The Black Heroine's Femininity through Contemporary Looking Glass in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract
This article examines the re-writing of contemporary black femininity as being attributed to masculine codes in *Paradise* (1997), by Toni Morrison. The writer's re-conceptualization of black femininity is rooted in Judith Butler's revolutionary understanding of gender and identity constructivism, which are determined within limited agendas of social and cultural restrictions. In discussing the mechanism of re-appropriation, Butler claims that the subject is required to reenact preexisting gender norms and performances as revolting means of deliverance and emancipation; affirming that gender re-negotiation is meant to subvert power discourse. Drawing on these assumptions, this paper argues that Morrison's novel revokes a reversing visualization of black femininity to criticize identity and gender formation as social and cultural constructs. It also discusses the black women social performances that correspond to the subversive power and gender dimensions. It concludes that *Paradise* subverts the alleged continuity of gender identity, and challenged the matrix of power relations.
Keywords: Paradise; black femininity; Gender and identity constructivism; Masculine codes ; Subversion of the gaze.

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INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison, a twentieth century black female writer, has fought for the African-American heritage, essence, nationalism and tradition by interrogating the African American standards to reconstruct the very notions of femininity and masculinity. At the intersection of Morrison's themes and narrative techniques, the contemporary literary representation and the expectations for the remolding of her black female characters' identity, Morrison's fictional writings present an alluring glance of re-negotiating the parameters between gender and identity, imaginary and real realms. Accordingly, femininity in contemporary fiction, as maintained by critics, has progressively taken a central role- earlier being mysterious, it is spectacularly multifaceted, and unquestionably visible. As a controversial feminine trait, the writers of which have re-established it as essential to their narratives. By defying normative definitions of gender, contemporary literature has been regarded as "a welcome escape into a world of fictionalized femininity" (p.16), as being claimed by Cooper and Short (2012). Morrison's contemporary writing acknowledges that the social classification of both masculinity and femininity is ambiguous. There is a constant change in the redefinition of her characters identity as being governed by entirely biological, cultural, racial, and social forces. Morrison, the winner of the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction (1988) and the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993), has put her concerns on black women identity as depicted in her earlier writings, namely *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Beloved* (1989), and *A Mercy* (2008).

In re-conceptualizing gender and identity constructivism, Butler repudiates the prescribed social and cultural forces that determine one's identity. She sees that the subject's identity is not governed by biology and anatomy; it is rather the cultural and social institutions that have conventionally constructed the gendered subject. Hence Butler's theory of gender and sexuality is built upon identity constructivism, where the replication of gender norms establish the gendered subject. She assumes that if a set of behaviors and performances are reiterated in a restricted structure, then, it is the subject's will to place himself/herself within a subversive frame that repudiates the social norms and conventions. This opposing vision of redefining the matrix of gender is meant to reject the dogmatic formulas as being culturally, ideologically and socially made up and fabricated, and to subvert the parameters of power. In view of that, Butler (1990) claims in *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex"* that "Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This "being a man" and this "being a woman" are internally unstable affairs" (p. 126).

Butler (1990) has also criticized the patriarchal hegemonic power that determines the subject's gender and identity. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler assumes that one's gender is inscribed in the sexual nature of the body and the social practices and performances. In this vein, gender is conditioned and enacted through repetitions and reiterations of a set of acts and behaviors, according to her, "the body is figured as a surface and the scene of cultural inscription;" the body "is always under siege, suffering destruction by the very terms of history" (p. 177). She has further explained that the construction of identity is rooted in performing gender roles in relation to the established norms and rules of society. The subject's body therefore is socially constructed through these dogmatic norms that "establish the boundaries of the body" (p.178). She adds that these

established structures «appropriate limits, postures and modes of exchange that define what it is that constitutes bodies" (p.178). As revolting act, in re-negotiating one's gender, according to her, the subject is required to reenact preexisting gender norms, which are determined within limited agenda of social restrictions and borders. In discussing the parameters of appropriation that predominantly focus on claiming an opposed gender identity, Butler calls for the reconstruction of gender identity as revolting means of deliverance and emancipation because identity, according to her, is vulnerable to change. As previously contended, gender re-negotiation is meant to subvert power discourse that is seen as crucial in the course of identity formation and constructivism. Accordingly, she claims that"whenever construction is considered not as an activity, but as an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed; the constructivism is reduced to determinism and implies the evacuation or displacement of human agency" (p. 9).

