

# Ethical Dilemma and Redemption in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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**Abstract** In *Paradise*, Morrison depicts the process of a group of African Americans who go through all the hardships to establish and manage Ruby town. Starting from the ethical perspective, this paper analyzes the ethical dilemmas of race and family faced by African Americans through sorting out the various experiences of African Americans, and explores the ethical redemption thoughts and ethical connotations displayed in Morrison's works.

**Keywords** Toni Morrison; *Paradise*; ethical dilemma; ethical Redemption

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## Introduction

Toni Morrison, the winner of Nobel Prize for Literature, brings African American literature to a new climax. Morrison's works show African Americans' confusion, various ethical dilemmas, and their exploration of ethical salvation. Though Morrison passed away from her beloved readers forever in 2019, her works still show great charm and attract reader's attention. *Paradise* is Morrison's first work after winning the Nobel Prize for literature. It chronicles the rise and fall of the town of Ruby. This paper attempts to explore the ethical dilemma faced by African group in *Paradise* from the perspective of literary ethics, explore the ethical salvation path indicated by Morrison, and explore the ethical enlightenment in the novel.

As Professor Nie in his "Ethical Literary Criticism: A Basic Theory" holds that Ethical literary criticism is defined as a critical theory for reading, analyzing, and

interpreting the ethical nature and function of literary works from the perspective of ethics (189). Literary ethical criticism emphasizes the educational function of literature, emphasizes the return to the ethical scene of history, analyzes the ethical factors that lead to social events and influence the fate of characters in works, and explains and evaluates the ethical dilemma faced by various characters and their choices from an ethical point of view.

### **The Ethical Dilemma in *Paradise***

*Nicomachean Ethics* written by Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is an important work of western modern ethics. Aristotle said “when we changed the spelling of ethos, we became ethike” (25). There are good and bad differences between habits and conduct. Only good qualities formed on the basis of habits can meet ethical standards. In Chinese culture, ethics is the product of certain social, historical and cultural conditions, and refers to the relationship and order naturally formed between people or people and things. Ethics should conform to norms and guidelines. It can be seen that both eastern and western cultures emphasize the existence of ethics based on norms and order. Once breaking through some conventional law and order, it will be contrary to common sense, and the ethical subject will be in trouble.

In *Paradise*, a group of African-Americans trek west twice to establish their ideal paradise of order, and finally settle down in Ruby Town. But in the end, there is violence that wipes out the monastery and destroys the paradise. The tragedy of Ruby town makes people think deeply about a series of questions. Why doesn't the social order of the town develop to a standard and harmonious direction after the establishment of the paradise? What are the reasons behind the contrary? What ethical dilemmas do African Americans face in Ruby? In order to find out the answers to these questions, readers first should know the history of Ruby.

The story happened in 1890, when slavery was abolished. However, in fact, African-Americans and whites don't obtain full equality, and unfair events occur from time to time. African-American groups are still excluded from politics, economy, culture and education, and the shadow of discrimination still influences them.

The town of Haven is founded by Zacharias with more than 100 African-Americans. The founding of Haven shows that racial prejudice is still prevalent. African Americans are strictly restricted from living in white areas. Because of their charcoal skin, they are repeatedly rejected by white and light-skinned people. They are told that “come back when you're ready, or don't” (Morrison, *Paradise* 13). Under the influence of the dominant white culture, African Americans have

long suffered various injustices. After the town of Haven declined in 1949, African-Americans move west again. The daughter of the large Morgan family, Ruby, falls ill during the migration and is rushed to the hospital by her family. But "African-Americans were not admitted to the ward, and no regular doctor was willing to care for them" (Morrison, *Paradise* 113). Ruby eventually succumbed and died in a hospital hallway. The stigma of rejection is deeply embedded in the psyche of dark-skinned African-Americans. The physical and mental trauma suffered by African Americans don't disappear with slavery, and the scars left by history still remain, making it difficult for African Americans to find their identity as "people."

