

Positioning Paradise in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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ABSTRACT: *Contemporary studies attempt to portray nine disempowered subjugated women who take initiative to bring change in their private lives. This paper aims to use John Bowlby's Attachment Theory as a theoretical framework to analyze a character of Paradise who struggles to position her paradise amid exceptional circumstances. The novel depicts a shattered daughter who in desperation runs towards her mother—a secure base. The mother refuses to shelter the married daughter thinking of her immense responsibilities which hold more importance than her relaxed body and peaceful mind. To survive, the daughter runs and fortunately reaches a convent, a liminal space. Narrating and listening to multiple stories positively contributes to processes of healing and transformation. The findings offer vital information about how Mavis restores her mental health by avoiding discussing her unconventional decision with anyone, for there is a constant danger of re-traumatization because the memory of traumatic experience does not leave the victim easily.*

Keywords: attachment, mother, relationship, secure base, trauma.

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Toni Morrison, a leading contemporary American novelist, has archived the African-American experience in eleven novels and a collection of research articles and lectures. Morrison won the prestigious Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved* and the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. In a released statement, the Nobel Prize Committee of the Swedish Academy awarded the prize to Morrison whose novels are “characterized by visionary force and poetic import, [that] gives life to an essential aspect of American reality.”

Toni Morrison was born Chole Anthony Wofford in Lorrain, Ohio in 1931 during the Great Depression. Her grandparents were former sharecroppers who migrated to the north from Alabama in 1910 to find better opportunities. Her family life was tinged with economic and racial hardships. Morrison received a B.A. from Howard University and an M.A. in English from Cornell University. Upon graduation, she started teaching at Howard University. Later she was hired by Random House, where she advanced from textbook editor to the position of senior editor. During her 18-year tenure, she helped writers with their manuscripts, edited the *Black Book*, a collection of African-American memorabilia, and pushed the talented African-American authors for publication.

Londoner John Bowlby and his major collaborator Canadian Mary Ainsworth in late twentieth-century worked on the importance of the mother-figure or caregiver that plays an essential role in the personality development of a child. Bowlby was severely criticized by other psychologists because he rejected Freud’s drive theory. His books on Attachment and empirical research of Ainsworth led to the foundation of attachment theory in the 1980s. He propounds that attachment is an emotional bond that is developed during childhood which continues to be an emotional base and impacts old age. Recognizing its importance, Brisch writes, “attachment theory is today one of the most solidly founded theories of human development . . . served as a considerable building block and has contributed to the understanding of human development throughout the life cycle” (14). Whenever a child experiences anxiety he wants to be in close contact with the caregiver where he is certain to find safety and security. When this happens, a child develops a secure attachment to an attachment figure who sensitively responds to his needs. On the contrary, if a child is ignored and snubbed he will develop insecure attachment which will affect him throughout his life. Longitudinal studies have proven that if the individual experiences trauma, a person with a secure attachment is safeguarded from developing psychopathology.

Jon G. Allen added a substantial new level of sophistication to the theory, but his model is rooted in attachment theory (Fonagy xii). He believes that a strong secure attachment can put an end to anxiety and depression, a natural consequence of attachment trauma through “mentalizing emotional pain” (*Restoring Mentalizing* xxii) otherwise it will be transmitted to the next generation. He goes beyond the bounds of psychiatry and addresses existential-spiritual treatment of trauma thus bringing it close to the understanding of a common man. He guides the individual to develop close relationships where one can take refuge in troubled periods of life. If one develops and practices skills to heal the wound, there is a possibility of growth and change. There is a constant danger of re-traumatization because the memory of traumatic experience does not leave the victim easily. This makes the victim more dependent on secure base to find solace. On other hand, physical abuse terrifies the helpless victim which results in avoidance. This “avoidance can result in diffusion of identity and dissociation” (Allen, Lemma, Fonagy *Handbook* 432). In a conference paper, Allen strongly suggests creating connections where they are most needed. He concludes his paper by saying “[e]stablishing mentalizing in the context of attachment in individual therapy can be a bridge to other attachment relationships, but patients must not remain on the bridge” (“Attachment and Mentalizing as Change Agents in Psychotherapy” 6).

