

## Psychoanalysis Reading of Mavis' Character in Morrison's Paradise

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### ABSTRACT

This paper will examine Toni Morrison's novel Paradise. It will study one of the protagonists in this novel to demonstrate her psychological suffering namely hysteria. The study of this character will help to clarify how these psychoanalytic concept work to explain Morrison's obsessions with the psychological complications of her society. Moreover, the analysis of this character from a psychoanalytic perception will reveal the implicit meanings of the novel and gives us anew critical perceptions about the development of hysteria throughout psychic illness. Therefore, the psychoanalysis will rely on Freud's perspective, for being the father of psychoanalysis and the establisher of hysteria as it is known today. The study is going to examines one of the novels' heroins, Mavis, who experiences difficult psychological troubles during her life. According to Freud, family and the repressed memories are the main breeder of hysteria, which makes females mute, have no voice and no right to speak, as it is clear in the characters of Toni Morrison's paradise, particularly Mavis.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of hysteria has emerged as a part of psychoanalysis theory since the late of nineteenth century. Theorist have determined the causes and effects of hysteria on the construction of people's psyche. At that time, hysteria was associated greatly with women and how their manners fell into hard detrimental disorder (Kanaan, 2016). Moreover, hysteria began as a psychic destructive experience exposing the difficulties of women's psychic disorder and considered as one of the main problems inhabiting the female subjects. Many of those females suffer hysteric symptoms which demonstrate as a product of sexual violations such as molestation and rape these violations cause psychological traumas which can eventually lead to hysteria. Hysteria is also explained as the female difficulty; a sickness or disease women endure and this explanation could be one of many other studying of hysteria since it can also be read as a transgressive force which females use to regain or achieve some of their lost desire. Additionally, hysteria is studied as a non-verbal language used as a way to protest against the patriarchal law which is considered as a reason in breeding hysteric symptoms in women. Symptoms of disturbed sleep, fear, marginalization, and others are products of patriarchy which originate on females' bodies.

Breuer and Freud (2009), in *Studies on Hysteria*, succeed to classify hysteria not as the earliest French and classic Greeks, but they noticed symptoms involving; neuralgia, anaesthesia, paralyses, vomiting, hallucinations, anorexia, "which they described as Petite Hystérie" (p.4). Freud's thoughts on hysteria developed after his first renowned book *Studies on Hysteria* in 1895 which was the starting point of psychotherapy in general and specifically of psychoanalysis (Hook, 2016). As the father of psychoanalysis and the fundamental theorist on hysteria, Freud declared in his noticeable study, *Studies on Hysteria*, that hysteria emerges as a result of specific traumatic events, which are excluded from consciousness. The repressed memories of unresolved traumas, which lie in the unconscious, are consciously converted into bodily symptoms such as; limps, cough, convulsions or linguistic distortions. According to Freud, These symptoms, can only function as physical metaphors of psychic troubles. Thus, trauma in a course of conversion, took the shape of physical symptoms. Hysteria, therefore can be recognized from other types of neuroses or psychosomatic illnesses in the flexibility of its symptoms and in the way in which trauma can be converted into basically infinite demonstration of physical manifestation.

Relating to hysteria, Toni Morrison is one of the woman writers, whose writings concerned with the difficulties that women face in their life, especially black female. Most of her writing considered as a mirror which reflect the harsh reality that black females suffer. Most of Morrison's writings portray the deep psychological suffering of women in different places and times. Most of the characters in her novels, derived from real stories or incidents that happened

during her life, and this makes these fictional characters to be renowned and studied in many universities all over the world. Moreover, studying Morrison's characters shed light on the terrible psychic dilemma that women can endure and face in their living in both racial and patriarchal societies. Most of Morrison's heroines present hysterical symptoms such as shouting, crying, muteness (aphasia), killing, insanity, and other physical or sexual abnormal behaviours. In all her novels, Morrison wants to reveal the difficulty that women carry on their shoulders in their live under patriarchal and slavery system which lead them to be hysteric to face these difficulties.

## **2. A BRIEF SYNOPSIS ABOUT THE NOVEL**

Morrison's *Paradise* is a tragic novel which completes – as stated by Morrison – a fictional trilogy. The other two are *Jazz* and *Beloved*. The novel involves violent scenes against black females in different ways and portrays gender discrimination and oppression on women. The novel revolved about a place called Ruby in Oklahoma State. This town is entirely resided by black people. There is a Convent in the vicinity of the town. A group of women live in this Convent which had been a religious place. Women develop a tense encounter between the men who dominate the whole social life in the town. The novel's plot hinges on several female characters. Each chapter is named after each female.

