The Revelation of the Veiled in Toni Morrison's *Paradise*: The Whirling Dervishes in the Harem of the Convent

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Muslim women's perspective on liberatory Islamic orality (or empowerment via the oral traditions within Islam) is vastly accentuated in Fatema Mernissi's and Leila Ahmed's examinations of the harem structure. These harem narratives celebrate Sufism, a mystical Islamic theosophy that foregrounds orality and invites a constant search toward divine discovery and liberation from human limitations. Recalling these narratives, Morrison's *Paradise* (1997) emerges as a harem narrative that culls the liberatory Sufi rituals crystallized by Jalalu 'ddin Rumi, his lineage of the Mevlevi Order, and other Sufi mystics such as Mansur al-Hallaj and Muhyiddin ibn 'Arabi. *Paradise* celebrates Sufism as a paradigmatic vision for female resistance, empowerment, and liberation.

Religious contextualization of female regeneration in *Paradise*'s scholarship does not allude to any Islamic presence in the narrative's transformation rituals. Megan Sweeney argues that the Convent women's ritual "explicitly trop[es] on the biblical themes of crucifixion, redemption, and resurrection" (47). Echoing Sweeney, Ana Maria Fraile-Marcos reads Consolata's death as a precipitator of her transformation into a Christ figure (28). Critics such as Ingrid G. Daemmrich and Katrine Dalsgard identify other religious and mystic epistemologies in the Convent women's healing rite. Daemmrich contends that the Convent women's "strategies to create their transient paradise are portrayed as intuitive, experimental, even mystical" (225), and Dalsgard discerns "an almost mystical quality" in Piedade's tableau and perceives Consolata as "a kind of high priestess" who conducts a ritual of "almost sacramental proportions" (244). Other critical interpretations accentuate the hybridity of religious associations in Consolata's healing rite. J. Brooks Bouson claims that Consolata avoids the dualisms of normative Christianity by embracing Candomble, a native Afro-Brazilian religion that combines Catholicism with African spirit worship (238). Fraile-Marcos discerns a "reconciliation in [Consolata's] own person of the pagan religion she perceives in her gift and the Christian doctrine, both Catholic and Puritan, depleted of its patriarchal conditioning" (27), and Nada Elia also accentuates Consolata's religious hybridity (*Trances* 144). Consistent with Fraile-Marcos's and Elia's arguments, Channette Romero posits that Consolata "speaks to multiple deities and combines the Catholic precepts of service and love with the African American womanist traditions of root working and conjuring" (417). No one, however, has situated Morrison's novel in an Islamic context that cultivates female empowerment.

Excavating a link between Islam and female liberation opens up the crucial role orality has played historically in women's liberatory spirituality and Sufism. The "original impulse" of Sufism is classically believed to be oral, for it has "opened with the example of Muhammad and the

revelation of the Qur'an" (Helminski 3). Historical records and cultural studies of Sufi orders, especially the Qadiriyya, Kubrawiyya, Suhrawardiyya, Naqshbandiyya, Shadhiliyya, and Tijaniyya, acknowledge their main influence in the spread of Islam and its harmonious incorporation of oral rituals in Africa. Eric Charry identifies Sufism as the predominant form of Islam in various West African countries; it embraces African traditions because it "not only allows music, but puts it to great use" (556). Chronicles of the early days of the Islamic community reveal that women participated equally with men in the development of this newly emerging spiritual community. Muslim women's contribution has not only sustained the spirituality and orality of Islam but also shaped its early mystic aspects. Leslie Wines observes that "since its inception, Sufism had had its share of women saints, practitioners, and adepts," such as Rabi'a al-Adawiyya of Basra and Mtumwa bint 'Ali of Malawi, who "initiated both men and women into the [Qadiriyya] order" (64, 463-64). Other narratives relate how the Sufi ethos opposed the politics of the orthodox and dominant Islamic society with respect to gender arrangements and views of women (Ahmed 96). Thus, examining Sufi subtexts in *Paradise* is a way of understanding female empowerment from an Islamic perspective, a perspective that focalizes women's liberation.

Culling Sufi allusions in *Paradise* also illumines the African presence in Morrison's narratology. According to Camille Adams Helminski, Sufi orders "contributed greatly to African Islam's developing independently from Middle Eastern or Arab Islam" (82-83), while August H. Nimtz, Jr., observes that "the mystic orders within the African milieu were dominated by native Africans rather than Arabs" (56). Historians reinforce Sufism's contribution to decolonization and its adoption of the African legacy of resistance to cultural and historical oppression. Wines recounts that "[d]uring the colonial era, when many European powers sought to annex Islamic states, Sufi orders proved to be a surprisingly strong network of resistance in lands as diverse as Libya, the Caucasus and the Sudan" (164). Elia even highlights the development of African Sufism as an empowering diasporic practice in the New World:

[E]nslaved African diasporans who knew that their ancestors were devout Muslims tended to grasp at any survival of that religion in the "New World," and gradually, if unknowingly, they too shifted towards Sufi practices, making of the latter the dominant form of African Islam in the Americas, as it had become in many parts of Africa. Sufi Islam then merged with the spiritual empowerment that sustained them in their enslavement. ("Kum Buba" 194-95)