This study aims to analyze the function of a secure base, with which an individual establishes an emotional bond in childhood. According to the studies of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, a secure base facilitates the process of recovery of a traumatized individual. This study will trace how Mavis struggles to search a new secure base for herself, when her mother refuses to shelter her, which helps in reducing the mental agony of the suffering individual.

Mavis takes the decision of leaving her husband and three children after twelve long years. She has multiple reasons which make her take this action and she has no regrets as she looks back at her life. She has been through severe conditions that led her to run away in the darkness of the night with no plan in mind, no money in purse and no skill in hand. For the last twelve years, she has been struggling to survive amid the torturous environment of her house. Widdowson thinks, “The politics of Morrison's history/herstory are complex and radical, the novel excoriating both the failures of American democracy since Independence in terms of its black citizens, and its black citizens for imitating their white counterparts by engaging in a reverse separatism and patriarchal oppression” (Morrison 331), and Mavis is certainly a victim of patriarchal oppression. She carries babies, puts them in the rear seat of the car and goes to buy sausages with

a dairy product. The heat outside takes the life of children and they leave their mother forever. When this accident takes place, the indifferent attitude of the husband is very traumatic for the wife. This trauma becomes the breaking point of her life and she determinedly takes the decision of leaving the husband and children to go somewhere else, where she can breathe freely and sleep peacefully.

When she finds that there is gray light outside, she slips out of the bed, and quickly leaves the bedroom without wearing her slippers. She looks for the purse which is lying on a cabinet and leaves the house without looking inside her children's bedroom. She thinks of knocking at someone's door to take refuge, but she feels embarrassed to knock at such an odd time of the day. At least it should be six, but she cannot afford to take the risk because by that time her husband might wake up and on finding his favourite possession missing, Cadillac, he will immediately call the police. It is that car which has become very famous in the whole neighborhood. People touched the hood, peeped inside to see the interior and the horn to get a luxurious feel of the car. Some are amazed at the strange decision of Frank of buying the car who has to borrow a lawn-mower after every fifteen days and has no working television in his house. This car is dear to him more than his wife so if she plans to steal it then she should leave the surrounding vicinity as early as possible.

The only person of whom she thinks in the time of trouble or who can provide shelter to her is her mother. She thinks first of calling her but then she thinks of reaching directly without any intimation because she is afraid that if she tells her beforehand, she might discourage her from taking this step and ask her to return to her house immediately. She wants to reach her mother's place which she thinks will be a secure base for her. On her way, "she [feels] as though the pavement [is sliding] forward instead of retreating. The faster she [is] [traveling], the more road [appears] ahead" (Morrison 30). At last she reaches her mother's home who is not yet back from her workplace, so she finds the house locked. The mother's attitude is, as expected by Mavis, not welcoming as she says, "Girl, you look a bat out of hell what you doing up here in little kiddie boots?" (Morrison 30); on this remark, Mavis requests her mother to open the door and let her come inside. Birdie tells Mavis that her husband has already rung her early in the morning at about five-thirty. To this, Birdie has shown a severe reaction that he should not have called her so early in the morning when she is sleeping, and she has to drag herself out of the bed. She is highly displeased at his call at such an early hour of the day. Mavis takes food with her mother, takes bath and aspirin as she is dead tired. Right on the dining table, the mother on judging the cause for

which she has left the house asks her to think about her decision as she has other children at home who also need mother. Birdie says that she knows that it must be very difficult for a mother to bury her children, but God has blessed her with other children too. When she tells her mother that her children along with her husband are trying to kill her, the mother gets shocked. She is not ready to believe the judgment of her daughter. Instead of listening to her painful narrative, she puts heavy responsibility on her shoulders by saying that she is her only child who is alive. As she has her two sons shot and now it is Mavis' responsibility to give happiness to her mother by staying with her husband and children. She does not console the daughter and refuses to provide security to her as Mavis repeatedly says that all of them have tried to kill her. They do not have any right to kill her. The mother is surprised to hear that her children are involved in murdering her. She starts doubting the mental health of her daughter so asks her if the twins are also involved in this plan of killing her to which Mavis cries, "No! Oh, no, Ma! Are you crazy? They're babies!" (Morrison 32). Mavis tries to convince her mother by saying that the husband, along with the children, was involved in evil plans of killing her. The children are following the footsteps of their father. They do what their father wants them to do. With the help of the razor, Sally has been threatening the already afraid mother. After this, Mavis tells her mother that she has already remained in troubled state of mind for such a long time that she can neither withstand the pressure nor ruminate about it anymore.

