ZESZYTY NAUKOWE • UNIWERSYTET ZIELONOGÓRSKI • 2016
SERIA: SCRIPTA HUMANA
AMERICAN LITERATURE AND INTERCULTURAL DISCOURSES TOM 7

Agnieszka Łobodziec
University of Zielona Góra

THE BLACK THEOLOGICAL CALL FOR AN EXTENDED GLOBAL FAMILY IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE*

Abstract

Black theological considerations of human existence involve metaphors corresponding to the concept of family. The formation of a beloved extended family may require a redefinition of certain Christian doctrines, an attempt made by some of the characters depicted in Toni Morrison's *Paradise.* The separatist, patriarchal leaders of the town of Ruby identify themselves as God-chosen, assume the responsibility of protecting their community from sinister forces, and violently murder women, who presumably embody evil, at a place called the Convent. Theologically, the patriarchs' commission of mass murder is an infraction of New Testament Christianity which mandates love of one's enemies and a call for seeking out the lost. In contrast, the women of the Convent spiritually console other women, regardless of race, class, and culture, who undergo a myriad of tribulations. In Black theological terms, also the figure of Reverend Misner embodies the hope for future reconciliation between people of varied religious and cultural backgrounds.
Keywords: black theology, interfaith dialogue, religious patriarchy, global family

Interfaith dialogue as a black theological call for an extended global family

Since the origins of systematic black theology in the 1960s, black theological considerations of human existence have involved metaphors corresponding to the concept of family. Oppressed black people affirmed their humanity as children of God. Such a conceptualization engendered the empowering "theology of somebodiness [that] conveys that in spite of the world's denial of you, Jesus (God) affirms you. So you must

go on"[1]. The black theologian J. Deotis Roberts underscores the sacred unity of the black community as he defines the black church as "an extended family [as the family of God]"[2]. Joseph H. Jackson, a president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. in the period from 1953 to 1982 employed family related metaphors when he proposed the utilization of Christian methods in the black freedom struggle. The methods "must be judged in the light of that social order that Jesus called the Kingdom of God […] and based on the brotherhood of all mankind and the fatherhood of God"[3].

The Black theological view of an extended family has broadened towards a worldwide perspective. Black theologian Dwight N. Hopkins observes that black theology seeks to carry out intercultural and interfaith dialogue. He recognizes three important reasons for the black theological necessity "to increase the interfaith dialogue on a global scale"[4]. The first is the fact that non-Christian believers outnumber Christian believers. The second relates to the victimization of people of all faiths through oppression, physical abuse, disproportionate employment policy, disability, marginalization, and loneliness. The third constitutes a range of globally observable predicaments that torment not only Christian but also non-Christian communities. They encompass

> the international economy of monopoly capitalism, the destruction of indigenous cultures, racial discrimination against darker skin peoples around the world, the oppression of women, and the attack on the earth's ecology[5].

The formation of the beloved extended family may require a redefinition of some Judeo-Christian doctrines, the intricacy of which Toni Morrison outlines in her novel *Paradise*. The author says: "I'm interested in the differences between […] the very stern Old Testament view of religion, with its emphasis on punishment, and the individualistic notion of God being in you"[6]. In *Paradise*, the residents of the town Ruby found a religious community that assumes the Old Testament perspective. This self-contained, separatist milieu constitutes a strictly organized, hierarchical, patriarchal, and all black enclave that resents the inclusion of outsiders, non-Christians, non-blacks, and the light-complexioned. They establish "a sleepy town, three churches […] but nothing to serve to the traveler"[7].

---

[1] J. Grant, Jacquelyn, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Atlanta 1989, p. IX.

[2] J. D. Roberts, *Roots of a Black Future: Family and Church*, Philadelphia 1980, p. 80.

[3] T. Walker, Jr., *Empower the People: Social Ethic for the African-American Church,* Maryknoll, New York 1991, p. 114.

[4] D. N. Hopkins, *A Black American Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue* [in:], *Living Stones in the Household of God*, Minneapolis 2004, p. 169.

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 172.

[6] *This Side of Paradise: A Conversation with Toni Morrison*. „Literature and Fiction", http://www.amazon.com/gp/feature.html?ie=UTF8&docId=7651 [access March 21, 2015].