Reading Sufi subtexts in *Paradise* demands an identification of the Sufi philosophy. Sufism is a scientific, spiritual, and spatial search for the tariqah (initiate path) to union with God or haqiqah (inner reality) of Islam. Sufi doctrines complement Islam's shari'a (law) and deepen the Muslim's understanding of its essence (Rural, Illustrated 14). Around these tariqahs, "brother/sisterhoods based upon the example of a Pir, or primary saint, developed, though each tariqah was always firmly rooted back through the spiritual lineage and example of the Prophet Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an" (Helminski 73). Tawhid (divine unity), the central doctrine that infuses the Sufi tradition of Islam, implies that all phenomena are expressions of a single reality, or wujud (being), and that the essence of divine discovery and self-purification is inseparable from every form and phenomenon, whether material or spiritual, masculine or

feminine. For Sufi mystics, the concept of hijab (veil) is metaphorical and implies aloofness from divine unity; its opposite is the *kashf* (revelation or discovery). In his *Diwan*, Mansur al-Hallaj defines the mystics' rite of discovery as the constant seeking of God that allows one to go beyond the hijab that imprisons our consciousness (Wines 15). In this context, al-Hallaj "believe[s] that if you concentrate on loving God, without intermediaries, a blurring of the boundaries with the divine becomes possible" (Mernissi 3).

In *Paradise*, the Convent's epistemology of nomadism and hybridity corresponds with the Sufi doctrine of spatial or physical travel or quest for knowledge and inner regeneration. The *salik* (traveler) is a significant Sufi trope that implies a constant search for truth and divine unity. In the *zikr* ritual, a continuous repetition of words and phrases in praise of God, the Sufi sheikh (guide) inculcates the traveler in divine unity, informs him that God exists in all being, and teaches him the *zikr-i qalbi*, or the meditation of the heart (Holbrook 30-35). The Sufi legacy of travel narratives also illuminates learning from traveling dervishes, such as the narrative of Rumi and the wandering mystic Shams of Tabriz, who so intensely transformed Rumi that he became an endless fountain of divine love (Rumi, *Illustrated* 15). In *Paradise*, the Convent embraces change, inclusiveness, and acceptance of racial variance; in so doing, the Convent's structure disrupts the Ruby patriarchs' dangerous mythologization of racialized and generational doubt and ostracism of foreigners. Predicting jeopardy to their racial purity and stability, Ruby's cohort stigmatizes the Convent's residents as "[degrees]awful women who, when they came, one by one, were obviously not nuns, real or even pretend, but members, it was thought, of some other cult. Nobody knew" (11). The Convent is in metamorphosis and characterized by a "perpetual indefinability ... suggested in its changing history from a decadent embezzler's mansion to a Catholic boarding school for Indian girls to its present function" (Dalsgard 243). The Convent's variable architecture ascribes, to use Rosi Braidotti's famous concept, a "nomadic subjectivity" (22) to its residents, as it "envision[s] a haven of travel [and] transformation" (Krumholz 25). Echoing the Sufi mystics, Consolata, a prominent Convent resident, receives *lawami'* (flashes) of knowledge from her interaction with Lone, an early member of the Fairly travelers. Lone inculcates Consolata in the rite of concentration and imagination revered by Sufis as a power that "does not construct something unreal, but unveils the hidden reality" (Corbin 12). Lone introduces Consolata to the concept of God's disclosure in His natural elements: "'You need what we all need: earth, air, water. Don't separate God from His elements. He created it all. You stuck on dividing Him from His works. Don't unbalance His world'" (244). Lone's lesson of divine affiliation is an intertext of *tawhid* that celebrates the presence of God "in everything, because there is nothing that is not His self-disclosure" (Chittick 137).

From a Sufi perspective, the Convent women submit to an ultimate *hajib* (veiling) from divine unity as they undergo a complete disintegration of human and divine love, manifested by their loss of appetite. Among the critics who have read food imagery in Morrison's narratives as a reference to female eroticism and sexuality, Barbara Hill Rigney indicates that "in Morrison's texts, food, like everything else in her worlds, is metaphoric, diffusely erotic, [and] expressive of *jouissance*" (83). Justine Tally claims that in *Paradise* the "subtext of the erotic is reinforced in

the major symbolism of the book--that of food, hunger, and devouring" (78). This proposed analogy between food, appetite, and sexuality invites a Sufi-oriented reading that channels the concept of food to divine love through the theosophy of eroticism. Sachiko Murata reinforces the link between eroticism and divine energy: "Human appetite reflects God's attribute of desire and love. Within human beings, it incarnates God's desire for creation and His joy in bringing the world into existence" (178). Reading through Sufi aesthetics of sexuality allows food to be conceptualized as an embodiment of love and a substantial phase on the way toward divine discovery. Consolata and the rest of the Convent residents are trapped in earthly realities of abandonment and abuse by loved ones. Disoriented by a depressive human love, the Convent women's perception of self-love degenerates into their *hajn* from all aspirations of divine love. The Convent's *mahjubat* (veiled women) start to nourish absurd dreams that frighten Consolata, who:

listened to these babygirl dreams with padded, wine-dampened
indulgence, for they did not infuriate her as much as their
whispers of love which lingered long after the women had gone....
They spoke of men who came to caress them in their sleep; of men
waiting for them in the desert or by cool water; of men who once
had desperately loved them; or men who should have loved them,
might have loved, would have. (222-23)

