

The crime of protecting paradise: Violent justice and moral panic in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

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Abstract: This article explores how Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) represents crime and criminality, focusing on the communal processes through which criminality is constructed and violence is rendered legitimate. It brings Stanley Cohen's and Robert M. Cover's theoretical frameworks into dialogue to examine how the construction of criminality relates to the moral legitimization of violence. Cohen's concept of 'moral panic' is read alongside Cover's notion of 'normative universe,' showing how the construction of a 'threatening other' can lead to the communal authorization of violence against those claimed to be a threat. According to Cohen's theoretical grid, the convent women are portrayed collectively as a source of social, moral, religious, and sexual danger for the town of Ruby. Cover's theory shows how the town's normative order transforms violence into a legitimate form of communal protection. The article also highlights the distinction between the immediate crime against the convent women and the deeper form of criminality generated by the structures of humiliation and exclusion. It argues that these structures not only facilitate violence but also provide the moral narratives to justify the criminal act. Morrison's narrative blurs the opposition between criminality and social-moral orders, challenging the assumption that a community's claim to morality necessarily corresponds to justice. In other words, the community that claims to protect itself from disorder becomes involved in generating the violence that it basically seeks to prevent.

Keywords: *crime; criminality; moral panic; normative order; collective violence; Toni Morrison, Paradise.*



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Introduction

In the literary context, crime is not necessarily limited to acts that violate the law, because literary representations of crime can also be achieved by examining how individuals or groups are deemed dangerous and how boundaries are drawn to separate belonging from exclusion. Beyond the perpetrator's identity and the nature of the offense, crime also involves the authority to define criminality and determine the legitimacy of punishment. The issue becomes unique when violence is committed in the name of a certain community, to defend and protect it from external factors.

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1998) offers an example of a crime committed to protect the community. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is confronted with a violent collective massacre without any explanation of its motives or meaning. As the narrative moves between the town of Ruby and the convent, the attack gradually proves to be more than an isolated, spontaneous confrontation. The convent women have already become objects of suspicion and condemnation in a community deeply concerned with preserving boundaries. The town of Ruby sees itself as a morally ordered, coherent community that rejects outsiders whose values and beliefs are seen as 'different'. The writer then shifts to a more complicated question: how does a community create the conditions for certain people to be classified as legitimate targets of violence?

Critical scholarship on Toni Morrison's *Paradise* has examined the novel as a complex interrogation of African American community formation, racial history, gendered differences, religious ideology, and the exclusion of outsiders and collective belonging. An influential example of this line of study explores the relationship between communal identity and historical narration: Rob Davidson's "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2001). In that work, Davidson investigates how dominant narratives sustain the town's collective identity; he similarly emphasizes the male authority exercised by the town's patriarchs over insiders and outsiders.

Channette Romero's study "Create the Beloved Community: Religion, Race and Nation in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2005) examines the intersection of race, religion, and patriarchal governance. The author situates the town of Ruby within broader historical and ideological tensions surrounding the making of an African-American community. Morrison explores the possibilities of religious belief while exposing the exclusions produced by rigid conceptions of communal identity.

More recent studies about the selected novel shift to the gendered dimensions of violence, like Margarita Castroman Soto's "The Unhurried Hermeneutics of Anti-Black Violence in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*" (2021), which shifts the attention from the anonymous victim introduced at the beginning of *Paradise* to the black women's suffering and cumulative forms of harm they experience daily. Castroman Soto demonstrates the importance of examining violence as a process rather than a discrete event or an immediate, spontaneous reaction.

This article approaches the novel through two main perspectives: Stanley Cohen's theory of 'moral panic' and Robert M. Cover's research on the normative order. On the one hand, Cohen's concept of the 'folk devil' is highly significant for examining how a

group of people is turned into a threat to common values. On the other hand, Cover highlights how the community constructs distinctions between the legitimate and the illegitimate through various narratives. Together, the two perspectives let the reader trace two connected processes in *Paradise*: the construction of the criminal ‘other’ and the subsequent authorization of violence against that ‘other’. To answer these questions, the study is divided into two main sections, each with three parts: How does the town of Ruby produce the criminal ‘other’? And how does it produce a justification for its own crime?

This article argues that Toni Morrison represents crime first as a violation of an established communal order and second as a phenomenon that results from the mechanisms a certain order uses to define and protect itself. If the convent women are portrayed as a threat to Ruby’s moral and social integrity, that portrayal contributes to perceiving violence as a necessary protection. The novel arguably reflects the conventional distinction between a community that suffers crime and a criminal who threatens it. The town’s attempt to protect its boundaries generates the violence that deeply compromises them.