Morrison's *Paradise* (1997)—a Nobel-Prize novel— completes the trilogy that includes *Beloved* (1987) and *Jazz* (1992). It revolves around twentieth century five black women—Consolata, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas— who have conquered black male the very notions of power and authority to reassure their existence as subjects away from Ruby, the black men town in Oklahoma. The novel witnesses their bloody and brutal massacre at the Convent, in a mansion seventeen miles away, where these black heroines' survival and power take hold. "Everything that worries them must come from women" (p.217) Morrison (2004) concludes, which may justify their black male counterparts conducted tyrannical assassination to finish these "outlaw" (p. 169) women. Morrison's novel, actually, challenges the authorial male voices by encouraging the re-inclusion of marginalized but authentic black female voices, such as Consolata, Mavis, Gigi, Seneca and Pallas, within revisited narratives, and allowing new perspectives and spaces to these black heroines as real subjects in contemporary fiction. Thus, *Paradise* can be said to subvert the archetypal male contemporary fiction- as a central figure- and restore it with female as genuine one, questioning contemporary attitudes to gender.

Both masculinity and patriarchy are the grounds on which the novel's incidents are structured and set, as has been tackled by some critics. For such, Mar Gallego (2009) in "What Does It Mean to Be a Man?": Codes of Black Masculinity in Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and *Love*," foregrounds patriarchy and black masculinity as the dominant ideologies in Morrison's selected text. She also highlights the way Morrison offers a subversive reading of manhood and masculinity —an alternative portrayal of masculinity— that may promote the narrative's male authority. According to her, this new conceptualization of black masculinity is marked by "the internalization of White patriarchal codes without deconstructing its sexist and racist bias, which leads to outrageous gender violence" (p. 56). Gallego, unquestionably, suggests that Morrison's fictional work *Paradise* mirrors the gender issues and limitations; it is, then, characterized by "the failure of Black patriarchy to effectively challenge the racist and sexist bias a Western code of masculinity fosters" (p. 57). Morrison, in view of that, registers a profound focus of patriarchal power and violence as barriers for the liberation of her black female characters as leading heroines, "Black masculinity considers violence against Black (but also white) women as a necessary or "benign" form of oppression. In a way, the "new fathers" of Ruby enact the script of patriarchal masculinity to perfection, by using racism (in this case intracaste racism too) as the typical justification for Black male violence against women" (p. 55).

This critic, in fact, holds in common with other critics that Morrison's selected text is caught within the restrictions of masculinity and masculine dogmas- borrowed from the Whites patriarchal codes. The black female identity, therefore, is in itself debatable for there are various barriers in constructing a non-gendered self and accordingly defining what femininity is in a normative gendered masculine community. While previous canonical perspectives of the novel have put emphasis on patriarchal power, black masculinity, and the idealization of the feminine, this paper assumes that the primordial discourse which offers little scope to women as leading figures is that of traditional canons, which is concerned with depicting rigid differences between femininity and masculinity. It showcases Morrison's *Paradise* as the reflection of the reception of the evolving black femininity as a chief trait in the Contemporary era in the twenty and the twenty first Centuries. It is worth noticing that, in these literary productions, a woman takes central roles, and, in practically every case, is depicted as a leading subject. Thus, this paper classifies Morrison's novel within contemporary deconstructive theory. It also suggests that Butler's re-conceptualization of gender constructivism situates women restrained within a framework in which she puts emphasis on the gendered nature of the heroines. In so doing, she draws rigid biological, social, sexist, and cultural forces that establish a subversive contemporary black femininity. These black heroines are designed to be "race female characters," to re-conceptualize what it meant to be a black female heroine in African American community. In spite of the negative stereotypes that have been fashioned during the Reconstruction era, these black heroines have been placed in opposition to them. This reformulation and re-molding of an atypical black heroine put emphasis on the reconstruction of the heroine's femininity and identity, "This re-appropriation via the contemporary… novel seeks not only to recover and reclaim, but also to rescue the female from the monolithic framework within which she has been inscribed" (Cooper and Short, 2012, p. 15). This new type of heroism, therefore, is meant to reshape black femininity into a means of resistance in opposition to gender stereotypical definition. Through this paper, accordingly, power structure has been subverted, and the stereotypical dogmas that place the black heroine outside the realm of discursive practices have been defied. Morrison's literary text traces these social, cultural, racial and sexist forces, created as new written text giving rise to subversive visions of understanding femininity and masculinity, and brings about plethora of representative modes of change for these black female characters. Relying on these mechanisms, and the African American black female writer's opposing vision towards the gender issues, this paper examines the ways in which Morrison, through an understanding of the gendered subject, evokes fictional spaces in which gender roles are open to re-negotiation or redefinition for the black female characters. This subversive formula is manifested as a quest, a journey to fulfill, to realize the denied self; all include the attempt to reject expectations imposed on black and female identity and femininity.