This transfixion by abusive human love leads to the Convent women's drift from divine love, a separation that Consolata worriedly detects in herself and the others (222). Such human and divine duality is further accentuated by the women's repression of the appetite that Sufis deem, when properly directed toward elevated states of consciousness, as a significant stage on the way to *tawhid* (Murata 178). Before arriving at the Convent, these women have experienced either nausea or loss of taste for food. Mavis "couldn't figure out or manage a simple meal [and] relied on delis and drive-throughs" (171). Likewise, Pallas's appetite was killed by her relationship with Carlos: "While he loved her (or seemed to), food, other than that first chili dog, was a nuisance to her, an excuse to drink Cokes or a reason to go out" (178).

The induction of the Convent's *mahjubat* into divine discovery is signaled by their sudden insatiable hunger. Each of these women's sudden starvation can be interpreted as an early sign of elevation on the *tariqah* of divine love and unity. Upon their arrival at the Convent, the wandering women cannot resist the food prepared in the kitchen. Mavis's nausea from the night before vanishes and she finds Consolata's coffee and salty mashed potatoes irresistible (39-40). She wanders outside in the garden and admires the "flowers mixed in with or parallel to rows of vegetables," "staked plants" that "grew in a circle, not a line, in high mounds of soil," "a patch of melon," and "an empire of corn beyond" (40). Aloof from Consolata's mourning, Gigi cannot

help "reach[ing] out and pinch[ing] off a bit of crust from a pie sitting before her" (69). And like "a legitimate mourner," she becomes "ravenous," and "fiercely hungry" (72). Seneca has the attribute of a "soft, mildly hungry" voice (171), and Pallas feels "starved" for crepe indulgence (177). Some critics construe this devouring imagery as evocative of the "traditional images of the female as voracious, and therefore a danger to men" (Tally 79). However, food imagery in Paradise suggests a Sufi reading that assigns divine attributes to devouring. As of yet, the women's hunger is neither healthy nor wholesome, because it lacks any manifestation of love. For instance, though Mavis becomes a creator of "crepe-like delicacies," her cooking remains saturated with bitterness and enmity for Gigi, not with love: "[S]he would take a plate of [food she had made] down to Connie and tell her what had happened. Not the fight. That wasn't important. In fact she had enjoyed it. Pounding, pounding, even biting Gigi was exhilarating, just as cooking was" (171).

Consolata's relationship with Deacon is emblematic of the hermeneutics of divine unity in love. Consolata has been embracing celibacy and seeking "piety" (227). Instructed by Mary Magna, the Mother Superior of the Convent, Consolata yokes the knowledge of divine love with a theology of separation that privileges the spirit over the body. However, her first meeting with Deacon jeopardizes the provisions of her worship and causes "thirty years of surrender to the living God [to crack] like a pullet's egg" (225). The narration of this meeting discloses erotic expressions related to food, starvation, and eating. Coming to the Convent's garden, Deacon asks for "some black peppers. He was twenty-nine. She was thirty-nine. And she lost her mind.... [B]eing love-struck after thirty celibate years took on an edible quality" (228). This description of hunger resonates with the Sufi concept of appetite that incarnates God's attributes of desire, love, and joy in creating the world (Murata 178); Consolata remarks (or wants to remark) that Deacon's eyes "are like the beginning of the world" (228). The language that renders Consolata's affection also reflects divine elevation through the mobile energy of love and sensuality, symbolized by the wings that give human beings a chance to reach toward divine performance: "Sha sha sha. Consolata saw his profile, and the wing of a feathered thing, undead, fluttered in her stomach.... She did not see him again for two months of time made unstable by a feathered thing fighting for wingspread" (226-27). Consolata's meeting with Deacon recalls the Sufi mystics' encounters with wandering guides, where the trope of the face is prominent. One major encounter related by an early thirteenth-century mystic named Najmuddin Kobra tells of a vision/dream in which "his own face suddenly began to emit light.... He then saw a second face, also with flashing lights, encountering his face. For Sufis, this second face was a suprasensory guide, a response to his prayer for a Friend to lead him on a spiritual path" (Wines 27). In Deacon, Consolata meets the traveler with whose lace she identifies; Deacon says to her "'I've traveled. All over. I've never seen anything like you. How could anything be put together like you? Do you know how beautiful you are? Have you looked at yourself?'" To which she responds, "'I'm looking now'" (231). Consolata's identification with Deacon's face is the first sign of her recognition of the true self, annihilated in the subsistent or everlasting face of God, to use Sufi terms (Chittick 46-49).