In Ruby, dark-skinned African-Americans also enslave light-skinned African-Americans. There is a woman in town, Patricia, who is discriminated against because of her light skin color. She tries everything to regain her identity as a "person" of the town. She walks around town discreetly. She does her best to please the townspeople, such as marrying dark-skinned men, retracing the town's history as an elementary school teacher, keeping her daughter under strict control. But even so, the Christmas night program still excludes families of light-skinned African-Americans like Patricia's. Therefore, Patricia angrily burns the documents of her family in the town that she has worked so hard for years, unwilling to praise the history of African-Americans. Light-skinned African-Americans suffer from discrimination and oppression in the white world, and are not recognized within African-Americans. It can be seen that under the racial concept of "white as beauty," African Americans have confused their ethical consciousness and have no right to make ethical choices independently, making it difficult for them to define their own identity.

In the social environment of discrimination and oppression, it is also very difficult to establish a reasonable and effective family ethical order. When Stuart, the first family of Ruby Town, is young, he has an affair with the convent's mistress, Consolata, which causes his wife Thorne to have an abortion in the midst of all the work. After the death of their son in the Vietnam War, the couple become more indifferent to each other, and the heavy and unloving atmosphere of the family is suffocating. Suen is dissatisfied with her husband's behavior and has many opinions about the affairs of the town he presides over. Despite her husband's status, she befriends the convent woman against his will. Stewart's brother, Deacon, and his wife, Davi, also rarely communicate with each other, and the family's ethical identity is weak. So Davi chooses to confide in a young man who is 20 years her junior, but not to her husband. It is not hard to see that in the first family, there is a lack of family ethical order, and they are deprived of their ethical identity as parents.

There is a lack of care between husband and wife, and neither husband nor wife is responsible for their ethical identity. This tragedy occurred from time to time in Afro-descendant families and is a common ethical dilemma faced by the entire Afro-descendant community. Through the description of the ethical tragedy of African American families, Morrison reveals the difficult ethical demands and construction path of African Americans, and expresses their desire for healthy family relations.

Small-town women Arnett and Sveti have suffered the trauma of childbirth. Arnett gave birth to a child in a convent and left because of emotional difficulties. Arnette finally reunited with K.D. and married him. On their wedding night, Arnette went to the monastery to find the child she gave birth to four years ago, but she could not accept it when she learned that the child had died. Sveti gave birth to four disabled children in a row and was physically and mentally devastated. For six years, she stayed indoors to care for her children. When the youngest child died, she vented her frustration by refusing to use the Morgan land for burial. Both Arnett and Sveti have lost the opportunity to be mothers, as well as the lack of normal social relations and family ethical identity. They are a kind of people whose psychology is distorted under discrimination and oppression.

No matter male managers or female managers in small towns, their lives are depressed and distorted, trapped in the dual ethical dilemma of race and family. Morrison takes African-Americans in *Ruby* as an example to reflect the reality of the African American community in social interaction and family relations, reflecting the ethical dilemma of African Americans and Morrison's concern for the new ethical relations of African-Americans.

### **Ethical Choice of the African American Group**

Ethical dilemmas are "insoluble contradictions and conflicts brought to characters due to ethical confusion" (Nie, "An Introduction" 258). Literary ethical criticism holds that the subject realizes individual growth and moral perfection through ethical choice. African Americans are faced with two cultures, black and white. When they are enslaved and oppressed by white people, African Americans feel panic and anxiety. But the mainstream white values are powerless to change, and *Ruby's* African ancestors choose to escape, distance and isolate themselves in order to own their identity as African "people" and reinvigorate the national spirit.

The first people who choose to run from white people are *Ruby's* ancestors, a group of 158 freed men from Mississippi and Louisiana. To escape discrimination, they move west and settle in the town of Haven, the ideal city. In order to regulate the ethics of the town and express their sense of unity and endeavor, they build large

ovens. By isolating the town from the rest of the world, African Americans share the prosperity and security of the interior, which is also their way of alleviating their inner panic. But the world moves on, and any standing still is abandoned by the world, and Haven Town is doomed to decline.