I. RE-ENGENDERED POWER AND AUTHORITY: NON-CONFORMIST TRAITS OF FEMININITY

In her *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "sex,"* Butler (1993) expresses her revolting thoughts and notions with regards to gender and identity formation. She assumes that "identifications shift does not necessarily mean that one identification is repudiated for another; that shifting may well be one sign of hope for

the possibility of avowing an expansive set of connections… [it]involves a substitution of oneself for another that may well be a colonization of the other's position *as* one's own" (p.118). In this manner, her interest in performance as a social construct becomes that of creating alternative enacted acts and performances, unconventional to the way norms are and, when considered collectively with her continual rethinking of the subject and their gender roles, this brings about a reversing visualization of gender relations and men and women social practices. Morrison's *Paradise* aims to revise femininity and feminine stereotypes and codes and, in the anxiety of identity, it is an emancipatory medium for these black heroines to reclaim the self, outside the gender borders. It is, consequently, crucial to reconsider the directions in which those acts and performances are re-interpreted by Morrison to deduce the way these new altered identities correspond to the subversive gender dimensions given in Paradise. The black female characters namely the ones who reside in the Convent embody Butler's notion of "phantasmatic identities," complicated roles which symbolically and imaginarily are defined as altered identities (p. 130). Each of these re-incarnated egos portray the gender issues through revisionist performances of femininity. These black women embody fanciful identities that stand in opposition to the black community gender standards. All these altered identities allocate their dissident roles that decline dogmatic norms, "gender is the vehicle for the phantasmatic transformation of that nexus of race and class, the site of its articulation" (p.130). Being assigned to multifaceted identities, these five black female characters have re-identified the self-opting for the opposed gender identity, they become whomever they want. In addition to this, a plethora of fabricated limitations allocated to gender have been transgressed, as these black women redefine femininity while assimilating men attitudes and acts of power and authority.

Fundamentally, being classified at the margin, Morrison's black female characters either do not adhere or they recognize the way conformity rarely allow black women self-actualization. In contrast to Morrison's black female characters in her former contemporary literary texts, these black heroines share collective consciousness as they link their mission towards wholeness to be self-defining with the collective struggle of black women. These radical black "subjects," as perceived by the black men, have broken down the agonizing memories of slavery, of the grief of self-denial, who sustain their courage in resistance, exist freely away from conventional gender roles. In her *Yearning Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, Hooks (1990) conceptualizes radicalism as the "Other Space" for black women, where these radical black female subjects, frequently, have enthusiastically defied the prevailing dogmas and went against the grain. In this context, she defines black women marginal space claiming that "For me this radical openness is a margin-a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk. One needs a community of resistance" (p.149). Referring to Morrison's black female characters' revolutionary mission, they have been represented as radical subjects, their uprising against the status quo has been forced to confront both sexism and racism. In describing this black women radicalism; at K.D and Arnette's wedding getting pleasure and cherishing life; Morrison narrates, "The Convent women are dancing, throwing their arms overheads," "Tired from their night dance but happy" (*Paradise*, 1997, p.157-284). For the black men, these "outlaw" (p.169) black radical subjects, who have gone against the norms to claim nonconformist strategies of being, characters like, Consoltat, Mavis, Gigi, Pallas, and Seneca are the embodiment of radicalism "We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town" (p.149), according to Hooks'(1990) notion

of the margin. Previously depicted as unheard and voiceless, these black women share the process of transformation that they have experienced to develop as radical subjects. If, however, their struggle is rejected by their male counterparts, then they find themselves recreating means to cope as they decide to bring their voices to forth. Those black women who heroically adopted such radical consciousness have also been forced to reconstruct the matrix of both femininity and masculinity.

At the Convent, as earlier defined, Consolata, Mavis, Pallas, Gigi, and Seneca —as radical subjects— perform an oppositional identity that is borrowed from masculine stereotypes (authority, power and gazing). Although the black female characters, the peaceful women are designed to adopt the patriarchal prototypes, are the subjects in whom authority and power are attributed, these five black women have radically withdrawn the black men' supremacy and canon. At the Convent, "a quiet, orderly community, there were women like none he knew or ever heard tell of. In this place of all places" (*Paradise*, 1997, p.8), they most dramatically personify sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and liberation as being stated by one of the black men of Ruby. Butler (1990) in Gender *trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* claims that "this displacement from the original object is an essentially metaphorical activity (p.86)," of reclaiming power and authority. Being at the center of the margin, in Hooks' words, has reversed the relation between the black women and the black men, through the new altered identities, they share these masculine codes that have threatened men position. This marginality, according to Hooks (1990), is manifested as "much more than a site of deprivation…it is also the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance. It was this marginality that I was naming as a central location for the production of a counter-hegemonic discourse that is not just found in words but in habits of being and the way one lives" (p.149). Hence, the new assumed identities represent what these black heroines will to be: free women and mothers, real subjects, and authoritative and powerful agents through decentering the acts of power, authority, and gazing. This is unquestionably obvious in *Paradise*, where the black heroines have clearly taken on an adventurous journey towards liberation. As well as being the initiators to reclaim agency, they are depicted as the driving force behind the decision to run away from the black men community, Ruby. In this, Morrison describes the black men discussing the black female characters distinguished qualities and the power accorded to them, "They don't need men and they don't need God" (*Paradise*, 1997, p.276). This is manifested as a climacteric from the plot, in which these black women headed to the Convent as courageous subjects, and they make the plans to take the lead in their odysseys as free agents and radical subjects.

