

Utopia & Dystopia in Morrison's Paradise

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Utopia is a world so ideal that it holds the tranquility of an ocean. But the ambiguity of this idealism is what brings in the small currents of dissension under the apparently tranquil surface. The currents build waves of rebellion that crash against the shore containing the Paradise and erode it away.

There is continuous ebbing and recession of support and revolt to implement the imagined beauty into reality. But variation being the most innate trait of this world, Paradise becomes customized. Hence, Utopia is created and recreated as its five elements (Beauty, Plenty, Exclusivity, Rest, and Eternity) gets defined and redefined. In this repetition of the struggle to gain short-lived stability, Dystopia is inevitable. The boundaries that encase the customized Utopia for one, push the other away. Hence, Utopia and Dystopia exist inseparably as did Ruby and the Convent.

Every time a group faces rejection, a Utopia is born exclusively ideal for that color, gender, age, and ethnicity. This exclusivity demands purity, purity demands rejection, rejection demands hatred, and hatred demands to kill. So, "They shoot the white girl first". They (the men of Ruby) shot her because she was white, she was a woman, she was independent and free without a single male trailing within several miles of her existence.

"Earlier, when they blew open the Convent door, the nature of their mission made them giddy. But the target, after all, is detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door. So the venom is manageable now. Shooting the first woman (the white one) has clarified it like butter: the pure oil of hatred on top, its hardness stabilized below."

The women at the Convent were detritus because they were different in all the ways the men of Ruby could think and hence their removal amust. Their removal was amust the same way the latter's removal was inevitable to turn Haven into Utopia. They were dark enough to detriment the idealism of Haven. So, the people of Haven inflict the same rejection on the people of Ruby as they received from the Caucasians, and so did the people of Ruby on the women of Convent. The ripple of hatred was too strong to die as the people were very sure of how the Eden on Earth looked like. Theirs was a world in which, "Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey." Did the women trust it so much so that they thought they were safe by revolting sex, deceit, and sly torture of children? They didn't have to trudge ninety miles to be unsafe. It was just seventeen miles, the Convent, and they were shot.

Ruby was built by the men and for the men and women were nothing more than 8-rock pure line generators, comforters, and entertainers. But Ruby did ensure women's safety and rights as much as possible maintaining patriarchal glory. Such glorious was their affection that they shared it with the unmarried women. The unmarried women, or women without prospect (as the men of Ruby thought) were like abandoned properties needing acquisition and possession. So, the men discovered a predaceous way to be generous.

“But there were many others that practiced what Fairy DuPres called ‘takeovers.’ A young widow might take over a single man’s house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects.”

Ruby ensured that the women’s trouble is discussed after they were harmed. So, the Fleetwoods and Morgans gathered together to discuss Arnette’s pregnancy but made sure her voice, her opinion, her choice wasn’t there. In the meeting for discussion of the same mistake in which Arnette and K.D. were involved, it was Arnette’s future that was discussed, it was her reputation of character that was in stake. The meeting concluded with Arnold Fleetwood (Arnette’s father) saying, “I’m her father. I’ll arrange her mind.” And that’s how husbands, fathers, and brothers of Ruby maintained Utopian integrity by deciding for their wives, daughters, and sisters.

This integrity wasn't to be taken lightly but of a kind that was defined by strict boundaries of color. Any soul draped in a colorless dark than that of the gorgeous black diamond was prey to Ruby’s contempt. A contempt is so transparent that the town didn’t question the representation of seven families of Ruby that founded it instead of nine in the Christmas play. Misner being an outsider questioned this misrepresentation to Patricia only to learn that he didn’t know what Ruby was like. “I know I’m an outsider, but I’m not an enemy.” Patricia didn’t have reasons enough to support the town’s illogical disdain but to state the fact, “No, you’re not. But in this town those two words mean the same thing.” She had seen three generations of her family suffer in this unfounded contemptuousness. She had seen her mother, Delia, die in labor pain because none of the males could be persuaded by the begging women of Ruby to bring one of the Convent nuns whom the midwives needed for delivery.

“All of the excuses were valid, reasonable. Even with their wives begging they came up with excuses because they looked down on you, Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tampering.”

She has seen her little daughter, Billie being the victim of unintelligible teasing, shame, hatred, and derision. It was just because she took off her panties for horse riding, as any other kids would do, but wasn’t black enough to do so.

