

A Power Field: Internal Colonialism in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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ABSTRACT. *By exploring internal colonialism in Paradise, this essay argues that black people who attempt to build a black heavenly home without racial discrimination are entrapped into another variant of racism, internal colonialism which is achieved through the control of the power of discourse and the oppression from the aspects of skin politics and economic exploitation, transforming the town of Ruby to a power field.*

KEYWORDS: *internal colonialism, power, racism, Paradise*

1. Introduction

Paradise, written by Toni Morrison (1931-2019), an Afro-American writer who won the Nobel Prize, is structured into nine sections with each centered around one female character. It mainly tells the parallel histories of the town of Ruby and the Convent 17 miles south of it, and how the men of Ruby become intent on destroying the Convent women. Researches on this novel are fruitful, among which power have been addressed. Carola Hilfrich, for example, employs Michel Foucault's power theory to analyze the counter-memory. Channette Romero analyzes how power operates in religion, race and narration. Unfortunately, internal colonialism in this novel is neglected.

With the approach of Michael Foucault's power theory, this essay, by exploring internal colonialism in *Paradise*, argues that black people who attempt to build a black heavenly home without racial discrimination are entrapped into another variant of racism, internal colonialism which is achieved through the control of the power of discourse and the oppression from the aspects of skin politics and economic exploitation, transforming the town of Ruby to a power field where at the end, tragedies befalls.

2. The Norm of Purification Represented in the Oven

In *Paradise*, oven which prescribes the norm of purification of the community composed of fifteen families signifies the power of the "eight-rock, a deep deep

level in the coal mines”(193), especially the Morgan families. As soon as people “set up temporary quarters”, Zechariah who is the leader of the fifteen families “corralled some men into building a cook oven”(99). For the oven itself, on the one hand, the severe racism of being expelled “by whites, refused a homestead by coloreds”(99) disgraces and hurts them so deeply that they decide to construct an isolated town without any whites and coloreds. On the other hand, as the cook oven like a “community kitchen” prevents the possibility of “rape of women”(99) by the white men, it becomes a symbol of the norm of purification to prohibit the citizens of the town from contaminating the pure-black blood. Therefore, the oven is built to reinforce these 8-rock men’s rule and achieve their political ideal of a pure-black town.

Two generations later after their offspring inherits the oven, they, with the representatives of Deacon and Steward Morgan who are grandsons of Zechariah, value and guard it loyally, because they know that as it symbolizes the norm of the purification created by their ancestors, what they inherit is actually the power and the authority. When they lead other people to build the town of Ruby, they “took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it”(103). In this way, within Ruby, the oven becomes “one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault, 184) of the 8-rock men or specifically, the Morgan brothers to carry out the internal colonialism which highlights “the social relations based on domination and subjection”(Norma Beatriz Chaloult & Yves Chaloult, 86).

As for the words on the oven, the version of “the words Zechariah forged for the oven”(195) insisted by the elder generation with the representatives of the Morgan brothers represents the norm of purification and their unchallengeable power discourse. After about one hundred years from the 1870s to the 1970s, a few parts of the words have disappeared, arousing the young people “challenge the elders’ ideology by discursively waging battle over the most fraught symbol of Ruby”(Stéphane Robolin, 304). The elder insists that “ ‘Beware of the Furrow of His Brow’ is what is says clear as daylight”(86) while the younger resists: “What’s so wrong about ‘Be the Furrow’? ‘Be the Furrow of His Brow’?”(87).

Reverend Pulliam says: “that’s not a suggestion; that’s an order!”(86). Harper Jury stresses: “Beware means ‘Look out. The power is mine. Get used to it’”(87) and then Sargeant complemented: “ ‘Be’ means you putting Him aside and you the power”(87). What the elders say manifests that this dispute is actually a bid for power discourse. As Patricia says: “God bless the pure and holy indeed. That was their purity. That was their holiness. That was the deal Zechariah had made during his humming prayer. It wasn’t God’s brow to be feared. It was his own, their own. Is that why ‘Be the Furrow of His Brow’ drove them crazy?”(217), for one thing, although all these elder people assert that the power is God’s, what they do not say aloud is that the power is theirs, especially the Morgans’ rather than young people’s or anyone else. In the name of God, the words on the oven legitimize and sanctify their authority and power, as Soane says: “a utility became a shrine”(103). On the other hand, it testifies that “Beware of the Furrow of His Brow” refers to the norm of purification, the rule of pure-black blood. Here, the power of the norm, as Foucault claims, “has joined other powers - the Law, the Word(Parole) and the Text,