As maintained earlier, these black women have assumed a different form of power and dominance through crossing both gender, race, and power structure. In this context, Butler (1993) contends that "there is a cost in every identification, the loss of some other set of identifications, the forcible approximation of a norm one never chooses, a norm that chooses us, but which we occupy, reverse, re-signify to the extent that the norm fails to determine us completely" (p.126). Such subversive formulas call attention to other dimensions of leadership the black women have reclaimed. For example, when racial differences are the ground for the inclusion and exclusion of members in Ruby, in the Convent, these black women refute any natural and biological significations that eliminate a woman's life. The founders or "8-rocks families" inclusion of people is based on the darkness of the skin —a racial marker— that is used to exclude others who are light-skinned. The men of Ruby, thus, represent these forms of discrimination against women through which they practice their supremacy and dominance over the women. In this, Morrison (1997) writes,

"They shoot the white girl first" (p. 3), which implies the subversion of racial norms by these women and brings to light the reasons that have sparked the above violent scene against them. Unlike the black men, however, these black women— Mary Magna and Consolata in this case— have empathized with the coming women under such racial and sexist exclusions. Both characters of Mary Magna and Consolata, the leading figures of the Convent, represent all that challenges Ruby's racial identity mechanisms. Mary Magna —the white Catholic nun— the first woman to arrive at the Convent, who spent her life nurturing the lives of the coming women, is obviously of mixed race. In her turn, Consolata is initially from South America, being given foreigner racial traits, she has "green eyes," "tea colored hair," and "smoky, sundown skin" (*Paradise*, 1997, p. 223). She is of mixed race too, and formerly asserts Mary Magna "is my mother" (p. 48). When they tolerate such diversities, both Magna and Consolata's domination is expressed as a healing power; a maternal and motherly care for these "crying women…women just plain lost" (p. 270).

Becoming empowered and having the ability to use power and authority, a destructive power thrust upon the black men, "It was women who walked [the] road [to the Convent]. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth" (*Paradise*, 1997, p. 270), the five black women learn to control that power, to use it differently as a healing tool rather than a vicious one. Billie Delia, for instance, recounts her memories at the Convent as a refugee; and how these black women healing powers are: "They had treated her so well, not embarrassed her with sympathy, had just given her sunny kindness. No one insisted on hearing what drove her there, but she could tell they would listen if she wanted them to" (p. 308). Even where her black women are attributed with power and authority, Morrison has devoted a broadened space to female leadership, and emphasized it still further. Thus, she has carefully showcased those instances, and puts into emphasis these five black heroines, in the Convent, to be the only focus for reversing power and authority conceptualizations.

As mentioned above, Morrison's black heroines' renegotiation of power relations is to be seen as an alternating reality, where the world of these five black women has been reinterpreted and viewed differently. It is Morrison's revisionary technique to disregard black men as active, leading agents- the identities of the black female protagonists seem to be given unusual traits and characteristics- whose will is to finish these powerful black women, "if identity is constructed through opposition, it is also constructed through rejection" (p.115), in the view of Butler's (1993) identity formation. Embodying the opposed gender identity refers to the dissociation between biological nature and gender. These black women are no more represented as women when described by Lone DuPres, who is gifted with spiritual visualization powers, recognizes how the black female characters have declined the conventional clutches that devalue everything feminine, and stand against the constant threat of the outside world as masculine agents. In this, Morrison narrates, "It was women who walked [the] road [to the Convent]. Only women. Never men. For more than twenty years Lone had watched them. Back and forth, back and forth… out here where the wind handled you like [men], women dragged their sorrow up and down the road between Ruby and the Convent. They were the only pedestrians (*Paradise*, 1997, p.270). In their embodiment of masculinity, these black heroines have borrowed some masculine stereotyped traits including authority, power and agency. It is evident the interconnection of biological sex, gender and sexuality. As previously contended, these black heroines' femininity have been re-defined with accordance to the new altered identity and by their performance of

masculinity. In spite of being gendered as masculine, their masculinity is incarnated in a female body. As implicated in *Paradise*, "No men. Kissing on themselves" (p. 275-276), therefore, implies the absence of the opposite gender and de-centers gender roles and femininity as the product of identity choices. This may also indicate the incarnation of the opposite gender as "men" living in a female body by defying the prescribed dogmas about femininity, and re-negotiating gender parameters.