Escaping from mother's house she comes across Connie who becomes a safe haven for Mavis, as she knows how to relax troubled souls. As compared to Birdie's house, she is finding more peace of mind here in the company of Connie. On her way to the Convent, she has been thinking that if her husband, with the help of the police, follows her and gets back his car which though is painted in different colour but is registered in his name; she plans to scream and pretend that she does not know him and will call the police for help but will never go back to that hellish house where she has passed her youth giving birth to his five children. She considers all her thoughts related to family members as "awful" (Morrison 37) because she could not relate any happy association with them. On the other hand, on reaching the Convent, she finds herself so relaxed that she imagines that the kitchen is crowded with children; Merle and Pearl are also among them. She feels herself in such a comfort zone that she is reminded of her sixth grade teacher. These pleasant ideas relax her. She has never thought of her mother who has failed to be her secure base. She has no good memory related to husband and children at home. She has never missed them nor regretted her decision of leaving Frank and her children.

Mavis sometimes goes out of the Convent for a change and to experience life independently but on her return she is always welcomed by Connie with open arms. Connie has truly become her secure base who serves as a strong foundation for Mavis in re-building her personality, to whom she can come at any time especially when feeling lonely and alienated. Connie is so calm and composed that when Mavis expresses her dislike for Gigi for her bold appearance and abusive language, she tells Mavis that soon she will develop a liking for her. Through the attitude of Connie, “Morrison seems to offer the continuous hybridization which takes place in the Convent as an alternative to the monolithic polarized view of identity sustained by the leaders of Ruby in their search for paradise” (Fraile-Marcos 5). Mavis has developed resilience within three years by love and confidence which she has received from Connie. She is now no more afraid of anyone. She can dare to fight which now she “enjoy[s]” (Morrison 171). Now she likes to cook food as there is no one to criticize her. She likes experimenting with left-overs which is appreciated by Connie. The old Mavis used to be so weak that she “couldn’t defend herself from an eleven-year-old girl, let alone her husband. The one who couldn’t figure out or manage a simple meal, who relied on delis and drive-throughs, now created crepe-like delicacies without shopping every day” (Morrison 171).

The first principle of the Convent, which Connie tells Mavis, is that here no one can lie. As it has been objectively observed by the residents of Ruby that it is a place where no one questions. It provides enough space to a broken person where anyone can collect her shattered self. No one bothers anyone else. If a person wants that she should be taken care of, friends at Convent take care of her, but if the person does not want interference of anyone then they leave that person alone. These principles of the Convent are observed by Connie and then followed by the rest which led Mavis and others to restore their lost confidence. Connie has given security to not only Mavis but to many others who are betrayed by various members of the society. Mavis has developed such a strong relationship with Connie that she mentalizes with Mavis as they are found “[t]alking, talking, and always talking” (Morrison 221). This is another reason of the recovery of Mavis, because as Freud believes that talking helps in curing a traumatized person, which he calls talking cure and sometimes she talks of girlish wishes and desires for an ideal life. Connie has never objected to mindless shopping of Mavis as she buys Christmas and birthday presents for her dead twins because “Mavis keeps her dead twins ‘alive’ at the Convent” (Aguiar 515). She brings presents for them according to their ages if they would have been alive. She is surprised that both Merle and Pearl are growing fast. She has placed booties and

teething rings of her children in one of the rooms of the Convent. These things console her mind and soul, so Connie never raises any question or laughs at her actions or collections. Mavis has been doing this for the last six and a half years. Connie has never touched anyone's weak point. Mavis also takes care of her secure base as she brings things of necessity for Connie from the market. Mavis gets worried about Connie's health as she has recently noticed that Connie moves as if someone is talking to her. She listens and responds to the conversation. The best quality of Connie is that she "never questioned the reality of the twins and for Mavis, who ha[s] no intention of explaining or defending what she knew to be true, that acceptance [is] central" (Morrison 259-260). This has relaxed Mavis to such an extent that she has got rid of nightmares also. While living in the community, she was afraid of what people might say to her concerning the dead twins, but here she passes her life in the way it suits her.