1. Crime, moral threats and the narrative construction of legitimization

Crime should not always be understood only as an act with a fixed meaning tied to its social interpretation. An action becomes criminally explained through processes of naming, classifying, and responding. The juridical category may seem stable, but social perceptions of deviance are far more fluid. This study draws on the theoretical perspectives of Stanley Cohen and Robert M. Cover: while the first focuses on how individuals and their social production and shaping threaten the law, Cover emphasizes the distinction between justice and violence, and between the legitimate and the illegitimate.

1.1. Stanley Cohen and the social production of the criminal threat

The British sociologist Stanley Cohen is known for his research on the factors surrounding the subject; his theory of moral panic is specific and valuable because it shifts attention from the wrongful act itself to the collective mechanisms that transform certain people or behaviours into perceived threats. Cohen’s concept of ‘moral panic’ stems from his belief that a person or group can come to be seen as a threat to community values and stability. Moral panic occurs when a group is portrayed as dangerous or morally corrupt, usually beyond what the available evidence justifies. Cohen defines that concept as: “a condition, episode, person or group of persons who emerge to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests” (“Folk Devils and Moral Panics” 1). Michael Eversman and Jason Bird confirm: “at times, potential threats to social cohesion become exaggerated in the service of supporting suppressive policies” (29), claiming that it is important to identify exactly the source of threat and equally important to understand the social construction behind that threat that may become visible through common interpretations and collective reactions. They also emphasize that “moral panics foster the

enactment of social policies that entrench social disparities and injustice” (“Moral Panic” 29). In other words, to understand how moral panic shapes perceptions of social problems, it is necessary to identify which social groups are seen as a threat.

The second central concept in Cohen’s work is ‘folk devils’, a person or group that becomes a symbolic embodiment of what a community rejects or fears. Cohen insists that when a group is rendered a folk devil, individual differences between members disappear; the group is treated as a source of danger, sharing common features and principles. As a result, communities can easily treat a heterogeneous group as a single threatening entity. In other words, an individual in a certain group is expected to adopt the description applied to the whole group because he belongs to it. In this context, Cohen highlights the concept of ‘othering,’ referring to the distinction between ‘us’ and ‘them,’ which serves to clarify the way the community classifies itself as a moral, ordered, legitimate entity, while the ‘other,’ which is the targeted accused group, is considered immoral, disordered, illegitimate, and dangerous. The difference between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’ has no reasonable or logical basis because what seems like a social or cultural difference can be seen as evidence of deviance.

Cohen’s theory argues that a group need not commit a clearly established crime to be treated as criminal or dangerous; suspicion, rumours, assumptions, and stereotypes may be enough to heighten expectations of threat. In other words, criminality can be produced before the actual crime is effectively committed. The community reacts not only to what people truly do but to what it imagines or expects they might do; consequently, crime detection and punishment are established earlier and differently. Cohen’s main concern is the socio-cultural machinery that determines what counts as alarming, threatening, and dangerous. More significantly, what truly matters is the symbolic relationship between the claimed transgression and the values a community claims to defend. And this is because the threatened object is not always physical security; it may be sexuality, religious moralities, racial hierarchies, gender conventions, family structures, and collective identities. Crimes occur when the boundaries that protect collective values are violated. Cohen’s theory should not be reduced to the claim that communities exaggerate danger, because moral panic reveals how a community constructs and protects an image of itself.

The main question in relation to Tony Morrison’s novel is: what happens when the community itself becomes an agent of violence, claiming to defend the normative order? Should one be punished if they justify their acts as necessary interventions and not illegal violations? The language of protection can thus transform the meaning of violence, and the more appropriate question is: how do communities narrate their own version when they cross the boundaries they claim to defend and protect?

1.2. Robert Cover: normative worlds and the legitimization of violence

The American scholar Robert M. Cover approaches violence differently, exploring what he calls ‘the normative world,’ or ‘the nomos’. The latter refers to the system of meanings, stories, values, and rules that any community uses to distinguish right from wrong and lawful from unlawful. Cover states: “we inhabit a nomos, a normative

universe. We constantly create and maintain a world of right and wrong, of lawful and unlawful, of valid and void" ("Nomos and Narrative" 4). Law is thus inseparable from communities; it does not stand independently of the stories and beliefs people use to interpret it.