[7] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, New York 1998, p. 12.

Race and gender as obstacles in the pursuit of interfaith dialogue

Dwight N. Hopkins states that the examination of "social relations of power within societies will determine different ways of believing"[8]. The two underlying categories in the formation of a power structure are color and gender. If employed inappropriately, they impede interfaith dialogue and originate the policy of exclusion. Color

> raises the question of a hierarchy of worth. This can translate into who is thought to be the most worthy of receiving the resources and privileges that God has provided for that community[9].

The Ruby patriarchs, who consider themselves God chosen, render color a significant criterion that determines one's humanity. Skin color is the "way people get chosen and ranked in this town"[10]. This indoctrination founded on principles of exclusion does not emerge as an outcome of an in-depth hermeneutics of the words of the heavenly Father, but as a painful memory of the Old Fathers' history. In 1890, the Old Fathers, who were the forebears of Ruby's nine leading families, in flight from the oppressive South, sought to settle in the new territory. During their exodus they suffered the rejection from the residents of the established black community in Fairly, Oklahoma. They found out that "they were too poor, too bedraggled-looking to enter, let alone reside in, the communities that were soliciting Negro homesteaders"[11]. Additionally, they had to confront another kind of discrimination: "Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black"[12]. The black, poor, formerly enslaved people termed this rejection by affluent blacks "Disallowing," which

> came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits. They were kind, though, as the story went. Gave them food and blankets; took up a collection for them; but were unmoving in their refusal to let the 8-rocks stay longer than a night's rest[13].

Proud of their ancestry and blood purity, although rejected by their own people, the Old Fathers continued their search for new, free land, obtained territory from the State Indians after "a year and four months of negotiation [and] of labor for land"[14] and founded an all black town named Haven. On the surface, the whole town appeared to be formerly governed by benevolent patriarchs. The Oven, the community's cooking

[8] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* p. 177.
[9] *Ibidem,* p. 178.
[10] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 216.
[11] *Ibidem,* p. 14.
[12] *Ibidem,* p. 194.
[13] *Ibidem,* p. 195.
[14] *Ibidem,* pp. 98-99.

place, became the symbol of familial unity and freedom from white oppression. It also symbolized the men's authority that enabled them to liberate and protect their women. "They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white-man's kitchen or nursed a white child"[15]. However, the momentous days of Haven came to an end during World War Two and "the subsequent generations of 8-rock males did scatter, just as Zechariah [Big Papa] feared, into the army"[16]. Although entire families moved out of town before the young men returned from fighting overseas in 1949, the ex-soldiers "broke up the Oven and loaded it onto two trucks even before they took apart their own beds"[17] and reinstalled it in their newly established town Ruby, a reconstruction of Haven. Remembering the Disallowing, the Morgans, the most influential of the patriarchs, "carried the rejection of 1890 like a bullet in the brain"[18] and they insisted on racial purity.

Another determiner of one's role in the extended family is gender. Like in most mainstream Christian churches, the history of the black churches also testifies to their patriarchal nature in that black women were, most often than not, prohibited from ascending to the pulpit. For instance, regarding the African Methodist Episcopal church, even though

> women in the 1870s and 1880s functioned as preachers and some as pastors, the denomination restricted them to the office of evangelist and barred them from attaining ordination. Generally, there seemed near unanimity among male ministers that deacon's and leader's orders should remain as gender privileges for men alone[19].

In the twentieth-first century, black theologians challenge religious patriarchy in a number of ways. Dwight N. Hopkins calls for the examination of gender relations within the black church, asserting that

> The issue of gender is closely connected to the different issues surrounding race and, likewise, must be taken seriously in all interfaith dialogues […]. In the rituals of faith, men frequently function as the official representatives of the divine. This gives them the privilege to have an authority to represent, speak for, be closer to, be an interpreter of, or even embody the divine purpose within the community of faith[20].

---

[15] *Ibidem,* p. 99.
[16] *Ibidem,* p. 194.
[17] *Ibidem,* p. 16.
[18] *Ibidem,* p. 109.
[19] D. C. Dickerson, *A Liberated Past: Explorations in A.M.E. Church History*, Nashville, Tennessee 2003, pp. 121-122.
[20] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* p. 179.