Indeed, Morrison has explicitly portrayed these black women's practices and performances as masculine in many circumstances, comparing their acts with that of the black men who are viewed as the "revolting sex" (Morrison, 1997, p. 8). This growing power of these five black women has brought about the hazardous attack of the black men of Ruby. In their way to end these authoritative and dominant women, the black men articulate much of their irrational intentions against them, "You think they got powers? I know they got powers. Question is whose power is stronger" (p. 275-276). These black women have, at the Convent, been behaving in relation to a set norm of behavior which calls attention to the masculine power and authority. As an illustration, Morrison, in her literary text, shows the way **one** of the men who attacks the Convent declares his worries and hatred against the freedom of these women, who have altered power mechanism, "What, he wonders, could do this to women? How can their plain brains think up such things: revolting sex, deceit and the sly torture of children? Out here in wide-open space tucked away in a mansion – no one to bother or insult them –they managed to call into question the value of almost every woman he knew" (p.8). In fact, these altered identities do not reflect a real gender, but "phantsamatic or appropriated" ones in Butler's (1993) words. In this, she assumes that "This is not an appropriation of dominant culture in order to remain subordinated by its terms, but an appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency, a power in and as discourse, in and as performance, which repeats in order to remake—and sometimes succeeds" (p.128). This according to her becomes the site of crossing, which deduces the fact that this exchange of gender identifications is medium of subverting power parameters.

Since Morrison's black female characters have performed an opposed gender identity, they assert that being a woman is not a permanent state of identification; their identity is an unfixed condition, "The politics of difference have clearly shown that there is no literal referent that is embodied in the name 'woman'" (p.142), Christina Hughes (2002) writes. Consolata, Mavis, Pallas, Seneca, and Gigi, though earlier described as "broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying" (Morrison, 1997, p.222), are leading heroines. This black women performance of destabilizing femininity does not conform with rules and conventions of the prescribed model of the domestic and passive black woman. In the Convent, as a group of black women who confront tyrannical past, they have been taught to act freely outside the predominant institutions, which determine their destinies as both submissive and docile. They are also taught to defy the gendered self as feminine, playing the role of the subservient wife and mother, and being devoted to the domestic sphere; the social duties, and the will of the husband. Actually, in becoming another gender identity, these black women perform conventional dogmas of masculinity through rejecting feminine roles as wives and mothers to perfection. However, even if this altered identity appears to be stereotyped, gender anxiety, thus, is the result of the difference between gender and the anatomic nature of the subject in Butler's conceptualization of "gender trouble." She assumes that both social and cultural forces that construct one's gender, but not the biological nature of the subject, accordingly, gender

subversion at first level is meant to "appropriate and subvert racist, misogynist, and homophobic norms of oppression" (Butler,1993, p.128). Consequently, these black women as 'masculine' subjects reflect the unfixed process of identity formation, and the biological sex is not a condition to perform masculinity. Prior to their arrival to the Convent, Mavis, for instance, as an obedient woman, she performs her role as both a mother and a wife, who is subjugated to her husband's will, Frank, whose presence causes her to wake up "With a start of terror" (Morrison, 1997, 25) and calls her all her "The dumbest bitch" (p.37). However, being at the Convent, she acts as a rival to her male counterpart"I'll scream, she told herself…fight him" (p. 35). Thence she performs a multifaceted identity, where both personalities are viewed differently. Mavis is able, thanks to the new altered identity, to assume a masculine adventurous journey,"Mavis drove away, turned into another road, heading east...Pointing toward a fancy wooden sign"(p.45). Previously, Mavis, as a mother and a wife, could not fight. She can, finally, break down the normative regulations of femininity. Knowing that power and agency do not correspond to the prescribed traits of femininity, she acts differently through adopting multiple ways to transgress the forces that define femininity. She comes to recognize the fact that being a woman or a man are not biological realities; rather than social and cultural practices,"It was more proof that the old Mavis was dead. The one who 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 —through, now created crepe— like delicacies without shopping every day," (p.171) Morrison indicates. The call of Mavis is driven from her anguish and frustration. As both a wife and a mother, she transforms into a fighter, who becomes conditioned to resist a racial and sexist community.