What is really significant in Cover's study is the thought that the normative community creates meanings that make certain actions appear justified, claiming: "no set of legal institutions or prescriptions exists apart from the narratives that locate them and gives them meaning" ("Nomos and Narrative" 4). In response, people do not respond to violence or legality purely objectively; their understanding and reaction to any action depend mainly on the narrative framework through which they interpret it. For example, one normative perspective may call an act criminal, while another justifies, understands, tolerates, and even considers it necessary or right.

Morrison's *Paradise* reflects this difference in perspective, emphasizing the distinction between 'legality and legitimacy'. An act can be legally forbidden yet morally necessary or justified by the community; and vice versa: an act may be authorized by law yet ethically questionable. Cover's theory is therefore important for examining situations where people commit violence while believing they are defending a legitimate right.

In addition to his concept of 'nomos', Cover sheds light on the relation between law, violence, and interpretation; he frames interpretation as more than a simple intellectual exercise. Decisions about right and wrong do not always end in meaninglessness; they sometimes have physical consequences because normative judgments determine whose actions are punished and whose are tolerated, whose lives are protected and whose violence is legitimized. A logical question then is: Is this an act of violence? Within whose normative universe is this violent act interpreted? The notion of 'nomos' also opens the way to distinguish between the 'legal order' and the 'moral enclosure'. In other words, a community can construct a coherent internal world where values seem self-evident, yet that coherence does not confirm justice. The stronger the narrative identification between the communal identity and the moral legitimacy, the more readily violence against perceived outsiders can be rendered defensive, not aggressive. Protecting the normative universe may itself justify violating the lives of those excluded from it (the outsiders).

1.3. Read together: criminality between Cohen and Cover

If Cohen explains how a person or group can be considered a threat to collective values, Cover explores how a normative community builds the moral universe in which that threat acquires significance. Cohen's theory focuses on producing the enemy, while Cover's theory deciphers the production of the order that requires an enemy. Both scholars study crime not as an isolated act or a purely legal category, but as a relational phenomenon produced through competing narratives of danger, legitimacy, belonging, and justice.

The two theorists are hardly interested in asking who the criminal is, since they ask a more complicated question: who has the authority to determine criminality? And through which narrative exactly does this determination become morally convincing? By asking

these questions, one does not deny material responsibility for violence; rather, one must distinguish between the occurrence of the act and the process that gives it normative meaning. If the crime remains an act, its social significance becomes a matter of narration.

Theoretically, both scholars converge on the idea that criminality is a struggle over normative meaning: the community can identify certain persons as threats, consolidate its identity around that identification, and then interpret coercive responses as necessary measures of preservation. The structure that results from that conceptualization may seem paradoxical: the defence of order may generate violence, though violence against that threat can be narrated as a restoration of order. Crime is not outside the moral community; it emerges from the latter's attempt to define, control and draw boundaries.

2. Criminality and the legitimization of violence in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*

The African-American writer Toni Morrison is one of the literary figures who strongly shed light on the feminist issues of exploitation, gendered discrimination, and violence exercised against women generally and black women specifically. Morrison wrote a trilogy including three novels: *Paradise*, *Beloved*, and *Jazz*; what makes *Paradise* stand out among the three, according to Channette Romero, is that it makes religion and spirituality the main focus of the study of American history: "while these earlier texts contain only glimpses of strategies for dealing with painful pasts, *Paradise* presents a fuller account of healing individual and collective historical trauma" ("Creating the Beloved Community" 415). The present study explores the distinction between criminalizing women and legitimizing men's violence through an analysis of the crime committed against women in Morrison's *Paradise*. Relying on Cohen's and Cover's theories about violence and criminality allows an investigation of the reasons why the convent women become collectively considered as a threat and danger to the town of Ruby. The essential question is not only whether the women are guilty of certain acts; it is how the town comes to construct an image of them as threatening outsiders. To what extent does the novel portray difference as gradual evidence of moral danger?