Tradition”(*Discipline and Punishment*, 184), becoming a power discourse. This kind of power discourse is in Foucault’s view, an “ideological power”(*ibid*, 103) which “provided, in effect, by means of the theory of interests, representations and signs, by the series and geneses that it reconstituted, a sort of general recipe for the exercise of power over men: the ‘mind’ as a surface of inscription for power, with semiology as its tool; the submission of bodies through the control of ideas”(*ibid*, 102). Therefore, the oven and the words on it represent the ideological power and demonstrate the covert internal colonialism exerted by the 8-rock men represented by the Morgans.

3. The Oppression in Terms of Skin Politics

The norm of purification is operated against the light-skinned black within Ruby by the pure black who are the victims of the white’s ideology of whiteness. As what Foucault holds that binary division and branding is one of the double mode, according to which, all the authorities exercise individual control function (*Discipline and Punishment*, 199), in Ruby, the binary rule of “pure black against light-skinned” is practised to “characterize, classify, specialize” (*ibid*, 223) the citizens to achieve control. In Ruby, people such as Patricia, her mother, Delia, and her daughter, Billie, are classified into the light-skinned and therefore, excluded and marginalized by those who are characterized with the pure-black skin.

Patricia’s mother, Delia who is “of sunlight skin and racial tampering”(197) is dead in childbirth, in that “those 8-rock men didn’t want to go and bring a white into town; or else didn’t want to drive out to a white’s house begging for help; or else they just despised your pale skin so much they thought of reasons why they could not go”(198), becoming the sacrifice of the skin politics of pure blackness upheld by the black men in Ruby. Compared with Delia, Morgan brothers’ sister Ruby once dies out of racism upheld by the white and coloreds. That is to say, the racism is transformed to internal colonialism within the black community, which oppresses and kills Delia. As Bailey and Flores emphasize that internal colonialism in the United States refers to the racial discrimination the racial minorities suffer, here, within Ruby, the internal colonialism is practised by the pure black against the light-skinned.(*Internal Colonialism*, 56)

By “measuring, supervising and correcting the abnormal brings into play the disciplinary mechanisms”(*ibid*, 199) to which the fear of the norm of purification gives rise. Patricia, who inherits her mother’s fair skin, in order to escape from the fate of giving birth to what 8-rocks call “cracker-looking children”(196), marries Billy Carto who has “the midnight skin”(198) along with “stick-straight hair”(198) as the children of “a lot of those Sands who marry Seawrights”(196) marrying themselves “into other 8-rock families”(196). She and other light-skinned women, as Foucault argues, assume responsibility for the constraints of power, make them play spontaneously upon themselves, inscribe in themselves the power relation, and become the principle of their own subjection.(*Discipline and Punishment*, 202-203) “By this very fact, the external power may throw off its physical weight; it tends to the non-corporal”(*ibid*, 202) so that “the constant pressure acts even before the

offences, mistakes or crimes have been committed”(ibid, 206). Therefore, the internal colonialism runs efficiently for the Morgans to rule Ruby with the employment of this “instrument or technique”(ibid, 215) of power.

In Ruby, the norm of purification, serving as the eye of the 8-rock men, becomes the universal Law under which, everyone is “subjected to a field of visibility”(Discipline and Punishment, 202). Patricia still “passed the skin”(196) to her daughter, Billie, who had been marginalized and despised since she was “three”(203) years old when she “put down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto Hard Good’s[a horse] back”(151): “she got an unintelligent whipping from her mother... suddenly, there was a dark light in the eyes of boys who felt uncomfortable staring at her. Suddenly, a curious bracing in the women, a looking-away look in the men...and once when Mrs. Dovey Morgan stopped her to wipe what she thought was makeup from Billie Delia’s lips, yet her handkerchief came away clean”(151). “An infinitesimal distribution of the power relations”(Foucault, 216) among everyone is realized in Ruby. Since then, Billie has been punished in a mild and continuous way that “a dose of shame”(152) has always haunted her: regarded as the wild and dirty, she is cut out by other “girls whose mothers had warned them away from her” and suspected of having losing “her virginity”(151). However, she is “untouched so far” while Arnette “had sex at fourteen”(151). This punishment becomes a measure and caution to other people, as Foucault says: “the guilty person is only one of the targets of punishment. For punishment is directed above all at others, at all the potentially guilty. So these obstacle-signs that are gradually engraved in the representation of the condemned man must therefore circulate rapidly and widely; they must be accepted and redistributed by all”(Discipline and Punishment, 108). In this way, “the capillary functioning of power”(ibid, 198) is exploited by 8-rock men to the greatest degree to achieve the internal colonialism.