As with the other Convent women, Consolata's love displays the dialectics of tawhid in love. In Consolata and Deacon's relation, the potential of unity between human and divine love is thwarted by a veil, the congenital twinship and ideological unity between Deacon and Steward. Deacon's love for Consolata is a break from Steward's ideological ostracism of nonconforming women and racial others. Deacon's and Consolata's route toward divine love is symbolically arrested by the appearance of Steward's face: "[Consolata] backed away, staring at the exact face of him, repelled by but locked into his eyes, chaste and wide with hatred" (235). Steward's face recalls Deacon to his temporarily suspended unity with Steward: "'No.' He closes his eyes. When he opens them he is looking away. 'There's just one of me'" (232). The interposition of Steward's face veils Deacon's face from divine orientation; thus, he misconstrues Consolata's voracious and "knifed" hunger that drives her "to playfully bite his lip and then lick away the blood" (236-37). Many critics have read Consolata's inadvertent lip biting as reminiscent of various mythologies of consuming females. Fraile-Marcos argues that "it is not difficult for Deacon to interpret Connie's biting of his lips not only as the act of a whore but as an inversion of the vampire narrative convention in which she is released from a death-in-life trance that had turned her sexuality into a 'stone cold womb'" (25). Tally reads Consolata's act as an "obsessive and consuming" passion that alludes to the myth of the "vagina dentata" (80). Candice M. Jenkins proposes that the "significance of Deacon's revulsion is not difficult to read; he fears being literally devoured--physically, emotionally--by Consolata's unregulated pleasure-seeking" (286). These readings do not perceive a divine element in Consolata's hunger for "go[ing] home" (240) and reaching the sublime. Alternatively, her voracious hunger and that of the other women can be read as reflecting a human appetite that needs to be elevated in a "healthy and wholesome manner" (Murata 187). Instead of sustaining the pure aspiration of her hunger, Consolata deems this hunger a "big mistake" and becomes "devoted to the dark, long removed from appetites, craving only oblivion" (237, 221). She loses her erotic energy, despises her physicality, and erases any memory of her body (238). Revulsion makes Consolata envision her journey with Deacon toward tawhid in terms of harem dichotomies. For the first time, she perceives herself as a concubine sharing Deacon: "She dodged the tongue, but the toxin behind it shocked her with what she had known but never imagined: she was sharing him with his wife. Now she saw the pictures that represented exactly what that word--sharing--meant" (239). This shocking realization transforms Consolata into an actual odalisque (woman of the room), confined as if she were a harem slave to the darkness of the wine cellar. Similarly, Deacon recoils from his appetite for love to twin Steward's dualistic ideology of the exclusive divine, as his face registers revulsion. Abjuring their human appetites, both Deacon and Consolata are veiled from the route to tawhid.

To re-embark on her journey on the righteous path to divine knowledge, Consolata needs a spiritual chaperone. Mary Magna is not a suitable guide, as she espouses the severance of spirit and body, which violates the concept of tawhid. Mary Magna frustrates Consolata's call for ending the delay of enlightenment: "Mary Magna had nothing to say. Consolata listened to the refusing silence, more wondering than annoyed by the sky, in plumage now, gold and blue-green, strutting like requited love on the horizon" (251). Though Lone has instilled the

significance of tawhid in Consolata, she is not a spiritual guide who deciphers God's signs, being obsessed by her resentment of Ruby's racial and ideological hijab. Lone misconstrues the ominous appearance of the buzzards: "If she had been paying attention to her own mind instead of gossip, she would have investigated the Lenten buzzards as soon as they appeared--two years ago at spring thaw, March of 1974" (272). Her blindness to the divine message prevents a prediction of the planned raid on the Convent women: "Playing blind was to avoid the language God spoke in.... His signs were clear, abundantly so, if you stopped steeping in vanity's sour juice and paid attention to His world" (273). Obviously, Deacon cannot be the right guide on the path of divine unity, constrained as he is by Steward's ideology of exclusion. Thus, Consolata does not have a flesh-and-blood guide as a spirit-world aide.

Like a Sufi mystic, Consolata conjures the "Perfect Man" (Wines 27) to conduct her toward divine kashf. In Sufi theosophy, when the seeker does not have "a spiritual teacher in the flesh," the authorization from his superiors to teach (ijaza) comes through dream messages, as the example of the Sufi master al-Tirmidhi indicates (Helminski 64). Consolata also acquires the teaching ijaza through a dream-world chaperone. The arcane "Invisible Guide" (Wines 27) visits her after a dreamy realization of the dangerous drift in the other women's troubles and a call for spiritual awakening: "She slept herself into sobriety. Headachy, sandymouthed she woke in quick need of a toilet.... Back down the stairs, she decided to catch a little air and shuffled into the kitchen and out the door.... He took off his glasses then and winked, a slow seductive movement of a lid. His eyes, she saw, were as round and green as new apples" (250-52). The intimacy between Consolata and the visitor is mystical--an intimacy that Leslie Wines might describe as "the closest kind with a 'Perfect Man' who is one of the saints in whom Divine attributes are mirrored, so that the lover, seeing himself by the light of God, realizes that he and his Beloved are not two, but One" (27). The role of Consolata's visitor as a guide to other wayfarers on the divine path is inferred from his sitting position: "Where he sat on the kitchen steps, framed by the door, a triangle of shadow obscured his face but not his clothes" (Morrison, *Paradise* 251). His sitting position dramatizes the Sufi expression of al-qu'ud lahum (sitting in front of people), which is considered a great test and can never be practiced without an ijaza (Helminski 64).

