

**The Possessed Men in *Paradise* and *the Bluest Eye*:
A Study of Unresolved Masculinities and the
Impossibility of Exorcism**

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“The past isn’t dead and buried. In fact it isn’t even past.”

William Faulkner

My paper intends to look outside the immediate ambit of the obvious spectrality in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*¹ and *Paradise*, beyond the spectral figures, the liminal spaces and the ‘ghosted’ (Anderson n. p.) women that haunt these works and that are so well traced, analysed and discussed by Anderson. It intends to take a look at the black men who find themselves in the grip of their new found/superimposed historically and politically composed masculinities and a suddenly surfacing gender anxiety. Tormented by repressed emotions, haunted by their past, shadows of their former selves, these are mentally mutilated men who individually or collectively project their darkest fears and unspoken and sometimes ‘unthought known’ apprehensions onto someone who they consider more vulnerable than them, compelled to act the way they do. For these men, who are constantly battling ghosts, the skeletons in their closet outweigh their material problems. For them, there seems to be no transition, no redemption, no way out of the eternal torment as they fail to understand their own manhood and succumb hopelessly to a white model of patriarchal masculinity turning into ghostly and ghastly figures, embodying ‘the ultimate form of male domination encapsulated in violence (Gallego 55)

The most overwhelming presence in the novel *The Bluest Eye* is that of the bluest pair of eyes which is oddly never seen but is always an absent present. Like this ubiquitous central motif which eludes the eye coaxing the reader with the ‘premonition of its arrival’² (Punter 262) to read on, overseeing the narrative, taking us through it, there are other apparitions too that make themselves visible, not to the naked but to the discerning

eye. In sharp contrast with the unemployed, alcoholic and abusive³ black father, Cholly Breedlove, is the presumably nice, well-off, absent, white father of Dick and Jane, the master of the lovely house described in the opening pages of the narrative who provides for his children and ensures that they are not ghosted⁴ or end up wandering in the space between dream and reality, the real and the unreal, like Pecola. The overweening presence of this reassuring white father is juxtaposed with Cholly's incompetence and worthlessness establishing the stereotypes of essentialist white and black masculinities; it can also be seen as a revenance⁵ or an uncanny returning of the two white men who had exploited Cholly's vulnerability years ago by catching him in his first act of love making and forcing him to carry on while they watched:

... When he looked at her face, she was staring wildly at something over his shoulder... there stood two white men... there was no mistake about their being white; he could smell it... Cholly jumped, trying to kneel, stand, and get his pants up, all in one motion. The men had long guns... "I said, get on wid it. An' make it good, nigger, make it good."... With a violence born of total helplessness, he pulled her dress up, lowered his trousers, and underwear... Cholly, moving faster, looked at Darlene. He hated her... the flashlight wormed its way into his guts and turned the sweet taste of muscadine into rotten fetid bile (*TBE* 115-116).

What should have been a beautiful intimate experience marking the transition from boyhood into maturity for Cholly becomes a cheap pornographic act shattering his masculinity even before it took shape becoming a nightmare coming back to taunt and haunt him for the rest of his life, reminding him of his mental impotence.

Dick and Jane's father has nothing in common with the two white men except for the racial association. Denying Cholly his rightful entry into manhood and appropriating his sexual prowess to cater to the voyeurism

of the white men implies a symbolic emasculation⁶ or depriving the black slave of his phallus which is one of the many violent residual memories embedded in the African American masculine unconscious. The lynching which these white men resort to stems from the entrenched disposition of white hegemonic masculinity to be perversely attracted to the black male body as an object of sexual activity and physical excess and also symbolizes the myriad ways in which racial oppression is practiced.

The men invisibilise and infantilise⁷ the Cholly by reducing him to a performing diminutive and making a spectacle out of him. The narrative tells us that Cholly goes in search of his father after this incident - a frightened little child in search of a reassuring parent after a terrible nightmare only to be disowned a second time. He tries to repress these ghastly encounters, keep the skeletons firmly locked up in his closet and a period of relative peace and happiness follows when Cholly meets Pauline marries her after a brief courtship. But the repressed memories always return and so do the, ghosts, dragging along with them phantoms from a bloodied and violent past that had stood witness to the emasculation and the 'picnic (king)'⁸ of Cholly's ancestors at the hands of their white masters in numerous plantations.

In her book *Spectrality in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, we see Melanie R Anderson put Cholly Breedlove in the category of 'social ghosts', who has an opportunity to 'shape his identity' the way he wants to as he seems to be 'isolated and disconnected' from his community and his past (18-24). But how rootless and free can Cholly really be given his traumatic past? Repressed memories translate into unwarranted fear and violence which is projected on the most vulnerable. Dealing with a marital relationship which is more like a festering infection than any kind of bond, and yet clinging on to the ghost of this once beautiful relationship (the only meaningful relationship he probably had) Cholly finds himself wavering between two worlds, two spectral spaces; transfixed on the crossroads of love and estrangement battling physical and psychic impediments, repressing anxieties, warding off ghosts in a curious and

inexplicable combination of rage and tenderness he rapes Pecola his own daughter:

Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt... the sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love... Why did she have to look so whipped? She was a child-unburdened-why wasn't she happy? ..He wanted to break her neck-but tenderly. Guilt and impotence rose in a bilious duet (*TBE* 127).