To put it clearly, being at the Convent independently is another proof that their existence is not restricted to that of other men as they exceed their predetermined obedience. In fact, as non-conformists to gender norms, these black women have developed a deep awareness of the fictitious pattern of the ideal wife and mother. Thence not only an alter gendered identity and a new understanding of motherhood and the feminine have been adopted but also femininity, or what is defined as a "woman" have been re-conceptualized and recreated in accordance to their norms. In this, Alison Stone (2009), in *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*, contends that these "norms concerning gender are continually changing and do not confer on women any common identity or experience" (p.7). This fact, actually, is manifested in Gigi, who paradoxically, in contrast to the black women, who have escaped the social barriers, she holds surprising physical and psychological potentials. She, to some extent, portrays the power of a black woman survival. Instead of fighting back, she embraces the social and cultural significations assigned to her sexed body. Her ultimate goal is to endure such obstacles, to adapt to a culture that devalues women femininity. Each alter identity performed by Gigi represents gender, that is viewed as a reversal and threat to Ruby's women domestic nature. At the beginning, she embodies conventional femininity through her alluring appearance, that reminds of typical feminine traits without considering limits and exceeds whatever is banned or prohibited; by walking in the street provocatively, "in pants so tight, heels so high, earrings so large" (Morrison,1997, p. 53). Later on, at the Convent, an altered identity appears-a non-stereotyped ego- that points out to the remolded self, to those traits that she attributes to masculinity.

Gigi, on the other hand, is depicted as a non-conforming black female character as she sought to decline the continuity of the conventional sexual norms of the black men community, Ruby. In her journey towards liberation, she looks for

ways to exceed the presuppositions of Ruby that limits the female body to sexual fantasies, she is marked by the black men as "a good dog" (Morrison, 1997, p.54) and "who had never seen a woman mince or switch like that, believed it was the walk that caused all the trouble" (p.53), a gendered and sexual classification that brings about her estrangement. Gigi even, in a unusual way, plays the key role in the promotion of image to be believed as "the [woman]that caused all the trouble (p.53)," rather than assuming the domestic feminine role, even if the latter leads to a non-decent social position. Gigi's rejection to act in accordance to the predestined gender roles, and to conform with the established gender norms is nourished form her will to reconstruct an altered identity-a non-fabricated nature of categorized gender acts. She, then, upraises the alleged stability of the gendered identity through defying the domestic woman archetype.

Morrison's selected text, through revisiting femininity, develops unusual power relations between black men and women thanks to these diverse identities the black female characters have re-assumed. Knowing that "women of color…[is] not only everywhere excluded from this scene, but constitute a site of identification that is consistently refused and abjected" (Butler,1993, p.131). Thus, the repudiation of the black women identities, on the opinion of Butler, calls for the new self that severs for the withdrawal of the old 'selves' and identities. Essentially, the very physical qualities of Consolata, for instance, underline her distinguishing characteristics as the holder of power. In exerting her over these women lives, she affirms, "If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say. And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (Morrison, 1997, p.262). In the Convent, the black female community, she is depicted as tender, caring, and loving towards the women, showing a different form of power, compared to the black men rigidity and control. She is skillful at directing these black women lives and destinies through confrontational power. She heals rather than dominates, and uses her authority only by assuming another form and only when she or the women are assaulted, Morrison describes her as the woman who watches after the black female characters' safety, "I don't want to sleep when nobody there to watch" (p.70). She is the woman who, in spite of being imprisoned by patriarchal tyrants, she learns with the other black women to use theses power and authority to survive. Through her power, she reconstructs the Convent as a "place where you can stay for a while. No questions" and where" you can collect yourself" and "think things through, with nothing or nobody bothering you…They'll take care of you-whichever way you want it" (p.176).

In explaining the identification with an opposed sex, Butler (1193) assumes, "To identify with a sex is to stand in some relation to an imaginary threat, imaginary and forceful, forceful precisely because it is imaginary" (p.100). The essential fact here is that, the conventional gender archetype she rejects is, indeed, a non-conformist act. She repudiates with the other women the fabricated dogmas by patriarchal institutions to condemn these black women to their gendered bodies as "females." That is to say, these black heroines as "radical subjects" are the antagonists of social and cultural patriarchal structures, which are shown as the only way of reviewing femininity and masculinity, and this divergent departure from these norms must be considered as the outcasts. Thus, this brings to light the reasons why Morrison's novel opens with the tyrannical threat and attack of their male counterparts.

II. A DECOLONIZING GAZE: NON – GENDERED LOOKS

Rebelling against conventional sexist stereotypical definitions of black femininity, these black heroines have evoked subversive ways of looking that takes a