Consolata's all-absorbing communion with this "hidden saint" resembles the celebrated journey of Moses in company with the sought Khidr, the "Sage whom Sufis regard as the supreme hierophant and guide of travelers on the Way to God" (Rumi, *Rumi* 3). The green eyes of Consolata's visitor recall the archetypal myrtle that alludes to the "'ever-green' man, symbolic of Khidr and ... the ever-living, ever-fresh, teaching" (Helminski 66). The visitor's attire also discloses the mystic archetype of greenness: "a green vest over a white shirt, red suspenders hanging low on either side of his tan trousers, shiny black work shoes" (251). The green color in Consolata's dream is consistent with the Sufi dreams that often allude to the symbolism of herbs and myrtle, the two levels of spiritual healing or instruction:

[T]he level of ordinary good worshippers (as-sadiqun), who are symbolized by the fragrant herbs, and the level of the just (as-siddiqun).... The nature of the worship of the first group is not

altogether firm; it's rather fickle, since the herbs which symbolize them "in summer are ... like this," namely, withered, "and in winter ... are green." As for the siddiqun, the mystics, "those who have attained certitude," they are symbolized by the evergreen myrtle which never withers, neither in winter nor in summer. (Helminski 67)

An herb and root worker, Lone is the as-sadiqa who is associated with the ephemeral herbs after being blinded by Ruby's ideology. Deacon is the as-sadiq whose companionship is herb-like, as it saps the greenness from Consolata's eyes: "He had burned the green away and replaced it with pure sight that damned her if she used it" (248). However, the "Invisible Guide" is the as-siddiq, whose evergreen eyes are myrtle-like and lasting. He is the dream-world chaperone who can best transform Consolata into a spiritual teacher of what Sufis call the "way of the return" (Wines 27).

Consolata's visionary and illuminating encounter with the "Invisible Guide" rekindles her energy as a mystic seeker of divine love. She ushers in her preparation for a pre-prayer grand dinner (Morrison, *Paradise* 252-60). This meal preparation is symbolic of Consolata's refreshed and insatiable hunger that resonates with the Sufi traveler's hunger for divine gnosis, which is lucidly described by Sara Sviri: "[T]he mystical path carves its hidden routes within the hearts of men and women who, at certain moments in their lives, awake to an insatiable hunger, to an irreconcilable nostalgia for something which they cannot clearly define, and which is nevertheless powerful enough, when this awakening becomes an inner commitment, to shape their destiny" (60). From an Islamic epistemology, Consolata's last cooking can be read as an ablution and preparation for prayer and healing from trauma. As in the wudu (cleansing) ritual that precedes the Muslim prayer, Consolata washes the chicken and potatoes with tender love and exultation. The divine attribute of Consolata's cooking suggests the teachings of the mystic Dhakkara of Baghdad, who used the language of food to describe the enraptured self with God: "Take the sugar of the divine gift, the starch of purity, the water of modesty, the butter of self-awareness, and the saffron of recompense, and strain them in the sieves of fear and hope.... When you take a bite of it, you will become one of the wise and will be liberated from vain fantasies" (As-Sulami 150).

With the final food preparation, Consolata announces the onset of the rite of prayer and healing: "The table is set; the food placed. Consolata takes off her apron. With the aristocratic gaze of the blind she sweeps the women's faces and says, 'I call myself Consolata Sosa. If you want to be here you do what I say. Eat how I say. Sleep when I say'" (Morrison, *Paradise* 262). The announcement of Consolata's full name reclaims her self-recognition and inner growth. These changes entitle Consolata to attain the ijaza for al-qu'ud lahum, or sitting in front of the Convent women. The freedom of choice conferred by Consolata's speech echoes the Islamic edict "No compulsion in Islam," which is related to a desire to "perfect the practice of faith" but is not meant to restrict individuals (Rouse 31). Consolata's declaration reinforces her desire to elevate hunger: "And I will teach you what you are hungry for" (262). Thus, as a domestic activity, Consolata's cooking launches Sufi-like rituals of spiritual elevation. Consolata even illumines her visionary construct of the realm of divine love: "Then, in words clearer than her

introductory speech ... she told them of a place where white sidewalks met the sea and fish the color of plums swam alongside children. She spoke of fruit that tasted the way sapphires look and boys using rubies for dice ... Then she told them of a woman named Piedade, who sang but never said a word" (263-64). Consolata's imagined realm recalls Rumi's famous catchphrase "ocean of divine love" that defines the mystic realm of the absolute and divine love.