As descendants of Haven, deacon and Stewart brothers, who return from the front after the end of the Second World War, choose to escape again and lead the Black men westward. Finally, they settle down in Ruby town. However, the administrators of Ruby choose the policy of isolation to maintain the ethical order of the town from beginning to end. Only African-Americans live in Ruby Town and anyone outside aren't welcome. It was a "unique and isolated" utopia where there are "no restaurants, police, gas stations, public telephones, cinemas or hospitals" (Morrison, *Paradise* 12). Ruby's managers hope to insulate themselves from white discrimination and oppression against African-Americans.

African-Americans in Ruby town express dissatisfaction with the exclusion and enslavement of white people, but in fact they envy and tend to the mainstream culture of white people. They copy what white people do to African Americans, to protect the people of the town, but really to hurt them. Men in the town aren't allowed to marry light-skinned women from outside of the town, so Menus is under great pressure to abandon his girlfriend and became unhappy. For the old Roger who has refused to dissuade him from taking a light-skinned wife, his daughters and granddaughters are treated differently. African-Americans in Ruby town neither achieve a harmonious ethical relationship with whites, nor do they have a correct understanding of the social ethical relationship within African-Americans, and don't adopt appropriate social ethical communication principles, which further aggravate their tragic fate.

From the perspective of family ethics, in the face of the imbalance of family ethics relations, they don't choose to improve the relationship with family members, but to choose emotional transfer. In Afro-descendant groups, family ethical order is generally missing, resulting in a variety of chaotic and abnormal family ethical relations. Deacon and Stewart, the first family of Ruby, lack the recognition of the family ethical order and lack of communication and love among family members. Deacon and his wife Davi are strangers and do not support each other. Stewart chooses to cheat and devotes his affections to convent mistress Consolata. As family individuals, their choices are not the right way to return to themselves. African-Americans of Ruby suffer from the lack of family ethical identity. Their family lacks normal ethical attributes and loses the most basic ethical identity as parents and children. Abnormal family ethical relations bring dangers for Ruby Town.

Male rulers gradually feel the pain of women and young people in Ruby, and become more worried about losing absolute control of the town. The town priest, Misner, once points out painfully that “we live in the world. It’s the whole world. Separate us, separate us—that’s their weapon. Isolation hurts several generations. it has no future” (Morrison, *Paradise* 210). Male rulers don’t realize the key of the problem, but are angry with the monastery nearby. They believe that women in the monastery are the source of all evils. Finally, they try to kill these women with gun. The scene at the beginning of the novel appears, “They shot and killed the white girl” (Morrison, *Paradise* 1). Managers try to completely cut off the contact with white people, and it is difficult for Ruby town to have sustainable development. Male rulers choose to use violence to solve practical problems to achieve their control over the collective, which is narrow and extreme. Neither closure nor violence is appropriate for the future development of people of African descent.

### **Ethical Salvation from Heaven**

The African American group is trapped in the double ethical dilemma of family and race, but it is difficult to achieve real relief through ethical choice. The paradise built by Ruby rulers don’t ultimately make African people happy. Morrison portrays Consolata, the soul of the monastery, who leads a group of women who suffer from various ethical dilemmas to get rid of pain and realize self-growth. The convent, 17 miles from Ruby, becomes the refuge of the women, and Consolata becomes the spiritual leader of the women’s self-salvation.

The women of the convent suffer various difficulties and lose themselves before they come here. The first woman coming to the convent is Mavis, whose family relationship is not harmonious. She accidentally locks the twin baby in the car, so the children suffocate to death. From then on, she is tortured by her husband and the eldest daughter. At home, Mavis can’t feel love, and her ethical identity is deprived. In a panic, she steals her husband’s car and leaves the house. At the convent she recovers herself, playing with Jia Jia and working with Consolata, all of which makes her excited and satisfied.

Grace comes to the convent after Mavis. She hitchhikes on a trip and stays here. Because she and her boyfriend have witnessed the death of a young African boy in an ethnic conflict on the road, she instinctively wants to hide in the convent where the relations are harmonious and simple.

