arise when using concepts of bipolar opposition such as "center" and "margin" (Ashcroft et. al. 121). Instead of dismantling the structures that result in the development of a powerful center and a powerless margin, the residents of Ruby have made themselves the center. Not only does this mind-set almost completely isolate the town from the outside world, but it forcibly marginalizes those of its own members who break these rules. An example of this type of exclusion can be seen in how the town reacts to a male member of their community marrying and having children

with a light-skinned African American: “They hate us because she looked like a cracker and was bound to have cracker-looking children like me” (Morrison 196). Here, a female member of the community expresses feeling hated and excluded because of her light-skinned mother. The use of the word “hate” indicates the destructiveness of basing the community’s self-marginalization and collective identity on the trauma of oppression.

Another oppressive force that is an integral part of Ruby’s foundation is a strictly patriarchal norm. One of the most telling signs of this gendered social structure are the male perspectives through which past rejections control and shape the present worldview of Ruby’s residents. In her work *Ain’t I a Woman*, bell hooks states that African American experiences of oppression and slavery have traditionally been examined with the perspectives of black men, which has largely meant an exclusion of the black female experience (*Ain’t I a Woman* 20-22). The men of Ruby, and specifically those of a certain age, are portrayed as having monopolized an interpretative prerogative of the townspeople’s history and its implications, thereby giving themselves the right to dictate what types of lessons are to be learned from them. According to Widdowson, Ruby is a micro-version of the larger oppressive structure that is American society (324). Patriarchy in the novel is a pivotal force of oppression of the dominant culture - the “center” in relation to the margin. In *Paradise*, the women of Ruby are not only principally stripped of any power, but they are also subjected to a myriad of different stifling norms to adhere to. In a scene where a few of the oldest and most powerful men of the community convene to discuss serious matters pertaining to a significant event in the town, they are described as hearing “the tippy-tappy steps of women who were nowhere in sight.” (61). Thus, the only sign of women in spaces where power is exerted in Ruby is the dainty sound of their steps, signaling both their exclusion from partaking in decision-making and the normative expectations of femininity. Initially, these types of gendered relations may be perceived as “common” and thus a self-evident development within any community, including those in the margins. However, Angela Y. Davis writes that such inequality was historically not a part of the black slave experience in America: “Within the confines of their family and community life, therefore, Black people managed to accomplish a magnificent feat. They transformed that negative equality which emanated from the equal oppression they suffered as slaves into a positive quality: the egalitarianism characterizing their social relations.” (18). This historical information refutes any idea of patriarchy having had a self-evident role in the lives and communities of the descendants of slaves. Thus, the rigid patriarchal foundation of Ruby is yet another mirror of

the dominant culture that oppressed its inhabitants in the first place, illustrating the consequences of basing their self-marginalization on the destructive trauma of exclusion.

The replication of these oppressive social structures is a result of oppressive notions that are built into the foundation of American culture in the novel. American culture is complex and multifaceted, but many scholars agree that racism and sexism are a part of this culture. For instance, Schur states that *Paradise* illustrates that the legal and organizational changes brought on by the Civil Rights movement are not enough to overcome racism, because racism is part of American culture (283-286). As ideas regarding race and gender are such an integral part of this culture, they are unconsciously perpetuated by the inhabitants of Ruby. In her essay on marginality as a method of resistance, hooks maintains that holding on to the pain of having been marginalized ultimately leads to holding on to a colonized mind. This, in turn, means that the freedom that is sought will remain elusive (342). In adopting the structures of the culture that oppressed them, the founding men of Ruby have locked the community into a collective colonized mind. Evidence of the colonized mind permeates the novel, but one of the most convincing examples is the attitude of Ruby's residents towards "Africa" and "Africans." There are a number of occasions where the townspeople are narrated as having negative associations with "Africa" and "Africans" (104, 209, 210, 213). Their need to separate themselves from the continent from which their ancestors originated is a further indication that they have internalized their own oppression. This internalization, in turn, suggests that the replication of oppressive structures is done unconsciously. Schur argues that *Paradise* addresses issues of "unconscious racialized and gendered thinking" (287). A similar idea of unconscious racism was developed by Charles Lawrence, who states that racism is built into American culture (322). According to Lawrence, this means that everyone in the United States, even people of color, unconsciously share cultural beliefs concerning race (322). By portraying Ruby and its inhabitants as replicating oppressive structures, Morrison shows that oppression is built into the foundation of American society. Although the residents of Ruby isolated themselves to free themselves of discrimination, they are not free from oppression because they share and perpetuate oppressive notions regarding race and gender. This oppression not only affects the people of the town, but is also directed at the women who live in the Convent.