Consolata initiates a ritual of unveiling similar to the Sufi rite of self-annihilation. After attaining the *ijaza* of *mukashafa* (unveiling), and as in the Islamic pre-prayer ablution, Consolata orders the women to clean the floor of the cellar (263). In this context, Tally argues that the choice of the cellar as a place for their healing reinforces its conceptualization as a womb (80). Tally's cellar/womb analogy is pertinent to the Sufi conceptualization of Consolata's prayer. A woman's womb refers to the womb of being into which we find ourselves born, as highlighted in the Sufi reverence for "Mary, the mother of Jesus . . . who continually took refuge with the divine and opened to receive divine inspiration within the womb of her being" (Helminski xxv). Consistent with the idea of ablution, Consolata's drawing of the women's different body templates signifies a gradual lifting of all veils and past traumas that separate them. This rejection of isolating traumas echoes what Nancy Chodorow calls the healthy relation of "primary intimacy and merging" (Reproduction 79) that "ensures the production of feminine personalities founded on relation and connection, with flexible rather than rigid ego boundaries" ("Family Structure" 58). Recognizing the stage of "annihilation of obstacles and impediments" (Chittick 36) in their Sufi-like rite, the Convent women are prepared for the next phase of prayer through a communion of thoughts or, in Sufi terms, *sohbet*, or spiritual conversation (Helminski 125). The epitome of this *sohbet*, or what Rabi'a al-Adawiyya calls "turning within oneself" (Helminski xx), is the women's loud and shared dreaming: "This is how loud dreaming began. How the stories rose in that place. Halftales and the never-dreamed escaped from their lips to soar high above guttering candles, shifting dust from crates and bottles. And it was never important to know who said the dream or whether it had meaning. In spite of or because their bodies ache, they step easily into the dreamer's tale" (Morrison, *Paradise* 264). Consolata replicates this *sohbet* in the form of what Morrison calls *rememory* that brings about "uncontrolled remembering and reliving of emotionally painful experiences" and past traumas (Bouson 135). The transformation of *sohbet* to shared *rememory* corresponds to the Islamic concept of conversion. Like *rememory*, the power of conversion is in "the control one has over the recreation of a personal history. Repositioning oneself within both a personal and social narrative is usually very therapeutic" (Rouse 133). The Convent women's *sohbet* of *rememory* exposes the possibility of their transformation through confronting, recreating, sharing their past traumas, and making connections between their stories. The *sohbet* of traumas teaches these women to recognize and love the unity between them: "In loud dreaming, monologue is no different from a shriek; accusations directed to the dead and long gone are undone by murmurs of love" (Morrison, *Paradise* 264).

After this ritual, the Convent women reach a significant step toward their sobriety of discernment that represents a high stage on the Sufi path and implies that the seeker has

attained "a sober awareness of [his/her] actual situation in the world and society" (Chittick 37). The Convent women's initiation into sobriety is discernable in their sudden change into sociable women: "But if a friend came by, her initial alarm at the sight of the young women might be muted by their adult manner; how calmly themselves they seemed" (Morrison, *Paradise* 265-66). This sudden change reflects their eradication of the enemy from within and their lifting of the veil of exclusion and dichotomy that fixates Ruby's residents: "[U]nlike some people in Ruby, the Convent women were no longer haunted" (266). Consolata's sohbet rituals invert these stereotypes by presenting bodies ready to be connected and assailed with the heavy desire of the divine. This inversion of the Ruby men's gaze is further reinforced by the interposition of Anna Flood's gaze: "[E]xamining it as closely as her lamp permitted, [Anna] saw the terribleness K. D. reported, but it wasn't the pornography he had seen, nor was it Satan's scrawl. She saw instead the turbulence of females trying to bridle, without being trampled, the monsters that slavered them" (303).

Consolata introduces the tawhid concept that dismantles all dichotomies and stereotypes in Ruby's patriarchal community. Some critics have argued that Consolata advocates the ultimate division of spirit and flesh by instructing the women to paint and inscribe their physical selves onto the floor, and let go of the body to "pass on" to the future (Aguiar 517). However, a Sufi interpretation of the women's painting highlights its rending of all veils that limit the self, as announced in Consolata's creed. Through an intuitive form of teaching, Consolata endorses a more connected spirituality that heals the wounds of their histories, "connects mind, body, and nature" (Romero 418), and warns them of severing the body from the spirit: "My child body, hurt and soil, leaps into the arms of a woman who teach me my body is nothing my spirit everything. I agreed her until I met another.... Bones. No different from the man. My bones on his the only true thing. So I wondering where is the spirit lost in this? It is true, like bones. It is good, like bones. One sweet, one bitter" (Morrison, *Paradise* 263). This creed implies that these women have to love, reclaim, and reconnect with their own bodies. In this context, Elizabeth Kella argues that the union between the body and the spirit is an act of personal agency, which is crucial to the creation of "authentic identity" (221). A Sufi translation of Kella's observation implies that the union of the spirit and the body ignites the mobile energy of love that prepares for a divine unity, the authentic momentum of creation. Like a Sufi murshid (spiritual guide), Consolata also urges her murids (students) not to separate women into categories. In harem terminology, this dissolution of hierarchies disrupts the patriarchal classification of harem women into categories. In Sufi terminology, it affirms dissolution of all human differences on the path of induction into divine unity.