2.1. The making of the criminal other: fear, rumours and the convent women in the town of Ruby

Toni Morrison's *Paradise* introduces crime from the very beginning: "they shoot the white girl first" (3). The sentence opens with the murder, yet withholds the main categories that usually precede a conventional crime narrative. The reader is not told who the murderers are, why they did that, or what made the victims targets of murder; the narrative provides the act before providing any explanation. This is significant to Morrison's representation of criminality: the novel does not open with an identifiable criminal or end with an investigation of the crime. However, it begins with violence that gradually develops to reconstruct the social and ideological conditions which made the violent act possible. Margarita Castroman Soto (2021) draws the reader's attention to the significations of the narration, which outlines a slow and delayed motion of murdering

the remaining women: “what of the infamous black women of *Paradise* for whom the violence is slow and drawn out or the many more in our country whose names we say to rebuke a system of injustice that continues to insist that there is “no need to hurry” (“The Unhurried Hermeneutics” 75).

The town of Ruby is presented as a small community that considers itself free of criminality: “neither had nor needed a jail. No criminals had ever come from his town” (Morrison, *Paradise* 6-7). The narrator explains the absence of crime because the people who ‘acted up’ and ‘threatened the town’s view of itself’ were “taken good care of” (7). Criminality has not disappeared; the community’s mechanisms of control have absorbed and controlled it. The writer describes this situation by saying that before they acquire the named identity of criminals, the town of Ruby takes care of them to protect its self-image. The claim of being free of criminality depends partly on its ability and power to determine who counts as a criminal in the first place.

The clear contradiction between the false claim of being crime-free and the terrible collective murder of women in the town becomes significant when the convent women enter the town’s field of vision. “Ruby emerges as the City upon a Hill,” as described by Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos; it is, according to her, “the all-black town of Ruby constructs an image of itself as an earthly paradise as a consequence of its engagement with the foundational Puritan myths and rituals at the core of American identity” (“Hybridizing the ‘City upon a Hill’” 3). Initially, they do not form a criminal organization; the writer does not mention that anyone had ever considered them a threat.

However, the danger develops gradually through shared rumours, suspicion, racial anxieties, religious attributions, and sexual judgments. The convent itself becomes a geographical arena where the town and its people project whatever they can hardly accommodate about the existing social order. Verena Harz (2008) criticizes the idea of utopian perfection established on falsified purity and immediate exclusion; she claims that Toni Morrison contrasts the town of Ruby’s ideals of communal purity with the convent’s smaller model of community, where difference is accommodated, not eliminated; the convent then is thrown to exclusions upon which the town’s assumed perfect social order depends.

In addition, the town is not as perfect as the patriarchs claim. Katrine Dalsgard argues: “as things now are in Ruby, unwanted children are conceived and aborted, wished-for children are born “broken,” and the young have begun to react against the conservative lifestyle and authoritarian politics of the community’s leading elders” (“The One All-Black Town” 233), meaning that the town’s men are behaving in a cruel manner toward the town’s children and that they may act even more cruelly toward outsiders. The picture the patriarchs try to draw of the town is no longer as idealized as the inhabitants suppose.

More importantly, the writer explains how women’s identities are reduced to collective categories with no special privilege or difference. The town men’s language does not differentiate Gigi from Mavis, Seneca, Pallas, or Connie. Despite their various histories, they are all eliminated and reduced to one single negative image of female disorder. Morrison describes these women as “bodacious black Eves unredeemed by Mary” (Morrison, *Paradise* 18), an ideological construction. By addressing Eve and Mary, the town of Ruby’s patriarchal imagination classifies women into two categories:

sinful femininity and redeemed femininity. This classification shows that women are unconventional; they reject the religious and patriarchal disciplines the town of Ruby defines as the frame of respectable womanhood.

More importantly, the convent women are placed outside the community's preferred religious narrative; their distance from that narrative becomes evidence of their corruption, as the author clarifies in "unredeemed by Mary" (Morrison, *Paradise* 18). These women appear to be dangerous because they do not conform to the town's definition of what a 'legitimate woman' should be. Another scene of dehumanization occurs when the women are compared to 'panicked does,' whereas the men are called hunters. This image does not simply portray women as vulnerable beings; it turns the encounter into a hunt. Linda Krumholz (2002) explains the irony of this description, considering women as sacrificial victims, despite men's belief in their righteousness and faith, because the image reverses the moral positions claimed by the attackers. In other words, those who believe themselves to be the protectors appear as executioners, whereas those designated by them as sinful people appear as the hunted and sacrificed.