In accordance with contemporary black theological discourse, in *Paradise* Toni Morrison portrays the complexity of patriarchy. Above all, the male leaders of Ruby believe that their authority has a religious dimension. They interpret and appropriate the biblical massage according to their interests. "The strong words, strange at first, becoming familiar, gaining weight and hypnotic beauty the more they heard them, made them their own"[21]. Deacon and Steward Morgan "behaved as if God were their silent business partner"[22]. Secondly, at first glance, their and other patriarchs' attitudes towards women seem to exhibit benevolent patriarchy as they respect women, whom they consider inevitable in prolonging the family lines. Deacon states, "Women always the key. God bless'em"[23]. Ruby makes an impression of a haven resided by one beloved, extended family. Appointing themselves as guards of morality, the patriarchs undertake the control over the residents' behavior. Therefore, "the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of"[24]. The fathers also prevent crime and violence so the town "neither had nor needed a jail"[25]. Above all, they protect their women so a

> sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight [or] could walk out the yard and on down the road [or] might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby[26].

However, their stern religiosity based on the conceptualization of a God who blesses only "the pure and holy"[27] does not allow the presence of the lost and broken. Overusing their patriarchal authority, identifying themselves as God-chosen, they assume the responsibility for protecting their community from sinister forces, and violently murder women at a place called the Convent, who presumably embody evil. The women are perceived as "Bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary"[28], and "detritus: throwaway people that sometimes blow back into the room after being swept out the door"[29]. Theologically, the patriarchs' commission of mass murder is an infraction of New Testament Christianity, which mandates love of one's enemies and calls for seeking out the lost.

---

21 T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 111.
22 *Ibidem,* p. 143.
23 *Ibidem,* p. 61.
24 *Ibidem,* p. 8.
25 *Ibidem.*
26 *Ibidem,* pp. 8-9.
27 *Ibidem,* p. 217.
28 *Ibidem,* p. 18.
29 *Ibidem,* p. 4.

Another foundation of the hostile abuse of religion is the lack of communication that permeates Ruby. Deacon and Steward Morgan hardly look at each other. The history of their family reveals that their mutual adversity is not a first case of the Morgans' familial animosity. Their ancestors Zechariah Morgan (Coffee) and his twin brother Tea also did not communicate with each after they could not overcome the shame that racism subconsciously inflicted upon these dispossessed black men. Coffee rejected Tea for dancing for

> some drunken whiteboys [...]. Coffee couldn't take it. Not because he was ashamed of his twin, but because the shame was in himself. It scared him. So he went off and never spoke to his brother again[30].

Reverend Misner explains the main reason for the familial conflict: "Lack of words [...]. Lack of forgiveness. Lack of love"[31]. Moreover, the lack of communication engenders isolation that "kills generations. It has no future"[32], as Misner states. In effect, the patriarchs project their repressed negative emotions upon others. Their desire to articulate their rage and ascertain their power also stirs a blinding imagination that excludes the other. Therefore, the accusations directed towards the Convent women by the Ruby patriarchs evidence the admixture of the men's rage, hostility, and desire for retribution. They are based more on a demeaning gossip than on a reliable source of information obtained through open, inclusive communication. The men speculate,

> Remember how they scandalized the wedding? […] Uh huh and it was that very same day I caught them kissing on each other in the back of that ratty Cadillac […] Sweetie said they tried their best to poison her […] My wife says they did an abortion on [Arnette] […] Roger told me that […] the girl he dropped off there was openly flirting with him. That's the one half naked all the time? […] No men. Kissing on themselves. Babies hid away [...] I hear they drink like fish too[33].

While they enumerate all the offenses, they do not intent to discern their own imperfection and the fact that it is Ruby citizens who sometimes escape to and hide in the Convent

> as adulterers, drunks, liars, would-be murderers of unborn children, and men expressing emotional needs and sexual desires not fulfilled or endorsed by their belief system and rigid code of behavior[34].

---

[30] *Ibidem,* p. 303.
[31] *Ibidem.*
[32] *Ibidem,* p. 210.
[33] *Ibidem,* pp. 275-276.
[34] C. Romero, *Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise'*, "African American Review" 2005, no. 39. 3.

