

Dominance and Defiance: Gendered Power Structures in Toni**Morrison's *Paradise*****Thanga Rathi J.**

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Abstract

This paper examines the tensions between male authority and female autonomy in *Paradise* by Toni Morrison. It explores the conflict between the Old and New Fathers in Ruby, revealing how both perpetuate patriarchal control. The Oven symbolizes cultural resilience and male authority. The study draws parallels between *Paradise* and *Beloved*, highlighting how trauma, shame, and masculinity shape the men's actions. Through an analysis of Elder and the Convent women, Morrison critiques the transformation of protection into oppression. The study reveals how Ruby's men, in safeguarding their identity, recreate the dominance they sought to escape. It also considers how the Convent women's resistance challenges patriarchal power, emphasizing the need to redefine identity beyond oppression.

Key words: Masculinity, Patriarchy, Female autonomy, Racial purity, Trauma, Control, Oppression.

African literature, rooted in oral and written traditions, reflects the continent's history, culture, and contemporary experiences. Writers like Chinua Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, and Toni Morrison use literature to preserve culture, challenge historical narratives, and address social issues. Toni Morrison (1931–2019), the first Black woman to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, redefined Black representation through works like *Beloved*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Paradise*. Blending history, folklore, and myth, her novels explore race, memory, and power.

In Toni Morrison's, *Paradise*, intricately explores the tensions between male authority and the subjugation of women through the conflicting ideologies of the Old and New Fathers in the town of Ruby. The term "Founding Fathers" signifies the patriarchy that governs Ruby, as men establish the rules, oversee the functioning of society, and assume the role of "protectors" within their community. However, despite the attempts by the New Fathers to reform the practices of the Old Fathers, both groups ultimately perpetuate the same oppressive structures. Under the rule of the Old Fathers, women were subjected to hard labour, their lives consumed by constant work. Even with the arrival of the New Fathers, these women faced deeper levels of exploitation and

control, with some even being killed by men who perceived them as a threat to their authority.

The Oven in *Paradise* is a powerful symbol of the Old Fathers' resilience and the way they sought to preserve their cultural identity in the face of adversity. The Old Fathers, descendants of freed Black slaves, endured significant hardships and were displaced from positions of power in white-dominated society. This displacement led them to establish the town of Haven as a place of refuge, where they could rebuild their lives and ensure the protection of their people, especially the women, from the external threats of exploitation and subjugation. The Oven, located at the heart of the town, is more than just a place for preparing food. It represents the communal effort of the Old Fathers to maintain control over their community's identity and uphold a sense of dignity and autonomy. It stands as a symbol of the town's survival through their physical labour and their determination to remain untarnished by the degradation of white society. As Morrison writes, "The Oven was central to everything in Haven... They baked, they prayed, and they kept things secret here" (113).

A key aspect of the Oven's symbolism is its role in protecting women from exploitation. During and after the era of slavery, Black women were often subjected to sexual violence in white households. The Old Fathers took deliberate steps to prevent their women from working in these environments, as they saw it as a form of vulnerability to sexual abuse and the erosion of their dignity. By keeping their women within the safety of Haven and within their own community, the Old Fathers maintained control over their women's labour and their bodies. The communal kitchen served as a safe space where women could contribute to the community in ways that preserved their autonomy and purity. The contrast between the Oven and the white man's kitchen deepens the significance of the symbol. The white man's kitchen is viewed as a site of exploitation, where Black women are vulnerable to sexual assault and the objectification of their labour. In stark opposition, the Oven within the town is a place of racial and cultural autonomy. It symbolizes a rejection of the racial hierarchies imposed by white society and the creation of a safe space for the Black community to flourish, free from the historical exploitation they experienced.

The Oven reflects the Old Fathers' belief in the purity of their heritage. Their dark skin, which had been historically marginalized and oppressed, becomes a symbol of strength and untarnished lineage. The Old Fathers viewed their ability to preserve their cultural and racial identity in the face of external pressures as a mark of honour. The

Oven, thus, is more than just a place of cooking; it is a representation of their commitment to keeping their community's heritage intact and to shielding their women from the types of violence and exploitation that had been all too common in the outside world. This connection between the Oven, racial autonomy, and the safeguarding of women's dignity encapsulates the Old Fathers' vision of a self-sustaining and protected community in Haven.