Morrison, as an erudite author, uses flashback mode to tell the reader of the actual events that might happen in the town in the historical past of Oklahoma in general; and the town of Ruby in particular. All female characters' psyches are somehow destroyed and seek peace and solace of mind in the Convent. Furthermore, they console each other by living together in the same place. They are treated by men in a tough way, which makes them prone to live in the Convent.

The novel's narrative point of view sheds light on Convent women and their plights at the hands of their society's males. People of Ruby do not accept the place of the Convent since it is set outside their ideal town. As a result, they decide to demolish it. The novel carries out Morrison's concern with the position of women in her society which might be threatened by dangers coming out of its very structure. The narrative events tell possible stories that could happen in the American society, or they might happen in the past. Being so, the fictional events call for serious interest in the social affairs of common people. The fictional characters represent Morrison's obsession with portraying the reality of women suffering who strive to live their normal life in a male dominated societies. Such authorial interest is conveyed through a meticulous depiction of the psychological states of the characters.

This is true to the first chapter which opens with a violent scene. The omniscient narrator tells us of a white girl killed in an attack. The identity of the killer is unknown. But the attack is symbolic insult of women who are treated in an inferior way. The attack is led by nine men who abruptly enter into the Convent and torment the women living there. The women resorted to the Convent because they saw it as their own "paradise"; and they had not been welcomed by any town or place to live. In this sense, the attack exemplifies a campaign against the women's will to live peacefully.

The plot, then, sheds light on Mavis. In the plot's onset, Mavis seems a murderer because she asphyxiates her twin, Merle and Pearl; and lets them alone in the car as she went out for a grocery. Her husband, Frank, has addiction to drinking. As a result, she becomes more anxious than before due to her husband's bad behaviors and the death of her twin. Her anxiety intensifies her hallucinations that she might be murdered by her husband and her other children Frankie, Sal and Billy James. She is negatively moved by her fright of others which make her submissive, mute, sleeplessness and afraid, which are all indicators of her hysterical psyche. Accordingly, she escapes the house by her husband's car. She leaves for her mother's house in Paterson. The mother notices her daughter's hysterical behaviors and calls her husband to come and take her back home. Mavis hears the conversation and flees to California.

On her journey, she drives her car to a house where she meets Mother Mary in the Convent. Consequently, she decides not to complete her journey to California as she feels relieved in the Convent. During her stay in the Convent, she discovers the gap between the Convent and the town. She finds rest and secure and for the first time she is able to make her own decision. The plot also focuses on the life of Seneca who is extremely abandoned and raped while she was a child. The repeated rape that Seneca encounter leads her to hysterically hurt herself by deforming her body so that not to seduce men. As She grows up and meets Eddie Turtle who becomes her boyfriend. Later on, Eddie is taken to jail; and his mother tries to persuade Seneca to leave him.

When Seneca comes to the Convent, she becomes a close friend of Grace. Seneca hurts herself. She develops an inferior disposition as she tries to do what the others need without considering her own need. In essence, the plot

shows how her imprisoned boyfriend, Eddie, make her feel that inferiority. He reprimands her; and he insists on informing her of her useless existence. Therefore, she seems to be poor and weak. the novel's plot highlights some other characters, which will not be discussed in this study.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF MAVIS' CHARACTER

Freud (1900) said that harrowing experiences such as die, sexual assault, and murder of a close relation do not only affect and destruct an individual but they are also damaging since they affect female's personality and consequently affect the society. Mavis is assaulted physically and sexually by her husband and this make her weak and passive woman which are symptoms of hysteria. Mavis unable to disobey Frank or to take any decision even minor one. Frank's insulting makes her suffer from chronic fear and negative self- image. This fear is so much on Mavis' psyche to breed hysteria in her and make her terrified even at the thought of passing her whole life with him. "[T]ears wet her chin, crept down her neck anyway" (36).

Dodhy (2017), emphasizes on the ability of words to hurt and even destroy human spirit. In fact, this influence is equal to the physical abuse and this is clear in case of Mavis.

Mavis is physically abused by her husband which damage her soul and make her weak and passive. On the other hand, Frank always called her with "dumbest bitch", and this affect her spirit and psyche so deep that she herself start believing it to be the truth. The hurt caused by these words was so deep that it is incurable and unforgettable. Mavis says, "Frank was right. from the very beginning he had been absolutely right about her: she was the dumbest bitch on the planet. (P.37). Morrison explain this fact in the novel "she recovers from these experiences, the damage done to her spirit takes much longer to heal than the physical wounds that occasionally require medical intervention" (140).