For instance, Sweety seeks to escape taking care of her sick babies, and Arnette hits her stomach forcefully to get rid of the baby. The Ruby patriarchs do not know that the Convent women invent mysterious practices and means that rush Sweety back home and want Arnetted to deliver the baby. Since Ruby's religion and community is based on principles of exclusion, some people from Ruby demonize their victims. Sweety thinks of them as "these demons"[35], the men assume that the content of a found letter is a "satanic message"[36], perceive the women as "More like witches"[37] and believe the "evil is in this house"[38].

Interfaith dialogue and the challenge to principles of exclusion

Paradise critiques the false religious exegesis that envisions an authoritarian God and overuses this image while constructing a religious institution based on the exclusion of the imperfect and disobedient. As stated earlier, the formation of an extended global family based on interfaith dialogue requires a challenge to the apologetic Christianity through recognition and inclusion of people of various backgrounds. In Morrison's novel, the two characters Reverend Misner and Consolata assume such a stance, embodying an ethos of global family members.

Reverend Misner, in contradistinction to patriarchs of Ruby, recognizes the sacredness of all people as equal and beloved children of God. He believes that the unifying power of God's love enables the contesting families' reconciliation. When the patriarchs assemble in order to punish K.D., the Morgans' nephew, for hitting his young, pregnant lover Arnette, a daughter of the Fleetwoods, Misner says, "God's love is in this house [...]. We treasure His strength but we mustn't ignore His love. That's what keeps us strong. Gentlemen. Brothers. Let us pray"[39]. He also advocates the redefinition of God's power when he willingly listens to the young, who insist on replacing the word "Be" (instead of the formerly inscribed "Beware" in front of the Oven motto). One of the young people argues, "No ex-slave would tell us to be scared all the time. To 'beware' God [...] trying to look out every minute in case He's getting ready to throw something at us, keep us down"[40]. As a response to Deacon Morgan's accusations directed towards the young of disrespecting the ancestral history and tradition Reverend Misner defends their liberal and progressive viewpoint saying, "Seems to me, Deek, they are respecting it. It's because

[35] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 130.
[36] *Ibidem,* p. 7.
[37] *Ibidem,* p. 276.
[38] *Ibidem,* p. 291.
[39] *Ibidem,* p. 61.
[40] *Ibidem,* p. 84.

they do know the Oven's value that they want to give it new life"[41]. Further, when one of the patriarchs warns the young generation that "You can't be God" and Reverend Pulliam says that "You have to obey Him," a representative of the younger generation explains, "Yes, sir, but we *are* obeying Him […]. If we follow His commandments, we'll be His voice, His retribution. As a people"[42].

Reverend Misner also transcends the memory of painful history of racial oppression of black people by whites, who once saw themselves as the only legitimate Christians. On the one hand, he teaches young people that "whites not only had no patent on Christianity; they were often its obstacle. That Jesus had been freed from white religion"[43]. On the other hand, regardless of the victimization of black people facilitated by supposedly Christian forms of white oppression, he does not seek retribution, but postulates the inclusion of white people in the family of God. When he tells resenting Steward Morgan about the lost white visitors in Ruby, he states, "God has one people"[44]. Steward, however, immediately retorts, "Reverend […] I've heard you say things *out* of ignorance, but this is the first time I heard you say something *based* on ignorance"[45].

Reverend Misner also defies the false religious exegesis performed by the domineering Reverend Pulliam, who sermonizes an authoritarian God, "not interested in you"[46] and conceptualizes God's love as an award for the strictly disciplined life, because "Love is not a gift. It is a diploma"[47]. Actually, Pulliam's words are

> a widening of the war he had declared on Misner's activities: tempting the young to step outside the wall, outside the town limits, shepherding them, forcing them to transgress, to think of themselves as civil warriors[48].