different form of power. They have significantly changed normative practices, altering conceptions of gazing. *Paradise*, then, offers radical departures for these black women to rethink new potentials for different representations of authority. In *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Hooks (2015) writes about the black women subversive act of the gaze, "That all attempts to repress our black peoples' right to gaze had produced in us an overwhelming longing to look, a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze. By courageously looking, we defiantly declared: "Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality" (p.116). Centrally, in Morrison's text, the need of the five black women to develop subversive looks, and re-create the self as subjects are rooted in their devaluation in their societies, "Broken girls, frightened girls, weak and lying" (*Paradise*,1997, p. 222). Those black heroines' new realities, through their oppositional acts of the gaze that challenge the prevailing structure, are mainly nourished from those altered identities that have been reconstructed in resistance. Previously manifested in Morrison's novel, the identities of Mavis and Gigi are the product of the black men colonial gendered gaze. For this, she depicts Mavis as an impotent women-the invisible and the "other" who repeatedly "chose silence" (p.22)- under the sovereignty of her husband, Frank. Her fragility, passivity, and terror are, chiefly, caused by one of her children's threatening looks; Sal's eyes are "as cold and unforgiving" (p.26). For such, Tamara L. Hunt (2002), in *Women and the Colonial Gaze*, explains that "the fact that the gender of the viewer, as well as a host of other factors, could shape and define the colonial gaze" (p.2). Gigi, in her turn, is the object of men's desire when she shows up the first time walking in Ruby. As mentioned before, Gigi, with her rebellious nature and alluring physical appearance arouse men sexual fantasies,"K.D., who had never seen a woman mince or switch like that, believed it was the walk that caused all the trouble" (Morrison, 1997, p. 53). In this context, Janne Seppänen(2006) in, *The Power of The Gaze: An Introduction Visual Literacy*, claims that "While the gaze of the other renders us conscious of ourselves, it also objectifies, limits and alienates" (p.72). In his song, formerly, Gigi is shaped with accordance to K.D.'s colonial gaze, who views "A puppy" (Morrison, 1997, p.54). As illustrated above, the black men of Ruby colonial gaze-the phallocentric gaze in Hooks'(2015) words- has the potential to diminish theses black women realities, "[it] constructs our presence as absence, that denies the "body" of the black female"(p.119).

In Morrison's selected text, reversing the gaze —being controversial as adopted by the black women as the holders of power— offers the opportunity to decode the grounds for the gender issues. As a means of empowerment, Morrison, in her novel, evokes multiple scenes where the black women are the gazers. In other words, she portrays them being the subject of the gaze by looking out, staring at, and seeing through the windows or gazing into the eyes, "There is power in looking" (Hooks, 2015, p.115) she adds that "the power of the dominated to assert agency by claiming and cultivating "awareness" politicizes "looking" relations—one leans to look a certain 'way' in order to resist" (p. 117). The gaze, then, through its broad perception of gender, seeks to portray the black women persistent decolonization of the gaze as a masculine trait. This brings to light that in subverting the gaze, a resisting instrument in the face of structures of control and dominance, promotes spaces of power for the black women as leading figures. Thus, in their struggle for redefining femininity, these five black women have developed a "critical gaze…one that is oppositional" (p.117), in Hooks' words. Mavis' subjectivity is achieved and manifested in her departure from Frank's house, where she sustains pain. In many instances, she appears as the gazer, "Mavis looked through the window" and adds that she, "Chose the one closest to the window, where she knelt looking out"

(Morrison, 1997, p. 35-48). This action of gazing through the window, certainly, releases Mavis from her inner silence and liberates her, and leads to her psychological awareness about her reality as a subject, "I'll scream, she told herself…fight him" (p. 35) Morrison writes in describing Mavis' rebellious acts. Hanneke Grontenboer(2012) in explaining women act of gazing states that "We seek protection from the gaze by looking out a window without of threat of being seen" (p. 154). Therefore, Mavis with the other black women at the Convent have rejected the promotion of sexism, the denial of black women existence as "subjects," though they are manifested as "objects" in many instances, they upraise against the "phallocentric politics" of the gaze.

At the Convent, Gigi, Mavis, Pallas, Seneca and Connie, have realized themselves as visible through locating themselves as the gazers. After her arrival at the Convent, Gigi, for example, observes the bedrooms, the dining room, the living room, the game room, and "Gazing into eyes" (Morrison, 1997, p. 70). She has also questioned the nature of Connie's eyes, the first woman that she encounters upon her arrival. It is remarkable that the act of gazing, as being adopted by these black women, has taken a different dimension of power. It is further seen as tool of protection; rather being a way of oppression and domination. As an illustration, for Gigi, being the gazer indicates her insecurity that is mirrored in Connie's protection, "I don't want to sleep when nobody there to watch" (p. 70). This is an allusion to both Gigi and Connie's interplay of the "Gaze," that promotes maternal love. To put it another way, the black females' parameters of the gaze differ from that of the black; by taking a divergent direction to alter black women tyrannical realities, "What was the nature then of this adoring black female gaze-this look that could bring pleasure in the midst of negation?" (Hooks, 2015, p. 121). In "the loud dreaming," a ritual created by Consolata, dancing under the heavy rain and Connie's tender looks, these black women learn that their bodies are not "objects" for the black males' colonizing looks, they are rather displayed for that look of liberation and self-definition-that constructs them as active subjects, "My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit is everything" (Morrison, 1997, p. 263). As previously mentioned, altering the conventional norms by these women in such ritual, is meant to constitute a sense of awareness of the complexity of black femininity, and the struggle for power and agency that decolonize that perplexing issue, "It is this process of mirrored recognition that enables both black women to define their reality, apart from the reality imposed upon them by structures of domination. The shared gaze of the two women reinforces their solidarity" (Hooks, 2015, p. 130).

