



**THE DISTRESS OF BEING AMERICAN AS A REJECTION  
OF DIFFERENTIATION IN TONI MORRISON'S *PARADISE***

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**Abstract**

America is a diverse nation. America has many races from all around the world and been recognized by the world as salad bowl. America also known for country of freedom. The fact that freedom and diversity who build America is interesting. Besides, American diversity has unique historical story which is between black and white. *Paradise* captures the journey and struggle of people fighting the distress of becoming American as a result of the diversity exist which create differentiation within the society of America. This study aims to find the way how to fight the distress as rejection of differentiation in the land of America and its relevant of American nowadays. The method of this study is a qualitative study analyzed by deconstruction method of Jacques Derrida. Then, the method of data analysis is based on the distress experienced by people described in the novel and how they deal with the distress. Morrison's novel shows that differentiation within the society of America is various; race, gender, background, age, etc. but actually it can be changed. They can fight the differentiation that exist by put the distress in reverse. The final finding of this study shows that power, constructs and control the distress experienced by American which is also still relevant today.

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## INTRODUCTION

America is a diverse nation, popularly known as the nation of liberty. It is believed that in America is where the freedom is exists, where people can be free from many things, where they can be themselves. Since America is a diverse nation, it is constructed by various people from different races, religion, cultures, etc. Mostly people living in the United States come from various parts in the world, and they are mostly immigrant. Since they are mostly immigrant, they are mostly come from different races. Difference is undoubtedness. It bears harmony of life. However, differentiation cannot be deniable when undergoing harmony (Wachtler, Brorsson, & Troein, 2006 in Rosyidi and Sukrisno, 2016). So, the differentiation comes from various aspect as well.

Segregation, is one of the differentiations exist in the United States and differentiation that really popular. According to Meriam- Webster dictionary, segregation is the separation or isolation of race, class, or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary residence in a restricted area, by barriers to social intercourse, by separate educational facilities, or by other discriminatory means. Segregation is really such a big deal in the United States. Not only race being differentiate, but also public facility, salary, school, even law is different according to the post posted by [www.loc.gov](http://www.loc.gov). Differentiation happens almost everywhere in the United States.

Segregation also develops into distress which experienced by American. Distress is kind of feeling experienced by person, or a group of society over something that suppress their feelings. The feeling makes them feel uneasy towards something, feeling extreme anxiety, sorrow, or pain. According Oxford Dictionary, as a noun, distress is great worry, or suffering unhappiness, also state of danger. As a verb, it means, make somebody feel very worried or unhappy.

Toni Morrison, is one of African-American living author to have received the Nobel Prize in Literature. Toni Morrison is categorized as a literary activist of the Black

Feminist Movement which came into being as a response to both Black Liberation Movement and the Feminist Movement. Its genesis lay in the realization that sexism existed in the Black Liberation movement and racism in the Women's Movement and it was formed to fight the interrelated effects of race, gender, and class on black women (Subuhi, 2017).

Literary works, exist to either talk or giving critique towards the society, especially about what experienced or what happen surrounds the author. Literary work, usually is a product of imitation develop by the author. According to Girard, human beings are strongly influenced by mimetic or borrowed desire. The desired of human being does not aim at a definite and original object but follows the desire of others. René Girard develops theory of desire, based on the ancient category of mimesis. The term mimesis in Girard's view means the basic imitative predisposition. It designates primary, unconscious, intrinsic and vital dynamism which forces human behavior and his way of thinking (Straczek, 2014). In this case, author's unconscious mind in literary work often affected by his/her mimetic desire to represents what surrounds them.

Deconstruction usually used as a way of suggestion given to related topic author's wrote. Deconstruction also a tool to understand text or meaning also the postmodern universe in which we live. The term was introduced by Jacques Derrida, the French philosopher, after publication of his *Of Grammatology* in 1967. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida claims that Western philosophy and thought have always had a "desire" to search for a center, a meaning, or a "transcendental signified" (49). Derrida calls this desire for a center "logocentrism" or "phonocentrism" (Of 11). In Derrida's Deconstruction, there are two ways to operate from inside of the text. One is to point to the neglected parts in the texts and to question them and find their inconsistencies; the other is to deal with the binary oppositions that are included in texts (ÖZDEMİR, 2012). The deconstruction indeed aims to reveal the concealed and other implicit meanings, not to show up the

meaningless of the text by separating it (Balkin, 1995-1996: 1-3). So, actually to deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it, and to show that it is a construction in a work of deconstruction that seeks to dismantle it and reinscribe it. That is, not destroy it but give it a different structure and functioning.