Cynthia Griffin Wolff's observations in her analysis of the enslaved woman's voice in American literature reveal an important parallel to Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), which explores the moral and emotional turmoil of enslaved mothers. In *Beloved*, Sethe's choice to kill her children rather than let them endure the horrors of enslavement emphasizes the depth of a mother's protective love, a theme that resonates with the eight rock men of Ruby. The character of Halle in *Beloved*, Sethe's husband, embodies the destruction of a man's identity when he fails to protect his wife from assault, leading to his mental breakdown. Similarly, the men of Ruby derive their sense of self from their ability to protect their women. They view their masculinity and pride as inseparable from their role as protectors, but their failure to shield women from harm such as the humiliation of being rejected for shelter in the town of Fairly becomes a defining trauma. This collective shame shapes their identity and fuels their determination to control their women to avoid repeating past failures.

The theme of protection resonates with the eight-rock men of *Paradise*. The character Halle, Sethe's husband, embodies this struggle. His inability to protect his wife from assault when schoolteacher's nephews steal her milk destroys him, leading to his mental breakdown (64-66). Likewise, the men of Ruby derive their identity from their ability to shield their women from harm. Their collective trauma stems from past humiliations, particularly the rejection they faced in Fairly, a town that refused them shelter. This exclusion deeply wounded them:

"It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. ... The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones. ... They wanted more than control; they wanted absolution, vindication. ... Not only from the men who had turned them away but from the women who had witnessed it. ... They had to prove ... that they were still men" (95).

The men of Ruby's reaction to rejection in Fairly reveals a deep connection between

shame, pride, and protection. According to J. Brooks Bouson's work, the trauma experienced by Black men and women in Toni Morrison's novels leads to internalized emotional damage and a desire for control. In *Paradise*, this trauma triggers shame, linked to racial pride and purity, driving the men's need to protect their identity and masculinity. This response mirrors Paul D's character in *Beloved*, who also asserts control due to past trauma. Bouson's analysis highlights how internalized trauma fuels the men's violent actions toward the Convent women, stemming from a desire to safeguard their racial and masculine identity.

The sense of duty that the men of Ruby feel toward protecting their women is deeply connected to sacrifice. They view their actions such as buying winter coats and blue dresses for their wives from the first harvest of as sacred offerings. These gestures serve to reinforce their perception of women as sacred figures who must be protected at all costs. The construction of the Oven in Haven symbolizes their triumph over the economic dependency that would force women into servitude in white kitchens. It serves as a sign of their autonomy and a means of providing for their families, preserving a sense of community and racial dignity.

After Haven deteriorates, Ruby is founded as a refuge to protect women from external threats. The men of Ruby see the outside world as a danger zone, where their families are vulnerable. As one resident describes it: "Where your children were prey, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled" (16). This quote highlights the men's perception of the outside world as a place where their loved ones are constantly at risk. This mindset shapes their ideal of masculinity, which emphasizes protecting women and maintaining domestic order. The Morgan twins, Steward, and Deek, exemplify this mindset, believing that women's roles are tied to purity, order, and domestic stability.

The New Fathers see their identity as rooted in their duty to provide and protect like the old fathers. They aggressively repel any external influence that could disrupt their carefully maintained order. When a group of outsiders arrives in Ruby and harasses local women with lewd gestures, the townsmen immediately take action, confronting the intruders with their weapons. This fierce protectiveness eventually culminates in their attack on the Convent. As Tally argues, their obsession with maintaining Ruby's purity drives them to view the women of the Convent as a corrupting force that must be eliminated.

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison contrasts the men of Ruby with the women of the

Convent, particularly in terms of protection, control, and freedom. This contrast underscores the complexities of gender roles, power dynamics, and identity in the novel. The men of Ruby, led by figures like the Morgan twins (Steward and Deek), define masculinity through their role as protectors. They believe their duty is to shield women, uphold racial purity, and preserve the town's idealized order. However, this protection is inseparable from control. By dictating the roles of women expecting them to be obedient, domestic, and aligned with Ruby's values the men reinforce rigid structures that limit women's autonomy. Their obsession with protection is driven by a deep-seated fear of vulnerability, particularly stemming from the humiliation of being rejected by Fairly. This trauma fuels their need to assert dominance over Ruby's women as a means of restoring their own sense of power and masculinity.