The Convent: Oppression, Norms and Resisting Patriarchy

This section of the analysis will begin by analyzing the type of marginalization and oppression that the women at the Convent are subjected to by Ruby residents. I will also

discuss how certain norms can function as a form of oppression as the Convent women are marginalized for not adhering to these norms. Further, I will analyze the Convent's first steps towards using the margin as a form of resistance. I will argue that freedom from patriarchy is a necessity in transforming the margin into a site of resistance.

The type of marginalization affecting the women at the Convent has to do with their lack of conformity to certain social codes that are imposed on women. Although the Convent women have the experience of trauma in common with Ruby, they deal with it in decidedly different ways. This is partly because they have been marginalized in different ways than the residents of Ruby. In contrast to Ruby, race is rarely mentioned in relation to the Convent. The townspeople's treatment and opinions of the women show that the women are discriminated against for entirely different reasons. The type of marginality affecting the Convent women bears many similarities to what Janet Mancini Billson refers to as "social role marginality" (184-185). She identifies this type of marginality as "the product of failure to belong fully to a positive reference group" (184). The positive reference group in this case are women who adhere fully to the stifling norms and social codes against which women are measured in patriarchal societies. In the novel's context this group is largely represented by the standards of the inhabitants of Ruby: "Quiet white and yellow houses full of industry; and in them were elegant black women at useful tasks; orderly cupboards minus surfeit or miserliness; linen laundered and ironed to perfection; good meat seasoned and ready for roasting." (111). The picture painted here represents the ideal norm that the people of Ruby compare themselves and everyone else to. The domestic site is supposed to have the features mentioned here and it is the responsibility of women to replicate this standard. It indicates what is expected of women in terms of behavior, domestic duties and appearance.

The Convent women, however, do not adhere to these norms and are therefore judged and dehumanized by the people of Ruby. They are judged for being different from Ruby women in behavior and appearance, which is yet another indication that Ruby's residents have effectually made themselves the powerful center in this context. They have made their standards the ones against which everyone is measured and judged. This is above all illustrated as the townspeople continuously refer to the Convent women in dehumanizing terms: "But the target, after all, is detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door." (4). The Ruby men who enter the Convent with the intent to harm the women justify their actions by referring to the women as "detritus," thereby stripping them of their human status. Once they are identified as non-normative and dehumanized, they are easy targets for judgment and oppression. Schur states that *Paradise*

examines “the normative assumptions that people use to view the world around them.” (287). Since Ruby has become a micro-version of the greater oppressive social structures of the United States, their views regarding the Convent women are an example of the discrimination that non-normative women face in American society. It is a social critique of how the norms of the powerful “center” marginalize those who do not conform to them. As the women in the Convent do not fit into the ideal positive reference group, Ruby residents make negative assumptions about them and their character. Therefore, Morrison presents norms and normative assumptions as a form of oppression. Another interesting common denominator among the Convent women is that they are all “runaways” who have left their previous lives in one way or another.

By portraying the Convent women as runaways, Morrison shows that “running away” is a common method of escaping oppression, but *Paradise* also illustrates that the running in itself does not solve the problem of oppressive norms. An example of this notion is shown in the way that one of the Convent women relates to being on the road: “She preferred traveling resolutely nowhere, closed off from society, hidden among quiet cargo – no one knowing she was there.” (138). If no one knows that she exists, then no one can oppress her. The character wants to stay hidden because even whilst “running” there is the possibility of being judged and oppressed. Thus, running away as a form of self-marginalization is criticized. In my opinion, Morrison shows that oppression cannot be resisted by constantly moving and hiding. This criticism also surfaces in Consolata’s internal dialogue, the eldest of the women at the Convent, where she describes common denominators among the women who show up at the Convent: “[T]he timbre of each of their voices told the same tale: disorder, deception and [...] drift. The three *d*’s that paved the road to perdition, and the greatest of these was drift.” (221-222). Consolata has the gift of perception and is older than the women who come to the Convent, therefore she sees things in them that they do not see themselves. She sees that the pain of their past oppression is still there within them, which causes them to “drift” and engage in self-destructive behavior. The terms “deception,” “disorder” and “drift” indicate three notions. Firstly, the use of the term “deception” suggests that the Convent women deceive themselves when they deny their own trauma. The pain of oppression needs to be recognized and processed in order for these women to rid themselves of emotional chaos. The second notion is that denying trauma means constantly drifting while trying to escape something that is inescapable because it resides in the mind. Thirdly, it suggests that as long as there is a drift, marginality cannot function as resistance. The seeds of resistance through

marginality are planted once these women cease their drifting and create a nonjudgmental place to be free from oppression.