Consequently, the town of Ruby constructs a positive image of itself in relation to the convent women; accusing them of being criminals who should be eradicated shows the townspeople that the patriarchs care about the town's reputation and that of its inhabitants. The convent attempts to destabilize this perfect image because the women's independence seems threatening to the town's men. The threat is ideological because these women live outside conventional marriage, form their own community without male leadership, exercise authority over their bodies, and provide refuge to other women. The convent women show that Ruby's rigid social norms are not necessarily respected elsewhere.

The town's men meet to discuss what they consider corruption; one claims, "before those heifers came to town, this was a peaceful kingdom" (Morrison, *Paradise* 276), meaning the convent women are the source of Ruby's internal problems and lack of peace. This causal claim lacks evidence and is not accurate. The men also confirm: "they don't need men and they don't need God" (276), referring to the absence of both forms of authority, the religious and the patriarchal. What the town's men describe as female autonomy is interpreted as rebellion against the moral structure of their community; they are also accused of being responsible for all kinds of disorder occurring in the town: "they meddle. Drawing folks out there like flies to shit and everybody who goes near them is maimed somehow and the mess is seeping back into our homes, our families" (276). These men fear that the supposed corruption will reach their homes.

Description moves far beyond classifying the convent women as unconventional persons; they are now considered a source of infection influencing other women and destroying families. Athina Bekou (2025) examines how the town and the convent function as contrasting social formations, especially around desire, gender, and communal control. Her study considers how the convent women's desires, needs, and practices disrupt Ruby's already established social organization. This claim is significant because it leads to the final decision that physical separation alone is not enough to protect the town. They decide that, since the convent has become a contaminated entity, violence against it should serve as a form of purification.

The writer, though, remains very careful because she does not replace the town's distorted representation with a simplistic image of perfectly innocent women. The convent women already have their own personal sad stories and complicated histories; they make mistakes and struggle against their psychological wounds. Mavi's guilt, Seneca's self-harm, Pallas's abandonment, Gigi's restless independence, and Connie's traumatic past complicate the conflict between the innocent victim and the evil perpetrator, and this kind of complication is strongly important for the author to portray the representation of criminality. In fact, these women have not asked or needed to be idealized, nor have they wanted to be dehumanized.

Moreover, the convent's location reinforces this process: it is close enough to the town of Ruby to be visible, yet far enough to be regarded as an externalized space. The physical distance makes it easier to imagine social disorder coming from elsewhere rather than from the convent. However, the town's women themselves go to the convent seeking assistance and care. In other words, the boundaries Ruby's men believe separate the town and the convent are not stable in reality because not all town women share the patriarch's norms of evaluation and judgment. That is, the alleged criminal 'other' is not outside the community as an 'outsider'; the community is already connected to it (strongly in certain cases).

The novel's opening statement about shooting the white girl first acquires a different meaning after the narrative progresses. If it suggests at the beginning that there is a crime and a victim, it later shows that the crime follows an extended process of classification. Before the women are physically attacked, they have already been transformed, symbolically, into outsiders, evil sinners, witches, sexual threats, and sources of contamination. The murder is, then, the culmination of a longer process where Ruby's men classify these women as persons against whom all types of violation are permitted.

Consequently, Morrison complicates the usual opposition between criminal and victim. The convent women are criminal in the town's imagination because they strongly challenge the community's definitions of legitimate womanhood, racial belonging, religious beliefs, and social order. Their supposed criminality is not established through investigation but produced through interpretation. The novel's first stage of representing crime is thus not committing violence itself, but manufacturing the person against whom that violence can be committed.

2.2. From crime to righteousness: the communal authorization of violence

When the convent women are transformed into a threat, the novel turns to another problem, asking: how can the men who kill them believe they have done the right act? How do they perceive themselves as righteous, not criminals? The answer lies between the lines of the novel and in the town's history. In fact, the attackers are not isolated individuals; they act in the name of the community and give themselves the authority and right to act as they believe is correct.

The final sentence in the opening chapter clarifies this logic: "God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby" (Morrison, *Paradise* 18); the religious statement preceding the act of violence makes that declaration striking. The following words shift responsibility

from one individual to a group of men, but the final phrase, “for Ruby,” becomes a declaration of purpose, suggesting that everything is allowed to protect the community. What is more striking is that these men not only killed; they killed in the name of the town and for the sake of the town; murder is then committed within a narrative of duty.

The irony lies where divinity meets the act of murder within the same binary. Linda Krumholz (2002) argues that Ruby’s men behave as if they know God’s will. The ‘holy oil’ image surrounding the hunted women deepens the irony because women appear as sinners in the men’s imagination and as sacrificial figures in the narrator’s description. Here, the writer destabilizes the moral status of the attack; readers doubt the attackers’ claim to be right, even as the narrative continually offers images that oppose it.