Mavis has five children, the eldest one is her daughter who is eleven-year-old. Mavis believes that her duty as a mother is to look after her children as well as give particular attention to her husband. On that day when her babies died, Mavis as usual, cooked the food for her children

And hurry to buy fresh meat to her husband as she knows that he doesn't eat spam, and as she believes that her duty as a wife is to satisfy her husband in everything, she goes to buy meat for him. Although frank refused to take care of their newly born twin.

So, in order to satisfy her husband, she goes to buy a fresh meat for him and she has to take her newly born twin with her in that hot day because her husband refused to stay with them claiming that he has a headache. Her fear from Frank makes her forget that her twins are in the car with windows closed. All those around her, accused her of being responsible of the death of her twin infants, they also described her as a careless mother all the time. this fear is so deep in Mavis' psyche that make her passive, weak and nerves. When the journalist interview Mavis at her home she blames Mavis for the death of her twin and this make Mavis feel depressed, unrest and deep sadness. When the photographer asks Mavis to sit for a picture with her children, frank wasn't there to support his wife and console her, instead he was drinking win in the bathroom. This is a clear evidence that Mavis spent her life struggle and suffer alone. neither her mother nor her husband understand or care for her. Through Frank's behaviour, Morrison is exposing "the idea that true manhood involves mastery over subjugated others leads the men of Ruby to seek total mastery over the only people they are in a position to dominate: the women in their community" (Read, 2005, 535).

This idea is very clear from the very beginning of the novel as Morrison explain how men treat women in Ruby as an object and not as a human being who has feeling and rights. This deprivation of their right and voice lead them to suffer. Oppression and muteness make women to show hysteric reactions as Freud state in his book *three essays in study of hysteria* that oppression, violence and hard sexual experiences women endure within families are enough to breed hysteria in them. In *Paradise*, Morrison meticulously portray women status in Ruby. It is very clear that the patriarchal system of Ruby placed women as an object in their society. Women don't have any rights; their role are only to satisfy men's desires and needs. Mavis was so tired and depressed after burying her twins, so she wants to sleep, but her husband who fresh himself with a bottle of wine after fresh dinner and now wants to have sex. As he used to decide when to have sex ignoring Mavis' feelings or even bother himself whether she also want to do that or not:

"she goes to bed to sleep, but Frank wakes her up by asking her if she is alright to which she customary replies, "I'm okay". She wakes up suddenly "with a start of terror", but immediately realizes that this terror is a "familiar fright", now he wants "to have sex" (p.25),

This is an evidence that for Frank, Mavis is an object whose duty is to do whatever he wants. She is his doll with whom he can have sex. A dumb doll, thus Mavis described it as "familiar fright". Frank rapes Mavis when they have sex, as there is no love, or even mutual desire between them. Mavis describe how Frank make love with her as when he put his short off she must understand that he wants that. Then he did it without kissing or looking at her face instead he throws her nightgown on her face. He is interested with her body which is necessary to satisfy his lust and desire. Mavis say:

"would it be quick like most always? or long, wandering, collapsing in wordless fatigue?"

It was neither. He didn't penetrate, just rubbed himself to climax while chewing a clump of her hair through the nightgown that covered her face" (p.28). So, the familiar fright for Mavis when she is raped each night by her husband.

Frank is a rude husband, he used to insult Mavis, he called her as "the dumbest bitch" instead of calling her with her name. He hurt her and beats her and insult her in front of their children, she admitted that she went to hospital fourteen times, for of them only to give birth and the others to treat injuries which result from Frank's beating, "fifteen times she had been a patient there, four times for childbirth (p.28)".

The deep suffering that Mavis endure due to physical and sexual abuse irritate her existence and personality. Thus, Mavis become very weak and passive and dependent woman. She is unable to do any thing without Frank's permission. Frank control Mavis' life and detached her from the external world. He prevents her from mixing with any of her neighbors, thus when she run away from her house. She finds herself a lone. Don't have any friend, neighbor or relative to hide from Frank. Thus, she decides to go to her mother who lives in another town. Also, Mavis express the frightening in which she lived which bothered her and even reduce her concentration as she is afraid from Frank all the time. After the death of her infants, Mavis' other children, particularly her eldest daughter, Sal, who also accused her of the death of her babies. Throughout the interview, Sal punch Mavis and hurt her too much. But also, this time Mavis keep silence as she cannot say anything in front of the TV presenter and also she is afraid of her daughter. According to Rizzuto (2015), Freud claims that aphasia or silence is one of important symptoms of hysteria. Mavis' muteness is obvious throughout the novel. In another point in the novel, when Mavis have dinner with her family, Sal asks her father if the razor is sharp enough to kill somebody and she is gazing Mavis while talking with him.