Therefore, one of the first steps towards using the margin as a space of resistance is to exclude patriarchal structures as they are largely responsible for the oppression of the women at the Convent. Bell hooks states that the margin can be a “space of refusal” where “one can say [...] no to the downpressor.” (341). Some of the most dominant oppressive forces that are depicted in the novel are patriarchal social structures. By secluding themselves from men, the women are protecting themselves from patriarchy and thereby saying “no” to that oppressive force. Ironically, their act of resistance can be measured through the eyes of Ruby men, who represent patriarchy in the novel: “What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit [...] ? Out here in wide open space tucked away in a mansion – no one to bother or insult them [...] .” (8). There are several occasions where the novel illustrates how a male resident of Ruby reasons when it comes to the Convent women. However, the male character or characters who reason in this way are not always named. The effect of this is that the identity of the oppressor becomes less important because the focus is on the oppression itself. The hidden identity of the oppressor also illustrates the notion that the powerful center is hidden. By not naming the character who has these thoughts about the Convent women, Morrison is showing that it could be any man who would hold such opinions about these women. The point is that these male residents of Ruby do not understand the women nor do they understand why they want to live in the Convent together. It also suggests that the reason behind their lack of understanding is their patriarchal perspective. The phrases “tucked away in a mansion” and “no one to bother or insult them” illustrate that the Convent women’s self-marginalization and lack of male presence alone is beyond what is acceptable to these male inhabitants of Ruby. According to hooks, resisting from the margin is “not just found in words but in the habits of being and the way one lives.” (341).

What the men of Ruby do not understand is that by creating a situation where they are free from men in their everyday lives and decision-making, the women in the Convent are resisting patriarchy: “The whole house felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters but exciting too. As though she might meet herself here – an unbridled, authentic self” (177). The term “blessed malelessness” suggests that an existence without men has positive emotional associations for the women in the Convent. Furthermore, terms such as “protected” and “hunters” indicate that the women feel unsafe where men are and safe where there are no men. Lastly, the use of “unbridled” and

“authentic” lets the reader know that the women at the Convent feel stifled among men in a way that inhibits their freedom to be who they want to be. Once the Convent women are free from patriarchal social structures in their everyday lives, they can begin to truly break free from oppressive norms. Therefore, Morrison illustrates how resistance through marginality for the women at the Convent must begin with freedom from patriarchy. However, further steps are required in order for the Convent women to transform their space in the margin to a site of resistance.

The Convent: Reinvention, Resistance and the Violence of Ruby Men

The final part of the analysis treats the Convent’s ongoing development towards using its marginality as resistance. I will argue that physical distance from oppressors is not enough as oppression can be internalized by the oppressed. The subsequent argument is that in order to resist oppression they must free their minds and heal from the pain of past events. Finally, I will analyze the reaction of the group of Ruby men to the Convent women’s resistance. I will argue that this violent reaction proves the potential power of the Convent women’s act of resistance and that the resistance eventually leads to social change.

The Convent women may have physically removed themselves from sexist and racist individuals and communities that oppress them, but the path to resistance through marginality should also encompass mental and emotional processes. The novel shows examples of oppressed peoples’ internalization of their own oppression. This internalization in the novel suggests that, although the characters may have physically removed themselves from oppression, they will not be free from it as they have not freed their minds from oppressive notions. For the Convent women, freedom from patriarchy is an important step but it does not automatically or entirely transform the margin into a site of resistance. As mentioned in the previous section, the characters at the Convent have all experienced considerable trauma. In many ways, *Paradise* illustrates the consequences of not processing the pain of oppression and marginalization. Some of the men in Ruby are the most extreme examples because their trauma leads to violence and destruction, but even the women at the Convent fail to process the trauma of oppression. For instance, two of the characters at the Convent are in constant conflict with one another and even here the inhabitants judge each other on certain occasions. The conflict leads to a physical altercation where both characters are hurt (168-169). Schur suggests that “haunting memories” need to be worked through and processed in order to free oneself from them (296). This mental process needs to happen in order for the Convent women to use their place in the margin to its fullest potential for resistance. In some ways