In order to neutralize "the poison Pulliam [has] sprayed over everything"[49], Misner takes a crucifix in his hands and holds it in front of the congregation because he believes that cross is the symbol of kinship among people all over the world. He reflects upon the closeness between cross and all children of the world since it was

> certainly the first sign any human anywhere had made: the vertical line; the horizontal one. Even as children, they drew it with their fingers in snow, sand or mud; they laid it down as sticks in dirt; arranged it from bones on frozen

41 *Ibidem,* p. 86.
42 *Ibidem,* p. 87.
43 *Ibidem,* p. 209.
44 *Ibidem,* p. 123.
45 *Ibidem.*
46 *Ibidem,* p. 142.
47 *Ibidem,* p. 141.
48 *Ibidem,* p. 145.
49 *Ibidem.*

> tundra and broad savannas; as pebbles on riverbanks; scratched it on cave walls and outcroppings from Nome to South Africa. Algonquin and Laplanders, Zulu and Druids – all had a finger memory of this original mark.[50]

Holding the cross firmly, Misner hopes that his wordless prayer will deliver the uplifting message "that not only is God interested in you, He *is* you"[51].

Misner's advocacy of a formation of a divine extended family becomes a struggle against opposing, domineering patriarchs like the Morgan twin brothers, who, belonging to the most powerful congregation in town, "sorted [his] opinions carefully to judge which were recommendations easily ignored and which were orders they ought to obey"[52]. The destabilizing patriarchal autonomy engenders exclusion to the point that its executers resort to violent extermination of those who do not conform. The men's inclination towards violence is gradually building up. For instance, Steward's memory of his brother Elder, who came to a prostitute's assistance insulted by white men evidences sleeping violence. The story

> unnerved him [because] it was based on the defense of and prayers for a whore. He did not sympathize with the whitemen, but he could see their point, could even feel the adrenaline, imagining the fist was his own[53].

The thought of black man's humiliating helplessness in an oppressive society makes Steward Morgan "want to shoot somebody"[54]. Morgan's nephew K.D. also violently abuses a young woman, upon which Reverend Misner reflects: "What did K.D. think he was doing? His relation to Deek and Steward protected him, of course, but it was hard to like a man who relied on that"[55]. Eventually, after the patriarchs' most poignant act of oppressive patriarchy – the mass murder of women in the Convent – Misner pointedly observes that their "power to control was out of control"[56]. He contemplates the complex confusion that entraps the New Fathers:

> 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. And when the maimed children ask for help, they look elsewhere for the cause. Born out of an old hatred, one that began when one kind of black man scorned another kind and that kind took the hatred to another level, their selfishness had trashed two hundred years of suffering and triumph in a moment of such pomposity and error and callousness it froze the mind. Unbridled

[50] *Ibidem.*
[51] *Ibidem,* p. 147.
[52] *Ibidem,* p. 57.
[53] *Ibidem,* p. 95.
[54] *Ibidem,* p. 96.
[55] *Ibidem,* p. 62.
[56] *Ibidem,* p. 308.

> by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seems to him was an unnecessary failure[57].

Therefore, Reverend Misner decides to stay in this town to perform God's work. He embodies a middleperson between two opposite ideological milieus: exclusive Ruby and the inclusive Convent. Encouraging the young to cross over the walls of a conservative enclave, he outlines a point of departure towards an interfaith dialogue that enables the formation of an extended family.

In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison portrays a microcosm of an extended interracial, interfaith, and intercultural household through the Convent, hosted by Consolata, whose embracing spirit welcomes the lost and driven. Mavis comes across the Convent in her flight from her husband's retribution for the accidental killing of her infant children, who suffocated being left inside a car. Gigi searches for a true love experience. Seneca leaves behind a convict boyfriend and escapes the humiliation she experienced when hired by a woman who wanted to indulge her perverse sexual fantasies. Pallas is a victim of rape and escapes from her domineering father. Even Ruby women seek solace in the Convent. Desperate, pregnant Arnette Fleetwood and Soan Morgan look for assistance in abortions. Sweetie Fleetwood longs to escape from her sick children. Consolata welcomes all women regardless of their faith, race and social status. Having been introduced to the power of God's grace by Catholic nuns, more unconsciously than not, she follows the way of Jesus, which means, as Dwight N. Hopkins elucidates, being

> with the poor because that is where Jesus resides, [and] then we are not bound by church doctrines or institutional restriction […]. If God is the spirit of freedom for the least in society, then this spirit has to be active as an event and process of struggle even where the name of Jesus is not known[58].

The invading patriarchs from Ruby notice that there is "not a cross of Jesus anywhere"[59] in the Convent. When they foray the rooms, they perceive

> strange things nailed or taped to the walls or propped in a corner. A 1968 calendar, large X's marking various dates […]; a letter written in blood so smeary its satanic message cannot be deciphered; an astrology chart; a fedora tilted on the plastic neck of female torso [60].