Based on the theoretical framework above, the problem proposed is how Morrison describe the distress of being American and how the distress is rejected through differentiation in *Paradise*. The aim of this study is to describe how the distress of being American and how the distress is rejected through differentiation and giving it the correlation to the American society so the study is relevant until today's ages. So, it shows the mimetic desire held by the author according to Rene Girard's theory.

## METHODS

This study is designed as qualitative-descriptive research applying deconstruction theory by Jacques Derrida. The material object of this study is Toni Morrison's novel entitled *Paradise*. Its formal object is the study of Morrison's novel concerning on binary opposition in novel, meaning, and relations in the novel which depicted the deconstruction showing the distress that reflected and described in the novel through the characters. The data analysis is taken by some procedures: (1) describing data in binary opposition (2) data is interpreted and related through deconstruct thinking and mimetic relation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part elaborates the binary opposition and deconstruction reading of Toni Morrison's *Paradise*. *Paradise* tells about two groups of people living nearby, but both are different in many ways. One is group of black society who manage its way to find a new place where they finally settled there and build a town called New Haven/ Ruby. The other, a group of escaped

women living in the Convent, Indian School ex building. Those two groups of people have different way of thinking and different way of how they manage their own people, which led to the conflict between those two groups also within. How they manage an outsiders also different where Ruby people closed themselves to outsider, while Convent women welcome everybody at their door.

### **The Distress of being American Reflected on *Paradise***

Distress is great worry, suffering, or unhappiness (Oxford, 2008). It means making people feeling very worried or unhappy. This part will focus on how the distress of being American is reflected on *Paradise*. As mention before, in *Paradise* exist two different groups of society living nearby as neighborhood. But both are nothing alike. They have different rule, perspective, also the way of living. *Paradise* (Morrison, 1998) depicted what differentiation in America is. Differentiation exist not only among the black and white, but also men and women, and young and old. Differentiation also not only happen on the outside but also happen within the society which creates distress among is people also the ruler.

### **Differentiation Between Black and White**

In the world there are many races living, but the most significant appealing races is between black and white. Black people have dark skin. On the other side, white people have fair skin. for some people, skin color is not important. But, on the other side, there are also some people who consider that skin color is important. Skin color defines your position in the society. Skin color defines how the society would treat people as person. That is the opposition between black and white in Morrison's *Paradise* (1998). Following their position defines in society, it led to another opposition that is ruling and ruled.

The opposition bears from their position in society. Talking about rule and being ruled, it cannot be separated from the law since rules and law almost close to each other. America is

governed by white, a lot of people are from white race since there is a lot of white town in America. White law is everywhere and black shall obey if they do not want anything bad happen to them as seen in the passage below,

The men welcomed him and, learning of his destination, warned him against entering the town..... what's the name of the town? Big Daddy asked. Pura Sangre, they answered. **At its northern edge was a sign: No Niggers** (Morrison, 1998; 153).

The law has flaws. It does not uphold justice. They punish black who does not obey their rule (Morrison, 1998; 117). It shows that black is being ruled by white. The rule exist is injustice. It makes the black feel and experience the distress of being American as rejection of their physical appearance. In this case it connected to the opposition that white is free while black is controlled.

White people, since they hold the law, they can manipulate workplace about who work in collar and who is doing the dirty work as seen in the passage below,

**Almost all of the Negro men chased or invited out of office** (in Mississippi, in Louisiana, in Georgia) got less influential but still white-collar work following the purges of 1875 (Morrison, 1998; 193).

It shows the freedom of white people in control over black people. Black people can do nothing about it, so it means they are controlled. White controls black lives (Morrison, 1998; 153). It led to another opposition that is white is powerful while black is powerless.