"Sal had Frank's old shaving razor unfolded by her plate and asked her father a series of questions, all starting with "Is it sharp enough to cut.....?" and Frank would answer, "cut anything from chain hair to gristle," (p.25)

Mavis has a strong feeling that Frank and her children are planning to kill her, or he is pushing them to kill her. This anxiety make Mavis restless, and strengthen her fear. This fear accomplishes her when she is a wake and even sleep. She has a nightmare which repeated every night and then become a daily fright, Freud (1894) states that "the hidden conflicts may be revealed through slips of the tongue, or dreams" (p.3). This is because, as Freud states that the unconscious is the storeroom for the repressed fears, desires, memories, anger, and emotions. This fear which Mavis suffer develop to a hysterical symptom known as fright of others. Thus, Mavis hysterical fright makes her fully satisfied that her children and husband are planning to kill her and therefore she has to run away. Freud (1900), also claims that dreams are a translation of experiences and incidents which happens in reality or in the waking life, then is recalled in a dream. He says "all the material making up the content of a dream is in some way derived from experience, that is to say, has been reproduced or remembered in the dream (p.45). This has a relation with Mavis' dream. Mavis' repressed her fears and unease into her unconscious which appeared in her dreams thus she woke up every night out of a horrible nightmare which she admits change to familiar fear, "Mavis woke with a start of terror, which dissolved quickly into familiar fright" (P.30). Mavis' feeling of frightened from her husband accompanied with another fear from her eleven -year daughter who accused her for the death of the new born brothers, Sal declares her hatred and doubt to her mother. When the T.v presenter was at their home interviewing Mavis to explain how the babies die, she punches her mother and bleed her, Mavis cannot say anything, "Sal put her arm around her mother's waist and punched her hard. Mavis knew instantly that her daughter wasn't nervous before the camera and all, because the pinch grew long, pointed. Sal's fingernails were diving for blood." (p.21). A few days later, Sal asks her father if the razor is sharp enough to kill someone and she gaze her mother. This deep frightened Which Mavis try to repress and go on her life make her sleepless, weak, and silence all the time. Mavis imagines that her daughter "to be sitting like a bull dog in front of the door with her upper lip raised showing her big teeth to horrify her "(26). Mavis cannot control her fear as Freud said that frightened is one of the important reasons which

lead women to be hysteric, thus Mavis behaviour become out of control and influence her manner with a hallucination. Mavis think that she has to ran a way so that she can be in safe from Frank and her daughter. Mavis' self -shattered and the sense of un wanting, lack of love and respect, mentally and physically abused all these lead Mavis to be hysteric. She is silent all the time, has a strong sense of alienation, and inferiority. And according to Grose (2016), Freud states that all these are enough to breed hysteric symptoms in female. Thus, Mavis became nervous and aimless. Mavis become obsessed with one idea, to flee from her house. She doesn't have any friend, nor she knows any one of her neighbour. this is because Frank never let her to mix with any one. As a male who believed and act within Ruby's patriarchal law, Mavis is doomed to be an object belong to Frank. Frank is the only one who is speaking while Mavis has to listen and obey only, Mavis is a mute person with no voice. Though muteness is considered as a hysteric symptom according to Freud, (1900).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there is the sense in which Mavis' condition fits her into a typical Freudian patient with observable symptoms of hysteria. Physical and sexual abuse that Mavis endure along with deep frightened of others and self -shattered which result from belittling and discrimination are enough to breed hysteria on her. The fright, low self-esteem and inferiority repressed within Mavis' conscious which triggered by the deep sadness for the death of her newly born twins and threatened of her life by her husband and daughter. All these circumstances make Mavis hallucinate, become out of control and obsessed of the idea of fleeing so that to survive. Up to these points, it becomes rational to infer that Toni Morrison's construction of the character and circumstances around Mavis life exemplifies the psychological condition of hysteria as it may culminate from a series of traumatizing conditions in the life of an impressionable young female.

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