Their blinding and confusing imagination brings about connotations of diabolism instead of emotional desperation, which they utilize as justification for the massacres. Consolata, in turn, enables the women's open exposition of and confrontation with

[57] *Ibidem,* p. 306.
[58] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* p. 171.
[59] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 7.
[60] *Ibidem.*

their tribulations and painful memories. She perceives them as "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying"[61]. In this manner, she is likely to carry out an interfaith dialogue, which involves one's ability to discern the "emotional makeup of diverse communities […]. How do people deal with grief, pain, and death"[62]. She does not interfere in the women's

> foolish babygirl wishes. Mavis talked endlessly of surefire moneymaking ventures: beehives; something called "bed and breakfast"; a catering company; an orphanage. One thought she had found a treasure chest of money or jewels or something and wanted help to cheat the others of its contents. Another was secretly slicing her thighs, her arms. Wishing to be the queen of scars, she made thin red slits in her skin with whatever came to hand: razor, safety pin, paring knife. One other longed for what sounded like a sort of cabaret life, a crowded place where she could sing sorrow-filled songs with her eyes closed[63].

Throughout her spiritual growth, Consolata also resists the oppressive vision of Christianity that seeks to erase indigenous cultures. Although the Catholic nuns formerly residing in the Convent assisted and educated Indian Girls, their mission was

> to bring God and language to natives who were assumed to have neither; to alter their diets, their clothes, their minds; to help them despise everything that had once made their lives worthwhile and to offer them instead the privilege of knowing the one and only God and a chance, thereby, for redemption[64].

For thirty years Consolata is a committed nun until she has a distorting relationship with a "living man," Deacon Morgan. When her passion overwhelms and even threatens him, he leaves her. However, her personal misfortune does not prevent her development towards becoming a welcoming spirit and attaining otherworldly powers. Initially, she is skeptical about any thought of magic. When Lone, a former midwife in Ruby, soothes Consolata's menopause symptoms, she hesitates to acknowledge any inexplicable powers because she regards herself as a conscientious Christian who accepts no "magic"[65]. Lone has just the opposite view when she says, "You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world"[66]. Eventually, she makes Consolata aware of her exceptional gift and even capability of 'stepping in,' entering the dying

[61] *Ibidem,* p. 222.
[62] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* p. 176.
[63] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 222.
[64] *Ibidem,* p. 227.
[65] *Ibidem,* p. 244.
[66] *Ibidem*.

person to save someone's life. Consolata prefers to name this practice "seeing in"[67]. Moreover, Consolata

> deconstructs the founding binary opposition within the structure of Western thought, the Christian separation of spirit and flesh, by stating: 'Never break them in two. Never put one over the other. Eve is Mary's mother. Mary is the daughter of Eve'[68].

This magic woman unifies the Convent family through the ritual of loud dreams, which is categorized as one of the strategies that enable inter-faith dialogue. Dwight N. Hopkins contends that in order to exercise an interfaith dialogue one has

> to see, hear, and listen to different cultural expressions of […] faiths [that encompass] dreams, tradition, morals, and connection to the divine […] hope that there is a force greater than they are[69].

In this manner, Consolata holds dream sessions during which the brokenhearted reveal their dreams and reconcile with their past.

> In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love […] They spoke to each other about what had been dreamed and what had been drawn[70].

This dream ritual engenders the women's transformation and unity. "With Consolata in charge, like a new and revised Reverend Mother, feeding them bloodless food and water alone to quench their thirst, they altered"[71]. Consolata's inclusive spirituality enhances the ritual that

> encourages them to confront them, acknowledge them, and to recognize similarities between their own and others' experiences […] helps these women to overcome their own personal traumas and to create a more nurturing, healing community not based on the divisions and exclusions of Ruby[72].

Consolata encourages a reconciling communication that is lacking in Ruby.

Interfaith dialogue also involves paying "attention to how people carry out their ordinary lives of survival"[73]. In *Paradise*, Consolata's everyday activities unite not only the women in the Convent, but also the outsiders. Because she is an extraordinary cook and a skillful gardener, the Convent becomes famous for the best barbecue sauce and

---

[67] *Ibidem,* p. 247.