Whether the act amounts to an attempt to reclaim a lost manhood or is the manifestation of a repressed emotion or the return of something hidden and its projection onto someone vulnerable or all of this, it reduces Cholly to the category of the stereotyped and much feared and abhorred black man embodying violence, depraved sexuality and a criminal mindset. If these ghosts which shadow Cholly like bloody apparitions lead him to do terrible misdeeds which result in stigmatizing black masculinity, there are other subtler, less explicit apparitions floating in the labyrinthine darkness of the unconscious which haunt Mavis's husband Frank in *Paradise* leading him to abuse and torment his wife. These cunning ghosts refuse to come out in the open, directing and pulling the strings from behind the curtains, resulting in discoordinated and unsynchronised movements from the ones they control: a smile followed by a blow, furtive sex followed by withering looks, a desire to love coupled with a desire to hurt. In the unconscious of these men are intertwined the familiar and the unfamiliar, the homely and the unhomely, the strange and the commonplace in an inextricable coil.

The town of Ruby regarded as Paradise by its elders is ironically nowhere close to a Paradise. True, it speaks of success stories and abundance, material prosperity and community living, upholding of an ethos and adherence to a way of life, but it fosters many evils which manifest themselves in the running of a society given to exclusionary and prejudiced practices. There's a deep rooted narcissism in the elders of Ruby who are proud and possessive of their unadulterated, unmixed and undiluted

blackness. This narcissism is tormented by the shadow of the memory of the Disallowing when their ancestors were turned down by light skinned Africans for being too black and asked to go and settle elsewhere. This is very much a part of the collective racial memory of the inhabitants of Ruby and a reason for their exclusionary practice of maintaining the *pure blood* (italics mine) feature in their community. Thus the town of Ruby run by patriarchs is based exactly on the white hegemonic xenophobic model of racial intolerance proving the incapacity or inability of blacks to exorcise the ideological ghosts of their white masters.

The elders of Ruby, the patriarchs who have laid down the rules for the village, epitomize black hegemonic masculinity, a masculinity unfortunately modeled on white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and they feel threatened by the women in the Convent who follow a different set of rules and have their own means of subsistence. These are men who started came of age without any interference, benevolence or assistance from whites or other communities. They laid down the rules determining the social practices of the village that rested on a loyal adherence to binaries. Women were to manage the house and raise babies while men would work and provide for them. Ironically these men are proud of their ethnicity; however what they fail to see or realize is apparently how deeply they have internalized the rigidification of the sex roles laid down by white-supremacist patriarchy which relegates women to a domesticated existence and urges men to understand and realize their masculinity by being responsible for the family's upkeep which primarily and finally means running the house, earning money and making decisions: an essentially male prerogative.

The humiliations of the past return to torment the patriarchs of Ruby, and in the women of the Convent they see reflected their rejection and irrelevance. The fear of erasure and being reduced to a state of powerlessness and insignificance, is a constant underlying anxiety, surfaces and translates into their 'fear of the evil eye'⁹ The fiercely possessive makers of Ruby take upon themselves the task of guarding

her jealously and warding off the evil eye, in this case the women in the convent, who can mean nothing but harm for the people of Ruby.

The women become witches, their routine activities become sinister rituals and witchcraft and the Convent becomes a space requiring cleansing. The men, in showing a great deal of reluctance in accepting the convent as a possible home or haven for me homeless also symbolically negate their original homes¹⁰, the womb of their mothers, the original prehistoric home, since the convent is nothing less than a womb taking everyone into its protective fold and breathing new life into near dead tormented souls. Their crusade to the convent and the subsequent massacre of the women reinforces the desire of the foetus to control the womb which Mary Daly explicitly proves through the metaphor of the vehicle and the astronaut, and the notion of the vessel in her book *Gyn/Ecology The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*: She quotes Ellen Frankfort who comments on Thomas Ford's likening of the fetus to an astronaut in a spaceship:

It takes a certain kind of imagination to assume guardianship for something lodged within another's body - a rather acquisitive proprietary imagination that fits right in with the conception of a woman as a spaceship and the contents of her womb as an astronaut (Introduction 30).

The elders of Ruby would like to have total control of the vessel which had started steering on its own through the women in the convent. Possession of the vessel combined with an unexplained dread of the original prehistoric home, the dark chamber prompt them to project their fears onto it and destroy it.

Though Morrison makes the women living in the Convent blur the boundaries of the spaces defined by binaries and transcend the material to continue existing as spectral beings, reaching out to people and healing troubled and traumatized souls, for the men in Paradise, the torment is not over. We see the men as the sum of their losses. They are shadows of their former selves. Steward's lost ability of taste is suggestive of his lost ability

to enjoy the finer things in life. No interest in 'quiet flavour' is how Dovey his wife sees it. His material gain is exactly proportionate to his personal loss. Deacon, haunted by his memories with Conie nevertheless cannot come up clean in front of his wife.