“When she saw him coming, negotiating space among the after-church crowd, she ran out into the middle of Central Avenue, where she pulled down her Sunday panties before raising her arms to be lifted onto Hard Goods’ back. Things seemed to crumple after that.”

Unfortunately, Ruby’s unfounded disdainful paws were spreading to asphyxiate its future. Its exclusivity suffocated the youth to rebellion - “What is talk if it’s not ‘back’? You all just don’t want us to talk at all. Any talk is ‘backtalk’ if you don’t agree with what’s being said.... Sir.”

While the youth wanted to be the instrument of God, the old advised to fear Him. The aged believed idealism lay in glorifying their ancestors who built Ruby, in giving up music, movie, disco, and television. But the youth preferred:

“Not the Blackhorse or Morgan way, but some African-type thing full of new words, new color combinations and new haircuts. Suggesting that outsmarting whites was craven. That they had to be told, rejected, confronted. Because the old way was slow, limited to just a few, and weak.”

As the men were busy celebrating inexhaustible prosperity and immortality of the town, they failed to realize that infertility, drugs, sex, and gambling were some unavoidable practical consequences of Utopian isolation. Struck by realization yet blinded to their misapprehension of paradise, they targeted the Convent. Misner being a foreigner looked at the situation impartially.

“They think they have outfoxed the whiteman when in fact they imitate him. They think they are protecting their wives and children, when in fact they are maiming them.”

‘Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it.’

He could see well enough that the human desire for permanent happiness couldn’t be supported by their ‘thin human imagination’ that considered including a selected few in their Utopia, that didn’t foresee the consequence of their exclusivity, that marked anything other than them as Dystopian elements like the women of the Convent.

“The chill intensifies as the men spread deeper into the mansion, taking their time, looking, listening, alert to the female malice that hides here and the yeast-and-butter smell of rising dough’. ‘Now he was somewhere down in the cellar of a Convent watching out for awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but members, it was thought, of some other cult.’”

The Convent, though unorganized and shadowed by the darkened souls of raped, abandoned, and betrayed women, turned out to be an effortless Utopia to them because of its all-inclusiveness. No questions to answer, no exertion to captivate, no societal embarrassment to face, the women were free as birds. They were freed from the Earthly lust, a trap they fell into again and again; from the sickening thirst for love, that was only responded by betrayal and disrespect; and from the choking grasp of the want for attention. It was for the first time their voices mattered, their dreams heard, their thoughts attended. In the journey of spiritual awakening, they tried to imitate the transformation of Connie to Consolata Sosa. It was the first time they gave shape to their screaming thoughts and strangling trauma and let it flow out and empty into their body’s silhouette.

“Seneca duplicated in robin’s egg blue one of her more elegant scars, one drop of red at its tip. Later on, when she had the hunger to slice her inner thigh, she chose instead to mark the open body lying on the cellar floor’. ‘Gigi drew a heart locket around her body’s throat, and when Mavis asked her about it, she said it was a gift from her father which she had thrown into the Gulf of Mexico’. ‘Pallas had put a baby in her template’s stomach. When asked who the father was, she said nothing but drew next to the baby a woman’s face with long eyelashes and a crooked fluffy mouth.’”

“Loud dreaming” was a therapeutic and rejuvenating journey. It was a journey taken in small steps in which their corporeal appetite gave way to spiritual fulfillment. It was a journey unknown but amelioration was achieved.

The idea of Utopia is inexplicit. It is not a world to attain but a destination to progress towards. And in this effort of defining the undefined mankind gains the unimagined. The Utopian boundaries aren’t rigid but ever-widening because “change is the only constant in life”. (Heraclitus) Hence, effort needs to be put not to maintain Utopian exclusivity but to broaden the narrowness of this exclusion. Through her novel, ‘Paradise’, Morrison tries to portray the

scenario during the Civil Rights Movement. While Martin Luther King Jr. was fighting to broaden the Caucasian paradise, the African Americans created their own. Hence merging the two worlds into one with liberty, equality, and fraternity sought incredible effort, passion, and sacrifice. Through the simultaneous portrayal of several human psychologies, Morrison has shown the importance of human feelings that equalize the laws that bound them. Thus, legislation of laws and education of humanity are of equal priority. In today's world of equal rights made possible by our forefathers, division on the basis of religion, ethnicity, and gender is yet to be extinct. It is for us to instill this sense of righteousness in humanity, to trudge the untrodden path towards Utopia and to leave behind a better world.

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