[68] A. Read, *As If Word Magic Had Anything to Do with the Courage It Took to Be a Aan": Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's 'Paradise*, "African American Review" 2005, no. 39. 4, p. 538.

[69] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* pp. 174-175.

[70] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, pp. 264-265.

[71] *Ibidem,* p. 265.

[72] C. Romero. *op. cit*., p. 418.

[73] D. N. Hopkins, *op. cit.,* p. 175.

red peppers in the town. When Mavis came to the Convent, "in the kitchen she felt safe; the thought of leaving it disturbed her"[74]. Consolata's sharing food with others is analogous to the black theological endorsement of the ethic of breaking bread. The theologian Theodore Walker, Jr. emphasizes the manner in which adherence to this ethic enhances communal and familial unity.

> We know now that the bread we ought to break internationally, nationally, and locally includes leadership, money, food, jobs, land, housing, righteous education, and socialization (including the use of such resources as religious ritual, music, and dance), vastly increased attention to male-female-family-church relations, health care, child care, home care, family care, elder care, power, and other opportunities and resources essential to the nurture, survival, fruitful increase, and empowerment of all the people[75].

Further Walker asserts,

> The bottom line of a black theological social ethical appropriation of the philosophy of black power is 'Let us break bread together.' Where bread is not broken, Jesus is not recognized, God is not served, and the people are not free[76].

Accordingly, Consolata's breaking of bread together with the marginalized and downtrodden not only includes food in a literal sense, but also a welcoming space and ambience which facilitates others' sense of belonging, respite, recognition, and acceptance. Before the defamatory actions of the patriarchs of Ruby, many people had recognized the Convent as a haven, whose hosts "took people in – lost folks or folks who needed rest. Early reports were of kindness and very good food"[77].

Summary

In *Paradise*, in sync with recent black theological perspective, Toni Morrison cautions against religious institutions founded on principles of exclusion and calls for interfaith dialogue that is inevitable in the formation of a divine extended family. The character Consolata succeeds in establishing an interfaith household because of her ability to recognize the values of varied cultural religious expression. Chanette Romero observes,

> Consolata's teachings attempt to implement a new, more accepting form of religion that focuses on the communal worship of a multiplicity of beliefs. She speaks to multiple deities and combines the Catholic precepts of service and love with the African American womanist traditions of root working and conjuring that she

[74] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 41.
[75] T. Walker, Jr., *op. cit.,* p. 120.
[76] *Ibidem,* p. 121.
[77] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 11.

> learned from Lone […]. Consolata also draws on Candomble, a religion from her native Brazil that combines Catholicism with African spirit worship. Drawing on these multiple deities and natural spiritualities, Consolata teaches the Convent women to connect to the natural world and each other by eating a meatless diet, allowing the rain to help cleanse them of their traumas, and most importantly, participating in "loud dreaming" sessions[78].

Towards the end of the novel, rain signifies the all-embracing natural world, the unifying power of which the women of the Convent discern and glorify. They dance together in the rain, God's blessing, that is "like balm on their shaved heads and upturned faces"[79]. Their closeness to nature empowers their divine kinship. On the contrary, the oppressive patriarchs do not recognize, or even hide themselves from this virtue of the natural world. While it is raining, the armed men of Ruby stay in a shed and prepare for their murderous act. Their companionship strengthens their killing rage. An analogous discrepancy between the attitudes of the Convent women's and Ruby's patriarchal society's stances towards nature is manifested by their approaches to gardening. Consolata's artful and fruitful gardening evidences her connectedness to nature, the crops of which she shares with other people. This is in contradistinction to Ruby citizens whose "habit, the interest in cultivating plants that could not be eaten, spread, and so the ground surrendered to it"[80]. While Consolata's gardening renders the land prolific and bountiful in crops she shares, the ground of Ruby's citizens becomes a wasteland overgrown by poisonous plants. The more the patriarchs of Ruby distance themselves from the natural world, the more apologetic and separatist their religiosity becomes.

---

[78] C. Romero. *op. cit.,* p. 417.
[79] T. Morrison, *Paradise*, p. 283.
[80] *Ibidem,* p. 89.