White are powerful enough to blow up colored towns, as seen in the passage below,

**Eleven years later Tulsa was bombed, and several of the towns Big Daddy, Pryor, and Elder had visited were gone.** But against all odds, in 1932 Haven was

thriving. The crash had not touched it: personal savings were substantial, Big Daddy Morgan's bank had taken no risk (partly because white bankers locked him out, partly because the subscription shares had been well protected) and families shared everything, made sure no one was short (Morrison, 1998: 108).

Black can do nothing about that, they are only able to escape (Morrison, 1998; 13). Moreover, if they want to stay alive, they must stay close to pinewoods (Morrison, 1998; 96).

The distress caused by skin color really does injustice to black. Their living defines on how white react towards them. If it is good, then good, and vice versa.

#### **Differentiation Between Men and Women**

There are two gender in the world, that is men and women. Men and women have their own right and responsibility in their live. But, more that that, their life also controlled by society. In this case, how society treat and react towards one's gender are able to create distress within person. Between men and women there is opposition which men is breadwinner while women taking care household.

In Ruby, men believe that they are breadwinner. So, women have no right to expect the men coming home from work and help the taking care of the baby, because it is women's work, as seen in the passage below,

**"They weren't crying or nothing but he said his head hurt. I understood. I did. You can't expect a man to come home from that kind of work and have to watch over babies while I go get something decent to put in front of him. I know that ain't right."** (Morrison, 1998; 23).

This opposition led to the opposition between control and controlled.

Men think, that they have rights to control women. They have rights to control

women behavior such what women should do and what women should not do (Morrison, 1998; 23). Men also control what his and what hers as seen in the passage below,

**It wasn't hers; it was his**, yet Mavis loved it maybe more than he did and lied to him about losing the second set of keys (Morrison, 1998; 25).

Also,

**Frank told her she better not touch, let alone drive**, the Cadillac as long as she lived. So, she was as surprised as anybody when she stole it.

Women must only do what men told them to do (Morrison, 1998; 137). Men always in control makes them think that women are weak. It manifests to another opposition that men are powerful and women are powerless.

Men are powerful, they have control over women (Morrison, 1998; 230). While women, besides they only obey men, they cannot defend themselves. When they are being hit by man, she could not fight back and just accept the blow that the man threw to her face as seen in the passage below,

Taking a walk around New York City before catching his train, he saw two men arguing with a woman. From her clothes, Elder said, he guessed she was a streetwalking woman, and registering contempt for her trade, he felt at first a connection with the shouting men. **Suddenly one of the men smashed the woman in her face with his fist. She fell. Just as suddenly the scene slid from everyday color to black and white.** Elder said his mouth went dry. (Morrison, 1998; 94).

It is showing that the women hold the distress to themselves. The distress within society.

## **Differentiation Between Young and Grown-Up**

In society, there is hegemony exist that is between young and grown-up. It happens not only in the United States, but also in every part of the world. The differences exist between young and grown-up is age. Age determines who is the grown-up and who is the young, also who is wise and who is reckless.

In Ruby, people are considered as grown up if they have married (Morrison, 1998; 147). It can be concluded that young are the unmarried and the grown-up is the married people. Married people are considered as grown-up so they considered as wise. While young are reckless, so their suggestion are does not being taken into account when they giving suggestion to Oven's words (Morrison, 1998; 85). Young also considered as foolish as they like to play and fool around and making mess (Morrison, 1998; 165). It makes the young think that they do not have any choice even being given choice as join in the meeting, but their voice would not be listened as seen in the passage below,

"Royal Beauchamp actually interrupted him, the Reverend! "What is talk if it's not 'back'? **You all just don't want us to talk at all. Any talk is 'backtalk' if you don't agree with what's being said.** Sir." (Morrison, 1998; 85).

Those are all just few from the distress of being American. The distress not only happen between black and white, but also the distress comes from inside of their society. Those binaries are reflected what is going on in the society, especially society in *Paradise* (Morrison, 1998) also the reflection of American society. The binaries are within the society and it cannot be separated. The binaries show and tell about everything within the society. It shows the differentiation in every stratum. And Morrison tries to show that in America there are a lot of differentiation and how it could affect someone's life and create the distress in them. Besides, it also explains that there are thousand ways to

differentiate people in America as long as they have control.

### **How Distress of Being American is Rejected Through Differentiation**

America are constructed by people from different race, gender, age, etc. The differentiation exist means they have different personality as well. Not all American accept the distress as it is, some reject the distress of being American as rejection through differentiation as well.