these women are also “haunted” by the very norms and structures that form the basis of their oppression, even though the Convent seems free of oppression. In a scene where one of the women involved in the conflict is sunbathing naked, the other orders her to “[P]ut some clothes on!” (76). The attitude of this character indicates that although she does not hold the same strict ideals as Ruby residents do, she “draws the line” at being naked in front of each other. She communicates that she thinks it is inappropriate, thereby signaling that she too has internalized oppressive norms. Therefore, in order to be free from oppression, the process of resistance must also take place in the mind.

As long as the women have internalized their oppression, they cannot resist it, therefore they must gain emotional and mental freedom from oppression. According to Schur, *Paradise* portrays the racism and sexism that is built into the foundation of American society (277). It is partly this foundation that causes the characters in both *Ruby* and the Convent to internalize their own oppression, which means that the oppression reproduces within themselves. Thus, the Convent women need to free themselves from what they have internalized. Schur argues that the solution to this must begin with a “decolonization of the mind” (290). He also writes that the initial step towards freeing the mind is to reinvent “the mental constructs” that are the basis of oppression and marginalization (292). As Consolata finally starts to recover from a depression caused by Mary Magna’s (who has been like a mother to Consolata) death, she realizes that their group cannot fully resist oppressive forces without having healed past traumas. Therefore, she constructs a method by which the women can mentally and emotionally process the pain of oppression. According to hooks, marginality cannot function as resistance if it is marginality that one wishes to escape. Rather, it must be a place that one “clings to,” because it “nourishes one’s capacity to resist” (341). As long as the women hold on to the pain of oppression, their place in the Convent will not be free from oppression. The trauma that remains prevents them from using their place in the margin to summon the energy that is needed to resist. Before the women go through the healing process most of them repeatedly leave the Convent, only to return after a while. This moving around does not really allow them to establish a firm ground as it is another form of running away. However, once the Convent women have mentally freed themselves from oppression, they remain in the Convent. This change indicates that their physical self-marginalization must also be accompanied by a mental deconstruction of all the norms, assumptions and structures that they have internalized while living in a society that is based on inequality.

Once the women begin this process, however, the men of Ruby adopt an increasingly harsh attitude towards the group at the Convent. There are several occasions in the novel that suggest a certain change in the opinions of some of the Ruby residents. According to Schur, the change in attitude is directly linked to the process that the Convent is going through: “It is not just any women who become the primary object of contempt, but the women of the Convent. Besides being “free” women and, in the minds of the town, wild, they are in the process of decolonizing their minds.” (290). The townspeople go from disapproving of and judging the Convent women to blunt hostility and the origin of this hostility lies in their fear of the Convent women’s resistance to the norms that the residents of Ruby adhere to. Examples of the change in the townspeople’s attitudes towards the Convent women can be seen in the type of discourse that is used to describe the Convent from the perspectives of the Ruby men. Dehumanizing terms are not only degrading, but also portray the women as “evil,” referring to them as “Satan’s malefactions” and “female malice” (14, 4). Kubitschek argues that there is a bipolar opposition between the two communities that is partly based on the townspeople’s social construction of “good” versus “evil” (180-181). Although this may be true, the analysis of “good” versus “evil” alone does not do the complexity of the novel justice. The fact that the change in the Ruby men’s attitudes corresponds to the women’s process of reinventing their perspectives indicates, as Schur mentions, that something that specifically pertains to the transformation is at the heart of the growing hostility. As the residents of Ruby have adopted the oppressive features of American social structures, the Convent’s resistance is perceived as an act of resistance against the people of Ruby. As resisting from the margin can be done by merely living life the way one wants to, free from oppression and stifling norms, the very act of living is seen as a threat to Ruby: “[T]hey managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew.” (8). The way that the Convent women live undermines most of the social structures that the men of Ruby rigidly hold on to. Therefore, the violent reaction of these Ruby men is based on their fear of the breakdown of the values upon which they have based a large part of their collective identity.