Paradise contributes to the literature on the spiritual cachet of harem dance by introducing its revolutionary adaptation in Consolata's garden dance that integrates practices of the Mevlevi Order to transform the Convent women into whirling dervishes. In Sufi theology, dancing expresses the longing to stretch beyond one's limitations, serves as a "'path to the divine origin' of humankind," and "is used to dissolve and heal the self; it does not serve as distraction, but as the means to an end" (Al-Rawi 45). A prominent Sufi dance is the sema, or the sacred ceremony

of the Mevlevi Order, where "women and men were [earlier] known to pray, share sohbet ... and whirl within each other's company" (Helminski 125). The Mevlevi Order is most associated with the "whirling dervishes," the Sufis who twirl themselves into joyful merger with the Absolute (Wines 16). Sema also represents a "mystical journey of man's spiritual ascent through mind and love to 'Perfect'" (Celebi par. 3). The ecstasy precipitated by sema reflects the intoxicating fruit of loving God: "Once the seekers love God, they will be loved by Him in return. God's love may then intoxicate them and annihilate all their human failings and limitations. It may drive away the darkness of temporality and contingency" (Chittick 38). In Paradise, Consolata, who "[took] over the kitchen as well as the garden" (225), acts like a sheikha (female spiritual leader) who initiates the sema and prompts the Convent women to perform a whirl of dance in the garden:

[T]hey stuck out their hands to feel. [Rain] was like lotion on
their fingers so they entered it and let it pour like balm on their
shaved heads and upturned faces. Consolata started it; the rest
were quick to join her. There are great rivers in the world and on
their banks and the edges of oceans children thrill to water. In
places where rain is light the thrill is almost erotic. But those
sensations bow to the rapture of holy women dancing in hot sweet
rain. (282)

Like the whirling dervishes who turn their hands "up to heaven to receive God's overflowing mercy which passes through the heart and is transmitted to earth" (Celebi par. 6), the Convent dervishes shave and upturn their heads and hands to be transparent to God's blessing of rain. The frenzy of these women's dance replicates the crescendo of the sema, through which the whirling dervishes feel lost in the presence of God. As Chittick notes, this crescendo of the dance is the first step toward "'obliteration' (mahw), a state achieved on the Sufi path through which all awareness of the individual self is erased by the intensity of unveiling" (149). This obliteration is symbolized by drunkenness: "When lovers find their Beloved present ... they cannot tell the difference between themselves and God. Seekers become drunk on the path to God because distinctions blur and they are drowned in the sweet ocean of love's unity, an ocean that knows nothing of creaturely distinctions" (39). Like the dervishes who feel drowned in the ocean of love, the women are drowned in both the ocean and rain of self-love and God's love. Conducted by the "furious" Consolata (Morrison, Paradise 283), who was earlier intoxicated by the cellar's wine, the Convent women become intoxicated with the wine of the divine. Their intoxication echoes the uncontrollable emotion that overwhelmed Rumi's dancing, as described by his son Sultan Walad: "He had been an ascetic: he became intoxicated by Love. / 'Twas not the wine of the grape: the illuminated soul / drinks only the wine of Light" (Rumi, Rumi 3). The Convent

dervishes' sacred dance in the realm of the divine, symbolized by Pallas's baby "Divine," undercuts the formality of the Ruby patriarchs' physical pilgrimage to the divine Oven, a space excluding women.

The Convent's whirling dervishes levitate into a mystic world of salvation and celebration beyond death. These women, once identified as "birds, hawks," and "strange feathers" (129, 155), perform the rite of sacred whirling, which opens "new worlds and possibilities . . . to one's own understanding" (Al-Rawi 55). Their levitation, one of the most familiar phenomena of Sufi experience, links them with radiant female mystic forerunners such as Zaynab al-Qal'iyyah from the fortress of the Banu Jamad. Ibn 'Arabi narrates how "when [Zaynab] sat down to practice Invocation [of the Name of God] she would rise into the air from the ground to a height of thirty cubits; when she had finished she would descend again" (155). The Convent women reach, to use Barbara Harlow's poetics of resistance, "recourse in transcendence, the perdurance of a hypothetical eternal" (84) and they surpass their historical and human disruptions, such as the threat of death. Merging with the Absolute and the Ineffable, the Convent dervishes acquire the ability to "die before death and resurrect now" (a famous Sufi saying). The women's realization of divine reality has trivialized and annihilated death, as symbolized by the washing rain: "They would have laughed, had enchantment not been so deep. If there were any recollections of a recent warning or intimations of harm, the irresistible rain washed them away" (Morrison, *Paradise* 282). This theosophy of death-annihilation through purification and transparency is reinforced by Morrison, who envisions the women's ritual as a rite of spiritual climax that transcends the threat of death:

Well, first they go through that ritual of Consolata's, which has echoes of New Age and spiritual regeneration. And then, yes, they end up in a very powerful religious ecstasy, it's interesting and important to me that once the women are coherent and strong and clean in their interior lives, they feel saved. They feel impenetrable. So that when they are warned of the attack on the Convent, they don't believe it. ("This Side" par. 25)