Between black and white, there are also black who reject the distress and does not want being ruled by white. They manage to build their own town so they can follow their own rule, as seen in the passage below,

His grandfather had named his twins Deacon and Steward for a reason. **And their family had not built two towns fought white law**, Colored Creek, bandits and bad weather, to see ranches and houses and a bank with mortgages on a feed store, a drugstore and a furniture store end up in Arnold Fleetwood's pocket. (Morrison, 1998; 55)

And the town called New Haven/ Ruby. They build this town in order to make their life better, away from white's control (Morrison, 1998; 56). So, they can be free since human are God made which has the right to be free, as mentioned in the passage below,

Not those frycake things they like but good hot food the winters are so bad we need coal a sin to burn trees on the prairie yesterday the snow sifted in under the door quaesumus, da propitius pacem in diebus nostris **Sister Roberta is peeling the onions et a peccato simus semper liberi can't you ab omni perturbatione securi...**"(Morrison, 1998; 48).

It is in Latin words which means that everybody can be free just if they wanted to. Free from all anxiety, anxiety of being this one

and that one. Feel free from any differences, since everybody is God's make.

Black people also can manage themselves to be powerful as well. Rejection does not bring them down, it makes them stronger (Morrison, 1998; 14). They also can be powerful and able to intimidate white (Morrison, 1998; 122) and they are able to learn defense (Morrison, 1998; 208).

Between men and women, women not only can do household chores. They are able to be breadwinner if they want to just as what Convent women do (Morrison, 1998; 41). Women are able to own their own home, house (Morrison, 1998; 131). Since they can live on their own means that women also able to take control on themselves. Women also able to control the other surrounds them (Morrison, 1998; 173). It shows that women are strong. Besides, women also able to fight (Morrison, 1998; 171). Moreover, doing chores also showing that women are strong (Morrison, 1998; 42). For it between men and women, something between young and grown up also can be manifested.

The distress laid between the differentiation of young and grown-up is caused by hegemony exist in the society. In order to fight the distress, young must break the hegemony. In *Paradise* (Morrison, 1998) the young struggle to give their choice even they are not married (Morrison, 1998; 213), also make heated argument towards married man so their voice can be heard (Morrison, 1998; 84). It shows that they denied the idea that to be grown-up someone must married. young also can be wise stating that not all people born in slavery time was slave

**"Everybody born in slavery time wasn't a slave.** Not the way you mean it." (Morrison, 1998; 84).

More than being wise they also can act properly as showing respect to the older by addressing 'Sir' (Morrison, 1998; 84). It shows that prejudice and hegemony can be break down just as the people related are willing to make change.

Here, it shows that power hold the crucial parts in life dealing with distress. Just like what happen lately about what Russian supporter did to French black football player, Paul Pogba (<https://amp-france24-com> ) and Separation in family according to Trump's immigration policy (Pierce; 2018). If people reject the idea of power existence, the distress of being American as rejection of differentiation would not occurs unless they reject the differentiation which exist because some believe in existing power that has controls towards others. It is like what Khabib Nurmagomedov did to Connor MacGregor (Stevenson, 2018) where he rejects the existing power that is the domination of Christian. Morrison in *Paradise* (1998) wants to give message that to fight the difference, fight the distress, is by fighting back and reverse it. Because actually people can fight back only if they willing to show their inner power to fight.

## CONCLUSIONS

The novel *Paradise* by Toni Morrison illustrated the description of the distress of being American from various phenomenon. It shows that the distress of being American is not only because of race, but others as well such gender and age. The novel describe how distress experienced scooped from various perspectives and how it can create the distress on them. The distress also exists not only outside of their society but also inside, and within. Then, drawn from the second discussion, it can be drawn conclusion that power is the key among any differentiation. The distress can be fight against and reconstructed. The distress can be deconstructed if they are willing to against it. But, to do this, they need power, either inside themselves or outside, that is power to fight for it. Besides, power also gives people control which means, people with power can do anything towards everything just how they manage their power. This novel, *Paradise* showed that power held crucial strength within society which can come as good and bad. This novel also criticized American society which it still relevant to today's America such found in

the new American Immigration Policy under President Donald Trump.

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