The women of the Convent Mavis, Gigi, and Seneca reject these imposed roles, each shaped by personal histories of trauma and marginalization. Mavis, a mother who lost her children in a tragic accident, flees societal judgment and her oppressive family life, seeking refuge in the Convent. Gigi, having endured abandonment and an abusive relationship, chooses independence over conformity. Seneca, scarred by sexual abuse and emotional neglect, distrusts traditional family structures and seeks healing and autonomy away from patriarchal control. Their choice to live at the Convent represents a form of resistance against Ruby's rigid gender norms. In contrast to the men's belief in control through protection, the women assert independence through defiance, highlighting the novel's exploration of gender, power, and identity.

This tension between protection and autonomy culminates in violence. The men, perceiving the Convent as a threat, launch an attack, believing their actions are justified in the name of order. Their obsession with purity and control ultimately leads to destruction, while the women's self-determination challenges these structures without resorting to violence. The novel suggests that rigid patriarchal control is self-destructive, whereas autonomy offers the possibility of liberation.

Elder, the older brother of Steward and Deek, embodies the psychological consequences of the men's fixation on protection. His experience illustrates how this impulse, rather than stemming from genuine care, evolves into domination and oppression. Elder's failure to protect a Black woman from a violent assault haunts him, revealing the fragile foundation of the masculine identity constructed around protection. Unlike his brothers, who dismiss the assaulted woman as insignificant, elder refuses to ignore her suffering. Morrison writes, "He saw himself, always, as her defender" (213),

highlighting his deeply ingrained belief that protection defines his masculinity. However, his inability to prevent the assault leaves him feeling emasculated. His failure is symbolized by his refusal to mend his stained uniform a metaphor for his damaged self-perception. Morrison describes, “He couldn’t mend the uniform. He couldn’t repair it... it had to stay that way, stained” (214). The uniform represents his identity as a protector, and his refusal to fix it reflects his unresolved guilt. His masculinity, tied to his ability to safeguard women, is now tainted by perceived failure.

Elder’s experience mirrors the broader pattern in *Paradise*, where the men of Ruby’s need for control escalates in response to perceived failures. Their obsession with protecting women is not rooted in respect for female autonomy but in a desperate attempt to maintain power. When this power is challenged whether by an external rejection (as with Fairly) or by independent women (as with the Convent) the men react with violence and repression.

The men of Ruby replicate the very systems of dominance they sought to escape. Originally fleeing racial violence and subjugation, they recreate hierarchical control within their own community. Their insistence on purity and order becomes a means of oppression, as Morrison states, “Their women were for purity, for order. They were a part of the structure” (96). Protection becomes a tool for maintaining patriarchal dominance, stifling women’s freedom rather than ensuring their safety.

Elder's failure to protect the woman exposes the fragility of the men's constructed identity. By defining masculinity through control, they reinforce oppressive systems that ultimately lead to their downfall. As Morrison states, "It was not just the defeat of the woman they wanted to control, but the complete structure that they had built around themselves" (104). This highlights how their rigid adherence to power and protection proves self-destructive. In their quest for dominance, the men of Ruby create an unsustainable power structure. Their narrow definition of masculinity fuels a cycle of control and oppression that consumes them. Morrison underscores how rigid power inevitably collapses, as their refusal to acknowledge women's autonomy leads to the destruction of both their community and their own identity.

This research paper examines *Paradise* through the themes of patriarchal power, protection, and gender dynamics in Ruby. The novel critiques masculinity as a form of dominance rather than mutual respect, reinforcing systems of control. The Oven symbolizes cultural heritage but also represents ideological conflict. Haunted by historical rejection, Ruby’s men strive for racial purity and social order, yet their

obsession with control leads to repression and violence. In contrast, the Convent women reject traditional roles, challenging these rigid structures. Their conflict culminates in a violent climax, underscoring Morrison's critique of patriarchy. *Paradise* reveals how rigid power structures lead to destruction, while autonomy and self-definition offer paths to liberation.

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