Seneca is abandoned by her mother at an early age, violated by the son of her adopted mother. Then she begins to make boyfriends and gets more injuries. She suffers relentless and helpless pain and is unable to change. She indulges herself in

free riding and wandering. Finally, Seneca follows Sylvette on foot near Ruby to the convent.

When Pallas was three years old, her parents divorced. At 16, Pallas leaves her father and runs away with her boyfriend to see her mother, but unfortunately, her boyfriend has intimate relationship with her mother. After experiencing the chaotic gender relations, Palas is stimulated and runs on the highway. Falling, being invaded and embarrassed, Pallas is taken to the convent with the help of Delia.

It can be seen that before they come to the monastery, they are in a dilemma, lacking stable and harmonious ethical relations in life, and unable to find the direction of life. As the women arrive at the convent, Consolata decides to bid farewell to her troubled past. She not only provides residence for these confused women, but also guides them out spiritual plight. Under the guidance of Consolata, the monastery women regain their lost self and lead their sisters to win economic independence by growing and selling agricultural products. Then Consolata guides them to obtain spiritual independence. Consolata's ethical redemption of women is essentially a guide to women's pursuit of self-identity.

Consolata lets the woman lie naked in the clean basement, and she describes her heart's paradise with elegant voices: music dazzling, flowers fragrant, children playing, women coming.... Her singing voice comforts them. The whole room is full of pleasant male-free taste, like a protected country with no hunter, but also exciting. As if in one of many rooms in this house, she can meet herself—an unfettered, true self, a self she thinks is “cool” (Morrison, *Paradise* 177). Women can't help but tell their own hidden pain in the way of “dream.” They use color pens to draw the outline of their bodies on the floor to replace their bodies, leaving the pain of the past in the paintings on the floor to remove the heavy shackles of mind.

Consolata dedicates her love to all, and the lost women feel safety, freedom and respect. Consolata becomes the leader of these women, “They are no longer troubled by the haunting things” (Morrison, *Paradise* 266). Consolata tells them to love themselves and others, and women try to reconcile with their families. At the end, Mevis meets her daughter, who expresses her love for her mother, and Mevis also kisses her daughter. Grace meets her father who is serving his sentence by the lake. Her father misses her very much. Grace says goodbye to her father. When Seneca meets her “sister,” her mother expresses her repentance. Women get redemption of ideas, and they can face the past and start a new life. Having a harmonious and normal family ethical relationship is also Morrison's expectation for women of African descent. The awakening of women's ethical consciousness is the key to integrating African-American groups into the white world and having a

better tomorrow. The return of monastery women's self and sisterhood indicate the possibility of future development of African-Americans.

The essence of ethical salvation is the pursuit of "human" self-identity. The uncertainty or confusion of ethical identity can lead to various ethical dilemmas. For African Americans, it is necessary to make the right ethical choice between true African identity and desired white identity. African Americans need to accept their African identity, love their own history and culture, actively seek equal dialogue with white people, and integrate into the American society with an open attitude. Exclusion and violent confrontation are not the way to the development of the African People. Only acceptance and integration are the future direction of development.

The essence of ethical redemption is the pursuit of human self-identity. Uncertainty or confusion in ethical identity can lead to various ethical dilemmas. For Afro-descendants, there is a need to make the right ethical choice between true Afro-descendants and desirable white identities. Afro-descendant groups need to accept their own Afro-descendant status, love their own history and culture, and actively seek equal dialogue with whites and integrate into American society in an open manner. Exclusion of closure and violent confrontation are not the path of development for Afro-descendants, and integration is the only way forward.

## Conclusion

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison describes the relationships between whites and Afro-descendants. She presents the plight of Afro-descendant groups in the face of ethnic and family ethical relations after the abolition of slavery. Morrison finally presents the process of monastery women's mutual love and growth in the novel, and they reconstruct the normal ethical relationship. But Ruby's rulers end their yearning paradise life by shooting the women in the convent. Morrison expects to explore the ways to achieve moral sublimation and ethical identity reconstruction for African Americans. She advocates sisterhood and mutual cooperation. She also points out that individuals should love themselves and others, combine personal development with national development, and seek integration and common development with white people, which will be the future roads for African Americans.

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