The phrase “for Ruby” deserves special attention because it transforms private responsibility into a collective responsibility, turning the town into a justification for violence. The attackers believe they are performing a communal function, defending the townspeople from an external danger. Rob Davidson (2001) studies the historiography of the town of Ruby and shows how its founding narrative becomes a political doctrine. The community’s history of exclusion becomes a justification for its own exclusionary practices; it is similar to how people seeking revenge operate: they use history to justify their actions.

In the town of Ruby, history is not only remembered; it is called back to bear witness, justify, and serve as authority. The original settlers and their descendants inherit the memory of racial humiliation and exclusion; instead of turning the page, the town’s men decide to turn it into a model for the communal identity. Morrison’s main concern, then, is not history or memory alone; her biggest problem is the political consequences of an unquestionable history. The history fathers write is sacred to their sons, to be followed, imposed, and preserved.

The convent women threaten that closed page of history and its historical system because they embody alternative forms of belonging; they are not bound by blood, family lineage, or racial origins. As a small community, the town of Ruby is built on accommodation, mutual care, assistance, and close relationships. The difference between the convent women and the townspeople explains why the town’s patriarchs find their autonomous behaviours intolerable. Verena Harz again shows that Morrison contrasts the town’s utopian ideals of purity and exclusion with the convent’s flexible way of forming a community. One shall claim that the terrible massacre may then be read as an attempt to defend the ideals of Paradise by excluding any other form of social arrangements (a convent or any other group form).

The town’s men redefine violence as a form of protection. Their discourse not only says that the women should die; they believe their removal becomes necessary because their presence would destroy the town of Ruby. Supposing that the convent women are sleeping with families and houses makes violence seem like a preventive measure. According to them, the men are not only punishing an existing crime but also preventing greater future damage or disorder. They exaggerate the expected crime that might happen in the convent, committed by the residing females, influencing the townspeople negatively; this is how violence against women is represented and justified as the only effective means to restore security.

The gender variable can hardly be excluded from the attack, nor can it be separated from the question of communal legitimacy; the convent women would never have been murdered if they had been male, one may reflect on the stream of events. Ruby's patriarchs define community norms partly by clarifying what women are allowed to be. The convent women are stigmatized because they prove they can organize themselves in a small community without male authority or leadership. The attack then targets not women so much as that form of autonomy, which the town's patriarchs do not allow.

The writer's greater shift occurs after the murder, emphasizing the townspeople's awareness that, if the murder were carried out for the community's purification, it would restore unity. Instead, the massacre produces uncertainty and division; the town of Ruby is unable to explain or absorb what has happened. The townspeople spend time chewing on the problem; murder has not produced a clear moral conclusion, only an interpretive crisis. What is more interesting is the weakness of the given justification that preceded the massacre. In fact, the twins Steward and Deacon, who represent the town's patriarchal authority, got divided after the murder. In other words, the violence meant to protect communal unity revealed fractures, divisions, and doubts that had already existed within the town.

The story's ending intensifies when Roger returns to the convent to recover the bodies, only to find them gone. The novel does not leave the murdered women in the position of victims; their appearances create a kind of ambiguity about whether they are still alive and whether they have spiritually survived. That ambiguity prevents the criminals from having a complete understanding of the crime; a murder that was supposed to remove the threat becomes an event that lacks meaning and resolution. While representing the crime between the novel's opening and ending, the writer highlights the physical act of violence as a certain act at the beginning, but the moral classification and massacre interpretation are unclear at the end because the immediate punishment of the criminals is not clarified for the reader.

2.3. The crime of protecting order

The first part of the analysis section explains the way the first crime is committed against the convent women, where the armed assault transforms suspicion and hostility into physical violence. It is the most visible crime in the novel and the one around which the novel organizes its structure. The second form of criminality is produced by the moral structure that claims to defend the town of Ruby from disorder. This contrast highlights the crucial distinction between the crime committed against the convent women and the crime generated by the mechanisms the town of Ruby uses to define, protect, and reproduce its own order.

Morrison's *Paradise* shows that the definition of the 'threatening other' and the response to that threat are both shaped by a communal normative system. The convent women become threatening through collective representation, in which their difference is interpreted as evidence of danger; what follows is punishment for an established crime. Violence then emerges from the previous construction of these women as a danger to the community's ethical and social coherence.