Ironically in what seems to be a gynophobic move the men claim to have cleansed the convent of all evils but fail to free themselves from the ghosts and spirits of the past. The erasure of these women doesn't salvage the situation. If anything the task becomes harder. But they realize this too late in the day, and victims of their own misdeeds and folly, they now begins the slow painstaking task of healing, of trying to redeem themselves. Small changes are gradually visible.

What we see in these novels is the black man's predicament as he struggles with the eternally ambivalent model of masculinity he is expected to don; making peace between the native who wouldn't experience guilt for having abandoned his family or not fending for it and the newly freed slave who has internalized the white master's values of hegemonic masculinity. Both a witness to and a survivor of the trauma of emasculation at the hands of white masters, the black man in his new found freedom is again symbolically emasculated¹¹ by the black woman in the race to empowerment through employment. Caught between two worlds again, the distant ethnic world and the recent world of plantation with its defining value system, these men are helpless preys caught in the vicious tentacles of the past, prodigal children of morbid histories who do not wish to do disservice to any ghost. Since earning a livelihood is a remote possibility, the desire to be powerful and assert that power manifests itself in the form of violence and oppression. .

One bears witness to both, individual instances of sporadic violence in a domestic space, and calculated and organized violence inflicted on women within a social space with an intention to control and wipe out resistance as a determining feature of black masculinity. New found masculinity¹² in the need to assert itself battling with age old ghosts runs amuck in the

absence of a model; like a many armed monster, it is awkward, directionless, purposeless and predatory. In the indiscriminate and unexplained violence inflicted on black women by black men, we see an inability to be decolonized, a revenance or a compulsive return of the abuse of black slaves at the hands of white masters once used as a strategy to control and rule.¹³ They are ghosts from a traumatic past, avenging furies that have come back with a purpose, refusing to leave or die down till they have attained what they set out to, and when they retreat, if at all leave behind ghosts and spiritual wrecks, residues and relics of what once was the real black man before he was enslaved, mutilated, emasculated, and possessed.

End Notes:

1. All further references to "The Bluest Eye" will appear in the text in parenthesis as (TBE)
2. Drawing from Derrida's suggestion of the eventual arrival of the apparition Punter shows the paradoxical and uncanny presence in an absence, a premonition of arrival which will never be fully removed or replaced. (Punter 262)
3. The stereotyped black masculine as 1) violent 2) sexual and 3) incompetent (Jackson 123)
4. Anderson attempts to understand Morrison's ghosted women in the light of Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's description of a ghost who he says is "... that which interrupts the presentness of the present... and its haunting indicates that, beneath the surface of received history, there lurks another narrative, an untold story, that calls into question the veracity of the authorized version of events." (Spectral America 5)
5. The word 'revenant' occurring in Derrida's discussions when he talks about the anticipation involved in waiting, how it is 'at once impatient, anxious and fascinated: this the thing ('this thing') will end up coming. The revenant is going to come.' (qtd. Punter 262)
6. Jackson talks about the two most common forms of punishment meted out to black men by white slave owners for offences ranging from general to grave, one of them being 'emasculatation or '...cutting off the penis. This removal of the phallus symbolized the denial of black masculinity.'" (124)
7. Gallego refers to Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* in which he says how "... Black men were literally treated like boys, not adults, and systematically denied their manhood, thus feminized, or even castrated - physically but also psychologically, (footnote Gallego 53)
8. The two punishments Jackson talks about one being emasculatation and the other a picnic, "... the social etymology of the term..." being "pick a nigger" when "...white slave owners would bring their children, wives and friends, to witness the hanging of a black slave who was deemed disobedient." (Jackson 124)

9. Freud in *The Uncanny* talks about the fear of the 'evil eye' and attributes the origin of the fear in a person when he "possesses something precious, but fragile, is afraid of the envy of others, to the extent that he projects onto them the envy he would have felt... what is feared is thus a covert intention to harm, and on the strength of certain indications it is assumed that this intention can command the necessary force." (Freud 146-147)
10. Freud describes the womb as the original home of every man at the same time indicating the discomfort certain men feel about female genitals which implies their reluctance to return to their original homes. (Freud 151)
11. E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939) presumed that contemporary problems among black communities stemmed from the destruction of the black family, as the female-headed household replaced the patriarchal order. The erosion of the traditional male role led generations of studies to contend that gender identities among black men developed pathologically, creating a sense of social impotence both inside and outside of the family. (Buckner 9)
12. Gallego talks about 'slavery's traumatic legacy' and how '... the foundations of the Black community rely heavily on a White model markedly flawed by racist and sexist prejudice. (Gallego 53)
13. When slavery ended... black men often used violence to dominate black women which was a repetition of the strategies of control white slavemasters used. (Hooks 4)

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