4. The Oppression in Terms of Economic Power

In Ruby, although no real power institutions exist, the invisible hierarchy with the Morgans at the top do exist. The Morgans enjoy such dominant position and giant power partly because of their giant economic power. They control the lifeblood of the whole town, owning “ranches and houses and a bank with mortgages on a feed store, a drugstore and a furniture”(55), and living a luxurious and leisurely life: “every day the weather permitted, Deacon Morgan drove his brilliant black sedan three-fourths of a mile”(107). In comparison, Ana runs a not bad store, Misner lives a terrible life with a not good barber shop, and the Fleetwoods owe the debt to the Morgans, to name a few.

Roger Best suffers economic marginalization for his marrying a light-skinned woman, which is specially reflected in his difficult living condition. He changes many jobs which are all dim and unpromising and cannot sustain his life: “his veterinary practice (illegal-he had no license-but); his butcher business (bring him the slaughtered steer); and of course the ambulance/mortuary business” (186-187). It is pathetic that when Delia dies without aid, he is not present with her but at the

mortuary school busy on studying for his future work. As for his ambulance/mortuary business, it brings little earning in that there's no hurt or death in Ruby except the death of two people that happens in other towns.(199) In order to survive, he even considers borrowing money in Deek's bank.

The negotiation between the Morgan brothers and the Fleetwoods to solve their niece, K.D.'s love affair with Arnette Fleetwoods shows the Morgan Brothers' economic exploitation. Deacon is very disdainful of the Fleetwoods by questioning: "your house?"(59) when Jeff Fleetwoods says: "don't you come in my house dirt-mouthing my family!"(59). Deacon's retort in fact hints that their house might have been mortgaged to the Morgans, according to what is written in the novel: "K.D. knew that Fleet owed his uncles money"(58). Then again: "Deek leaned back and spread his thighs wider, as though to welcome territory that naturally belonged to him", showing his master stance as if the land is theirs. In fact, it is the truth that "a mile or so" is "Morgan land"(296). The Morgan brothers dominate the whole negotiation while the Fleetwoods are cautious to striving for their interest because of the debt, thereby reflecting a game of the power of discourse:

Fleet scratched his jaw. "Can't make any promises. Mable is a mighty proud woman. Mighty proud."

Deek nodded. "Got a reason to be, daughter going to college and all. We don't want anything to stand in the way of that. Credit to the town."(*Paradise*, 60-61)

Fleet is not satisfied with this solution. However, he neither refuses nor receives Deek's proposal, but turns over responsibility for decision to Mable. Whereas, Deek always takes a hardline and authoritative stance to force Deek to accept that. In this game of power, there is no suspense that Morgan brothers will win. Under the rule and economical oppression of the Morgans, a wide disparity of economic power exists in Ruby. This economic exploitation, as Bailey and Flores holds, is a key means for the implement of internal colonialism.(*Internal Colonialism*, 56)

5. Conclusion

In *Paradise*, the racism upheld by the white is internalized by the black against the light-skinned. The originally heavenly town, Ruby, becomes a power field where internal colonialism is executed by the 8-rock men with the Morgan family as the head: the norms of purification of the town of Ruby as an ideological power represented in the oven is established and guarded to maintain their domination and colonial rule, the light-skinned black are oppressed and marginalized, and the economic lifeblood is controlled by the Morgans, leading to a wide disparity of economic power in Ruby.

With the long-time oppression under the internal colonialism, evil befalls the town: "a mother was knocked down the stairs by her cold-eyed daughter. Four damaged infants were born in one family. Daughters refused to get out of bed. Brides disappeared on their honeymoons. Two brothers shot each other on New Year's Day. Trips to Demby for VD shots common"(11). Tragically, the slaughter of

the Covenant is executed by nine 8-rock men who ascribe the doom of the town to those women in the Covenant. Heaven becomes hell; Ruby is collapsing.

Toni Morrison, through *Paradise*, criticizes internal colonialism which is implemented by the black as well as its source, racism held by the white, reminds and warns black people of the risk of going astray and resorting to this extreme means, and expresses her deep contemplation and concern about the future of black people.

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