Such a theosophy of the Convent's sema evokes the celebratory dance of Rumi's Mevlevis at funerals, which provoked more conservative Muslims. But Rumi responded: "[W]hen the human spirit, after years of imprisonment in the cave and dungeon of the body, is at length set free, and wings its flight to the source whence it came, is this not an occasion for rejoicings, thanks, and dancing?" (Home 111-12). Contributing to the poetics of resistance that is shaped by "direct, symbolic confrontation" (Scott xvi), the Convent dervishes' transcendence of death through ecstatic dancing presents a challenge to the Ruby men's threat of eradication. Transforming their bodies into sites of resistance, the Convent's whirling dervishes also invert the patriarchal stereotypes of women's dance in the archetypal harem as corporeal and perverted to reclaim its divine and liberatory cachet.

The final phase of the Convent dervishes' rite is the return to the world after the spiritual journey to God. The reappearance of the Convent women after the raid has been interpreted as explicit "troping on the biblical themes of crucifixion, redemption, and resurrection" to generate

"powerful imaginative possibilities for constructing a far more spacious and hospitable social home" (Sweeney 47). A Sufi reading of this reappearance not only asserts Sweeney's notion of its function but also demystifies the perplexity surrounding the nature of the Convent's return, whether corporeal or spiritual. In sema's rite, the stage of "sobriety after drunkenness" corresponds to the return of the whirling dervish from this "spiritual journey as a man who reached maturity and a greater perfection, so as to love and to be of service to the whole of creation, to all creatures without discrimination of believes [sic], races, classes and nations" (Celebi par. 3). This transformation is vividly translated by Chittick as a perception of fana and baqa', or "annihilation" and "subsistence" (35-36). The reappearance of the Convent dervishes not only echoes Eleanor Traylor's celebration of the African "loas" of visionary knowledge, but it also dramatizes the Sufi "extraordinary influxes" of annihilation and subsistence (Chittick 148). The Convent dervishes' spectral encounters and conversations with their loved ones are dramatic expressions of their enlightenment with the ancient and true reality of unity and connection from which they have been veiled.

The Convent's rite of kashf al-Mahjub (the discovery or revelation of the veiled) becomes Ruby's new story about the quest for the divine realm. The Ruby community has been historically fixated by its "stock" of founding narratives, endlessly duplicated by the men (Morrison, *Paradise* 161). As Patricia observes, there are no new stories in Ruby's language. Ruby's sexist and racist language translates what Morrison defines as "exclusivity and dominance" that "cannot form or tolerate new ideas, shape other thoughts, tell another story, [or] fill baffling silences" (Morrison, "Nobel" par. 11). However, the raid on the Convent and the disappearance of its residents weaves a new narrative for Ruby. Following the Islamic harem women's tradition of reciting riddles that flirt with death (Croutier 50, 61), the Convent women present a riddle about the possibility of their disappearance or death. The mystic core of this riddle is the quest for tawhid and annihilation of human limitations. This tawhid influx is inferred in a vision about transcending all disruptions and differences exemplified in Richard Misner and Anna's dispute about seeing a window or a door (Morrison, *Paradise* 305). This vision implies that these differences are trivial on the righteous path to the divine absolute. The Convent's mystic tale also launches a new journey in Ruby's history, initiated by the wandering Deacon who "had changed the most" (300). Deacon realizes his hajb from the divine realm through his twinship with Steward "who saw nothing or everything, [and] stopped them dead lest [Consolata and Deacon] know another realm" (301). Deacon rends the veil of his ideological exclusion by locating "exotic[ism]" and "disunity" in his relation to Steward (Dalsgard 242): "It was as though he had looked in his brother's face and did not like himself anymore" (Morrison, *Paradise* 300). Deacon discerns a mystic vision in Consolata's face, which emits the greenness of divine knowledge "that has been drained from [her eyes] and from himself as well" (289). Thus, Deacon embarks upon his quest for the divine face and light Consolata saw, and like a Sufi mystic, he "formed a friendship ... with somebody other than Steward, the cause, reason and basis of which were a mystery" (300). Like the archetypal ascetic dervish, Deacon "wore his hat, business suit, vest and a clean white shirt. No shoes. No socks.... He turned right on Central. It had been at least a decade since the soles of his shoes, let alone his bare feet, had touched that

much concrete" (300). Deacon's prior "wordless" and "brandishing" language even changes into Sufi-like replies about the greenness, the wine, and the ocean of love (301). Deacon's remembrance of his grandfather's journey enunciates his embarkation on the same path that seeks human and divine unity.

In conclusion, the world of the Convent witnesses a ripping of all veils of racial and gender dichotomies and hierarchies. The Convent women's final rituals transform the gendered and exclusive space of the Indian girls' boarding school into an inclusive and accessible madrasa (religious school) for both male and female murids. The teachings of this madrasa are best described using Morrison's words: "I can't take positions that are closed.... I don't subscribe to patriarchy, and I don't think it should be substituted with matriarchy. I think it is a question of equitable access, and opening doors to all sorts of things" ("Toni Morrison" par. 8).

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