The women living in the Convent have been waiting for the rainfall because rain purifies the soul. The rain perfumes the Convent stronger than the rest of the Ruby because it is covered with "thick white clover and Scotch broom" (Morrison 283). The aroma is so mesmerizing that it induces sleepiness. This time when it rained, first they stand in the kitchen and take out their hands to feel it. Raindrops "are like lotion on their fingers so they [enter] it and let it pour like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces" (283). Connie, the secure base, is the first one to take the initiative and the rest follow her. The writer has called them "holy women" (Morrison 283) who are labeled as "[B]odacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary" (Morrison 18). They are the ones who have given shelter and protection to one another in the most traumatic periods of their lives when their attachment figures have refused to do so. They have taken care of each other and boosted each other's lost confidence by letting them live the way in which they want to live. They dance to relax their tense nerves. They feel tired but happy too. After drying themselves, they oil their heads and listen to stories of paradisaic state related by Connie. They enjoy the soothing night with the "images of parrots, crystal seashells and a singing woman who never spoke" (285). They live in perfect harmony with each other as one mixes dough while the other lights the stove. One gathers vegetables while the other lays table for breakfast. The harmonious state is achieved in love and guidance of Connie. Mavis is the first one to arrive at the Convent, who religiously follows her principles, which are subsequently followed by others thus converting the abandoned mansion of a corrupt man into a paradise on the planet where there is no electricity, radio or newspaper but peace of mind.

The mother of Mavis has failed to become her secure base; she has not provided her a strong foundation to which she can revert in difficult times of her life. After a week, the mother stealthily rings her husband, Frank, and asks him to come as soon as possible to collect her from Birdie's house, which she overhears. As the mother has been away for work, she carries few necessities, steals back the car keys which the mother thinks that she has hidden so well and runs away towards an unknown destination probably towards California. On the way, the most important work which she has to do is to get Cadillac painted from green to magenta so that no one can trace her identity. She buys a drip-dry dress, a pair of thong sandals and as "more and more of the East was behind her, the happier she became" (Morrison 33). She remembers that the last time she experienced excitement and happiness of such kind was when she was a child. She has decided to leave her secure base forever because she has not understood her anxiety and failed to bring her back to normal life. It is by the stroke of good luck that Mavis finds her secure base, "[f]or the Convent shelters Ruby's women, providing food and care and a 'haven' for their anger and fears" (Aguilar 515). She runs out of gasoline, so she stops on her way to ask about the telephone booth from Connie who is busy doing household chores. Mavis, on finding Connie's accommodating attitude requests a hot drink and takes food in the kitchen. Mavis finds comfort in the kitchen where she imagines that it is "crowded with children—laughing? singing?—two of whom [are] Merle and Pearl" (Morrison 41). She closes her eyes "to dissipate the impression" (Morrison 41) but this action only strengthened the impression. Connie is busy shelling pecans and asks her to do so. Finding her detracted and lost in rumination, she suggests her to keep herself busy in physical work as it will divert her attention. Mavis thinks that shelling pecans will drive her crazy, but Connie insists to involve herself in some useful work to get off the feeling of listlessness. Mavis follows her instructions and with time they develop good understanding of each other.

Mavis' secure base—the mother, is not ready to believe that her husband and children are after her life. She doubts Mavis' mental health and convinces her to go back but when she refuses to discuss this matter further, the mother stealthily calls her husband to pick her up from her house. The mother, in this case, is not ready to understand the traumatic feelings of the daughter and thinks that the way in which the husband persecutes, and the daughter disrespects Mavis are insignificant matters of life that should be ignored. She should try to reconcile with them as she has weighty responsibilities of life from which she should not run away. The daughter on finding no consolation from her mother decides to find some other place of refuge where she can overcome trauma. She has to

position paradise for herself. An unknown person, Connie becomes her secure base who relaxes her troubled soul. She feels herself in such a comfort zone where her own pleasant thoughts relax her. During her stay in the convent, she has never missed her mother who has failed to be her secure base.

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