The distinction between Cohen's and Cover's contributions becomes clear when Cohen explains the first movement: transforming a differentiated group into a threatening collective entity. Cover, however, accounts for what happens immediately after the transformation. When a community integrates the 'other' into its normative narrative as a source of disorder, violence acquires a meaning that exceeds the act itself; it can be framed as defense, purification, restoration, or even duty. Morrison's depiction of the attack and description of the brutalities of the attackers is as important as clarifying the normative process hidden behind this brutality. Though violence against others can never be justified, the attackers assure they have done it for the town "for Ruby".

The town's men attack the women in the name of the town and in order to defend its boundaries. The paradox existing at the heart of the town's moral order is that the community's commitment to protect itself from expected contamination requires an act that violates the lives of the so-called 'outsiders'; in this case, violence and protection meet for the same target. The question then shifts from who committed the crime to what kind of normative order makes the crime seem like a legitimate response to danger.

In fact, Morrison refuses to depict the convent women within a symbolic category of innocence; she gives each woman a complicated history marked by vulnerability, desire, displacement, error, struggle, and survival. This complexity matters because the communal discourse that punishes them ignores these individual differences; it absorbs them into a single collective image. The crime committed against them is preceded by another form of violence: reducing many heterogeneous individuals into one single figure of threat. Additionally, the act of violence produces uncertainty, disagreement, and doubt rather than unity and confirmation; the townspeople are not fully behind the attack.

There is a distinction between the two crimes: the immediate, direct one against the convent women and the hidden, deeper one through the normative process that initiates exclusions and criminalization. If the first is an event that produces victims, the second functions as a structure of meaning that produces the conditions for classifying victims as legitimate targets. The murder does not deny individual responsibility for the attack, nor does it make every single individual in Ruby equally responsible for it.

Toni Morrison's true achievement in that novel is her refusal to leave the concept of crime at the level of the violent act itself. *Paradise* asks what happens when a community becomes worried about protecting its logic of order, and defending that order generates violence it ultimately rejects. The convent women are victims of a crime, but the text simultaneously shows that the crime is a result of Ruby's contradiction between belonging and exclusion, purity and contamination, protection and violence. Consequently, the apparent opposition between order and crime collapses: the community's attempt to protect its order becomes a mechanism for producing violence. Morrison then transforms crime from a question of individual transgression into a question of normative authority: who defines the criminal, who authorizes punishment, and who possesses the power and decision to call violence justice.

Conclusion

Reading Toni Morrison's *Paradise* through crime, criminality, and criminalization

clarifies key points, especially that crime in this novel is not only a violent act against the convent women; Morrison places it within a process of representation that transforms women from troubled individuals into a collective threat to the town of Ruby's ethical and social order. On the one hand, Stanley Cohen's work clarifies that criminality is not discovered, but constructed through the attribution of difference, danger, and social contamination. On the other hand, Robert Cover's theory focuses more on what follows after the construction of criminality.

Morrison's commitment to portray communal violence in *Paradise* resonates with her larger concerns with the way communities memorize, remember, suppress, and question the immediate consequences of violence. In *Beloved*, the writer states: "they forgot her like a bad dream" (323), suggesting that collective forgetting can offer temporary relief and rest while leaving the circumstances of violence unaddressed. Read together with Morrison's *Paradise*, this concern reinforces the instability of communities that seek to protect moral coherence without fully recognizing their role in producing violence.

When the convent women are integrated into the town's community, and normative order is seen as a threat, violence against them is understood by perpetrators as an act of protection, not aggression. The murderers justify their act by saying that they look for the best of the town and the townspeople, avoiding any external source of corruption and female autonomy. Individual responsibility for the attack cannot be ignored, forgotten, or tolerated, nor can the whole town be blamed equally. Despite the role that the normative environment plays in invoking violence that automatically leads to crimes, one should strike a balance between the different variables to avoid reacting violently because criminality remains a social stigma that individuals remember forever.

Morrison's *Paradise* shifts the problem of crime from questioning who breaks the law to asking who possesses the authority to define criminality and impose punishment. The writer ultimately shows that when a community constructs the 'other' to preserve its own sense of order and organization, defending that order can become a source of violence. The crime against the convent women is not external to Ruby's normative world; it is produced through the logic of its patriarchs seeking to protect their world, their paradise, Ruby.

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