This fear indicates the potential power of the Convent’s resistance and suggests that women in the novel have a pivotal role in changing oppressive societal structures. Widdowson argues that *Paradise* “points to the possibility of *Equal* rights, driven by the new women’s movements, as the way forward to a transformed future society.” (334). The role of the Convent women in the novel suggests that it is no coincidence that it should be a group of women who use the Convent as a place to self-marginalize and resist oppression. The reason

why the most powerful Ruby men resort to violence is because they want to protect the oppressive social structures and they perceive the group in the Convent as powerful enough to actually change these structures: “They are nine, over twice the number of women they are obliged to stampede or kill” (3). The men make sure to outnumber the women and bring excessive amounts of paraphernalia because they fear the power that women hold. In this case, not only are the inhabitants of the Convent women, but they are women who have managed to free themselves from oppressive structures and norms. Bell hooks states that “We are more often silenced when speaking of the margin as a site of resistance.” (342). This is ultimately what the men of Ruby are trying to do. To maintain a social system of patriarchy and other oppressive structures, they think it is their duty to destroy the Convent and its inhabitants. By doing this, they try to silence the Convent women’s resistance.

However, although this group of men from Ruby violently attack the Convent, the Convent women’s resistance ultimately leads to a form of social change. Many of the inhabitants of Ruby are horrified at the sheer violence of the act of these Ruby men and the men themselves do not seem to take pride in what they have done (287-292). None of the men that took part in the attack is open about their intentions or actions and therefore the truth about the attack remains hidden from the rest of the residents of Ruby (296-298). The fact that these Ruby men do not admit to their reasoning or their actions suggests that they realize that what they have done cannot be justified. One of the men even seems to go through a significant personal transformation after the attack: “[H]is long remorse was at having become what the Old Fathers cursed: the kind of man who set himself up to judge, rout and even destroy the needy, the defenseless, the different.” (302). The phrase “having become what the Old Fathers cursed” suggests that he now understands that the social structures that oppressed their ancestors have been reproduced in the town of Ruby. Secondly, the use of the terms “the needy, the defenseless, the different” indicates that he no longer views the Convent women as “evil” or as a threat. He seems to have learned that the women at the Convent are merely different from the residents of Ruby. Thus, this character has gone from being one of the most rigid protectors of Ruby’s oppressive social structures to understanding that he has had a part in replicating the same type of structures that oppressed the “Old Fathers.” Although these realizations take place after the violent attack, the resistance of the Convent women can be seen as a propeller of social change as many of the inhabitants of Ruby ultimately seem to start reflecting upon their community.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to analyze different forms of oppression and self-marginalization in *Paradise*. One of the most important points that the analysis has made is that oppression is internalized by those who are marginalized in the novel. Characters from both Ruby and the Convent bear their oppression with them because they have lived in a culture that is built on oppressive norms. In many ways, Morrison uses both communities to illustrate the consequences of holding on to the pain of oppression and perpetuating oppressive norms. The analysis has shown that the identity of the inhabitants of Ruby as well as their social structures are shaped by the townspeople's past experiences. Instead of trying to bring about a deconstruction of the social structures that oppressed them, they replicate the oppressive features thereof. However, the novel illustrates that a change in these social structures would involve a complex process. This process is illustrated in the analysis of the Convent. There are important steps and prerequisites that the Convent women need to go through to reach the point where their marginality can function as resistance. The most significant steps, however, involve mental and emotional processes. Once the processes of decolonization and reinvention has begun, the sheer power of this act of resistance towards oppressive forces is shown in the townspeople of Ruby's violent reaction. Despite this violence, the resistance of the Convent women ultimately leads to social change in the novel.

Despite the limited scope of the analysis, its findings could lead to interesting insights regarding larger issues. One matter that could be discussed and analyzed further is the concept of margin and its polar opposite concept of powerful center. In some ways, the novel illustrates some of the consequences of viewing power relations in this way. The analysis argued that Ruby's reaction to oppression leads to the creation of itself as the powerful center in a certain area. Although the Convent can serve as an example of resistance through marginality, it would be interesting to further examine possible paths to changing prevalent power relations without merely replacing the center in a larger societal context. Another intriguing point in the analysis is the suggestion that the potential for societal change lies with those who are most oppressed. As Widdowson suggested, *Paradise* illustrates that the true possibility for change lies with multiply oppressed women (334). Therefore, it would be interesting to examine *how* the experience of marginalization and oppression could lead to a process that can aid society in bringing about changes that do not merely reproduce the current social structures.

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