As a means of reclaiming power and agency, the metaphorical "mirroring" resonates through the novel. When referring to black women gaze, our attention is directly drawn to the black women reversal acts of the gaze. Ironically, these hung mirrors in the Convent's bathrooms, "Only one mirror has not been covered with chalky paint" (p.9), Morrison (1997) writes. The black female characters act of covering the mirrors may display both the self and its opposite for these black heroines. This act is followed by the initiation of the women's resolute will to close their previous fraught lives and establish new ones. These mirrors, actually, transgress the ordinary reversals that mirror-images reflect. When located in front of the mirrors, these black heroines, with gendered bodies, have denied gender complexities that are characterized by social, sexist, racial, and cultural divisions. For such, Hooks (2015) explains looking as a resisting tool in the case of these black heroines, she asserts that "Looking at one another, staring in mirrors, they appear

completely focused on their encounter with black femaleness. How they see themselves is most important, not how they will be stared at by others" (p.130). To re-create the fragmented selves, these black heroines have re-established divergent mirrors that reflect them differently, highlight their positions as subjects, and independent agents. In their positions as gazers, black women can access the black men spaces of power and authority that are basically nourished from sexist rejection.

Since the act of covering the mirrors remains ambiguous, one is tempted to deduce that it is the five black female characters who have carried the action out, "Being watched or being looked at changes the way we behave" (Hughes, 2002, p. 12). Following the assumption of Hughes, at the Convent, Mavis manages to dispose of the past that is symbolized in her abusive husband, Frank, whose looks causes her to wake up "With a start of terror" (Morrison, 1997, p. 25). In a similar vein, this is represented by Gigi, who is repeatedly fantasized by men erotic desires, "Puppy and a good dog" (p. 54). Indeed, the mirrors have enhanced Gigi's memory about the stereotypical images associated with a black female body, and this may lead to the covering acts of the Convent's mirrors. This fact is demonstrated by Hooks (2015) who points out that "Looking and looking back, black women involve ourselves in a process whereby we see our history as counter-memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future" (p. 131)**.** In Facing the mirror, the experiences of these black heroines, who reconstruct new gendered relations and scopes to looking, differ drastically from that of the black males as the holders of the gaze. In this, looking with an "oppositional gaze" in Hooks' notion, the five black heroines, have the potential to exist neither as victims nor as objects of the "phallocentric gaze" (p.122). Connie, for example, reassures Mavis that "Scary things not always outside. Most scary things are inside" (Morrison, 1997, p. 39). This may allude to the fact that the discriminatory ideologies in black men community—Ruby— that bring about these black women threat and psychological disorder. Seen from racist, sexist and social control, it is through an oppositional gaze, that Morrison's black heroines have regained the self. In so doing, they have evoked significant spaces; free from the male gaze of possession and dominance; where all these binaries have been diminished, where these black radical subjects can reconstruct a subversive gaze through a deep awareness of the matrix of sexism and racism.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on Butler's theory of identity formation, this study has examined gender controversial representations in Morrison's literary text, *Paradise*, by mobilizing Butler's gender constructivism, and Hooks' re-conceptualization of black masculinity and femininity. Following these assumptions, this paper has examined Morrison's oppositional vision of femininity as being the attribute of masculine traits. While deploying multidimensional interpretations, the novel investigates the challenging issues of gender and identity. Though it has been explored from feminist perspectives, being studied from gender formation and performativity theory offers new conceptions by which these black heroines have reconciled their multifaceted identities, and the way they reconstruct their femininity according to-or against gender norms. Because their journey has been about the struggle to recreate the prescribed states of being, Morrison's narrative indicates that it is longing for self-redefinition and recognition that leads to their lethal ending. In this, Butler (1998) indicates that the social forces impose one of only two possible states of being, and if one's behavior and sexual orientation do not conform with the preexisting gender

designation, he/she is met with "ostracism, punishment, and violence" (p. 275). The survival of these black women is rooted in their denial of the status quo as imposed by predestined hierarchal gender inequalities. The fate of Consoltat, Mavis, Gigi, Pallas, and Seneca, implies that following the journey of radical black female subjectivity is hazardous. And though these black heroines have faced a tragic ending, they are represented as glorious and leading figures. Developing a rebellious spirit is a central part of the course by which one claims the matrix of radical black female subjectivity as a leading heroine of her odyssey.

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