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IS MOTHER AN EMBODIMENT OF LOVE? – A SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
TONI MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

Morrison's writing has been her attempt at discovering her own self as an African-American woman writer, as an individual and as a human being in white America. Morrison's narration in *God Help the Child* reverberates with the condition of black children in America. The title, *God Help the Child* seems to be indicative of the fact that throughout Morrison's literary journey the plight of children has not changed much and that at the pinnacle of her literary stature she has handed over the authority and autonomy of the guardianship of children to God. The child protagonist of *God Help the Child* called Lula Ann Bridewell leads a similar troubled childhood as Pecola. Parental injuries are present in the life of Lula Ann along with lack of maternal affection, respect, familial love and preservation of innocence. Lula Ann falsely accuses a female school teacher for child abuse in order to win her mother's love and recognition. Lula as a daughter aches for the touch of her mother. Her tender psyche is not able to understand her mother's attitude – of considering touching the child is a sin. The mother considers the skin color of her daughter is a curse on her. Bride suffers, all her life, because of lack of Sweetness' duty to her. Her traumatic childhood experiences often keep surfacing though she is a successful business woman. Her lost identity is symbolized by the physical regression triggered by Booker's rejection. However, like any other postmodern fictional protagonists, Bride asserts herself and boldly informs the world about what is working in her mind. She is true to her 'self' and to her lover.

Key Terms: maternal, psyche, traumatic, regression, rejection, and postmodern

Introduction

Morrison's writing has been her attempt at discovering her own self as an African-American woman writer, as an individual and as a human being in white America. Her novels also juxtapose an unrelenting reality of African Aesthetic and African woman's traditions. Her novels are constructed within the realm of African culture as the characters confront white racism and their attempts have been to reconcile the two for fostering an African-American cultural identity. Her novels are women-centered and the 'self' becomes central to Morrison's concern, as she endeavors to create a concordant African-American female identity as she claims, "... I had to bear witness to what was not recorded for this person this female, this black did not exist 'centre self'" (*Playing* 45).

Toni Morrison's female protagonists are evolved out of the African culture, even as they question it for their own marginalization and exploitation and subvert the racist white cultural domination and the stereotypes for forging an independent self-identity. Morrison has consistently articulated her sensitivity to the interiority of the complexity of diverse African-American women's lives unaddressed by her literary antecedents. Her commitment to her culture and community emanates from her awareness that she must explore her cultural past and establish a connection to her cultural present for understanding racism that has been the reality from slavery to the present time. The study of Morrison's novels reveals her exploration of the African-American woman's innate spirit which is conditioned by African culture in the American ambience. The development of the female protagonist from the early phase, where her quest for selfhood is threatened and defeated towards a positive phase of partial self awareness, then it leads to the final phase when she is able to define her identity as an integrated self, well within the parameters of radical feminism and African-American cultural tradition. In all her novels, Morrison has taken meticulous efforts to probe the interiority of the most complex black and female experience in white America. She has delved into the myriads of oppression that the African-American women have been subjected to from slavery to capitalism that has persistently thwarted the African-American female sensibility.

Morrison, as an African-American woman writer, has endowed with the feminist consciousness. She also realized the emergency and the necessity of the black reconciliation with the white culture and values for survival as a race. Hence she attempts an integration of the black and the white culture in the portrayal of Sethe in *Beloved* and Violet in *Jazz*. She says, "it's very important to me that my work be African-American..." (Morrison *Playing* 119). Through a historical time shift, Morrison posits Sethe and Violet in slavery to underscore the intensity of the atrocity on the black race, through slavery and the consequent racism that paradoxically generated a psychological survival of millions of blacks by their reconciliation to the dominant culture since slavery.

Discussion

Morrison's narration in *God Help the Child* reverberates with the condition of black children in America. Though there is a chronological gap of more than four decades between the publication of her two novels namely, *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, yet the trauma of childhood remains Morrison's primary concern. The title, *God Help the Child* seems to be indicative of the fact that throughout Morrison's literary journey the plight of children has not changed much and that at the pinnacle of her literary stature she has handed over the authority and autonomy of the guardianship of children to God. Humans have failed children and now it is time for God to intervene. Therefore, Morrison opens the novel with epigraphic convention that has been borrowed from the Bible: "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not" (Luke 18:16). Such Biblical epigraph and allusion are both inspiring and optimistic amidst the gloomy fictional surroundings. Yvette Christianse making a poignant observation on Morrison's use of Biblical epigraph and the purpose of the novel opines that:

Morrison's fiction reclaims the epigraph from its function as verification, partly to attest to her mastery of fiction.... Her use of epigraph pays with the limitations of paratextuality and the function of authorization, especially authorization granted by a master discourse in the house of race. (219)

The child protagonist of *God Help the Child* called Lula Ann Bridewell leads a similar troubled childhood as Pecola. Parental injuries are present in the life of Lula Ann along with lack of maternal affection, respect, familial love and preservation of innocence. Lula Ann falsely accuses a female school teacher for child abuse in order to win her mother's love and recognition. Lula as a daughter aches for the touch of her mother. Her tender psyche is not able to understand her mother's attitude – of considering touching the child is a sin. The mother considers the skin color of her daughter is a curse on her. She is afraid that the neighbours probably the Americans may look down at her, if she holds the baby's hand. She also avoids telling them that Lula Ann is her daughter. Above all, she wants to kill the baby immediately after its birth: "I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color" (GHC 5).

Children who are deprived of parental care, love, affection, concern, preservation, mother's concern and timely advice by parents generally grow into thugs or social extremists or terrorists. Lula Ann who lost her

father at the age of three and deprived of mother's love and care for sometimes, atleast for a period, during her childhood, has certainly grown into a negative child. Sweetness (her mother) is very conscious that she should not touch the child unknowingly. So Lula Ann starts aching for her mother's touch. In the courtroom when Lula points out one of the teacher's of her school, Sofia Huxley who is accused for child molestation, Sweetness feels proud about her child's boldness while other children swooned or vomited when they asked to stand in the court hall. After the trial Sweetness walks out of the court hall clutching the hands of Lula Ann, which Lula Ann, herself could not believe. However, she feels happy about her mother's touch:

After Lula Ann's performance in that court and on the stand I was so proud of her, we walked the streets hand in hand. It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites I wanted her to know how pleased I was so I had her ears pierced and bought her a pair of earrings – tiny gold hoops. (GHC 42-43)

However, Lula Ann alone knows that she has wrongly testified the teacher, because she has not seen her with little children making some sort of sensual act. Lula Ann, in order to win the heart of her mother and to experience the touch and concern of her, she purposely accused Sofia in the court hall. But her little conscience always pricks her for that incident. Later in her twenty, she prays for salvation at the doors of Sofia. Though Lula Ann leads a life of agony, desertion and deprivation in her childhood, yet does not succumb to her surroundings but she redefines her role in the white American society. She escapes tragedy and emerges as a postmodern heroine of African American fiction. In this regard, Manuela Lopez Ramirez rightly makes an observation on Lula Ann's psyche and states:

During her infancy, Lula Ann is desperately a needy of love. That is why she testifies against her teacher, Sofia Huxley and lies about her pervert abuses of children.... Lula Ann remembers how Sweetness was 'kind of motherlike' the day she pointed at Sofia, smiling at her and even holding her hand when they walked down the courthouse steps, which she had never done before. (113)

Lula Ann suffers on account of her blackness. Her mother Sweetness hates her due to her color. In the opening line of the novel Sweetness asserts with aversion that "she was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black" (GHC 3). On one occasion she even tries to kill her daughter. Lula Ann's father Louis is not able to come to terms with the fact of his daughter's blackness and therefore he leaves his wife and daughter making them destitute. Though he supports them by sending money every month, Sweetness, her mother's anger grows day by day along with the growth of the child. The baby, Lula Ann is treated by her mother Sweetness as inferior because she considers that her high-yellow skin gets a social status in America but not the dark skin that Lula has. She believes that her daughter needs to be well aware of her inferior social status in America where the Americans are superiors because of their white skin. Sweetness justifies her act of treating Lula harshly by stating,

I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn't know the world. There was no point in being tough or sassy even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her. (GHC 41)

The guilt of her childhood troubles Lula Ann till her adulthood even when she tries to make amendments by helping the woman whom she had falsely accused. She leads a troubled and disrespectful childhood due to racism, poverty and color discrimination. Her childhood is as traumatic like any other African-American female children. Sweetness confesses that in her life she had learnt a lesson according to which, "What you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (GHC 43). Bride does not lament over the fact of her dark skin, on the contrary she tries to find new ways to beautifying herself. The cosmetic world is ruled by her who has her own charismatic style. The phantasmagoric and alluring façade of the hyper-real world of cosmetic and beauty cannot be devoid of her individuality. However, her mother's hatred for her, pains Bride more than anything in her life. Bride asserts, "When I woke up I reminded myself that freedom is never free. You have to fight for it. Work for it and make sure you are able to handle it" (GHC 70). Even Sweetness appreciates her daughter's elevation in life and takes the credit by stating that:

I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her.... Last two times I saw her she was, well striking, Kind of bold and confident. Each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes. (GHC 43)

God Help the Child shows how racism promoted a patriarchal authoritarian parenting style. African-American childrearing, Dr. Kerby Alvy writes, "is usually more restrictive and authoritarian, which can be traced to blacks' history of slavery, oppression and discrimination. A stricter parenting style – corporal punishment or downplaying children's good qualities – allowed black parent to keep their offspring safe. Authoritarian parenting, characterized by its low warmth and high control, is associated with the institution of patriarchal motherhood, while one of the most important aspects of a positive mothering is nurturance" (Baumrind 887-907). Only by loving children can help mothers empower them against racism and instill in them a love sense of self, enabling them to confront and question racist discourses that define them as unworthy of love. J.D. Mcleod and M. Shanahan argue "how the mothers' lack of affection towards their infants increases their internalizing and externalizing behavior problems, such as low self-esteem and inferiority complexes, as they feel that they are not 'seen', heard, or even loved" (351-66).

Sweetness, with her ironic name, rears Lula Ann in a patriarchal authoritarian way. Lula Ann grows up bereft of affection and love, which destroys the mother-daughter relationship. Patriarchal motherhood prevents Sweetness from developing the necessary emotional and affective ties with her daughter, which is compulsorily important, during the first years of a child's life. Lula Ann remembers how her mother loathed touching her dark skin: "Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me" (GHC 31). Lula Ann also recalls how she made little mistakes deliberately so that her mother would touch her, but Sweetness found ways to punish her daughter without touching her hateful skin. Lula Ann actually feels glad when she soils her bed sheet with her first menstrual blood for which her mother slaps her. Being handled "by her mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible" (GHC 79), Lula Ann thinks that the purpose of her birth has fulfilled through this act. As an infant, Lula Ann misses closeness of her mother. She remembers hiding behind the door to hear Sweetness hum some blue song, thinking how nice it would have been if they could have sung together. Sweetness' withdrawal of affection is her daughter's worst memory.

However, like any other postmodern fictional protagonists, Bride asserts herself and boldly informs the world about what is working in her mind. She is true to her 'self' and to her lover and therefore she goes in search of him and tells him about what happened in her life when she was very young. It is tough for a modern girl to overcome the obstacles put on her way of emancipation in the name of hostile social set up, strained parental bond, rape, incest, poverty, racism and consumerism. Bride though falsely accused an innocent white woman in order to reclaim maternal affection and respect, yet she feels psychologically disturbed. She is monetarily and physically strong to face the white American society. But she is brutally injured by the falsely accused woman whom she visits for seeking forgiveness. Her boyfriend, Booker deserts her when he learns about her philanthropic gesture because he nurtured deep hatred for child abusers.

However, Bride is not ready to leave her boyfriend as he likes. She goes beyond the convention and travels in quest of her lover to unfamiliar world of northern California. She meets with an accident and spends a few weeks with an unknown white couple and a girl called Rain and she understands that there are Whites who treat others even the Blacks with care and concern, through the couple. Ultimately she unites with her lover and discloses the fact of her pregnancy and her association with Sofia. Her union with him is a blissful one because they decide to give their child a protected and innocent life:

A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe (GHC 175).

Morrison in *God Help the Child* develops a concept of black motherhood that is radically different from that of the dominant Western culture. Her picture of maternity contradicts the prevailing white notions of ideal motherhood. To fully understand Morrison's view of black motherhood, there are two key concepts namely 'motherhood' and 'mothering' defined by Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born* are important to study. Lauri Umansky drawing from Rich's classification, points out that the oppressive and the empowering dimensions of maternity are mirrored in two competing feminist views on motherhood, the 'negative' discourse that "focuses on motherhood as a social mandate, an oppressive institution, a compromise of woman's

independence” and the ‘positive’ one that postulates that “motherhood minus patriarchy... holds the truly spectacular potential to bond women to each other and to nature, to foster a liberating knowledge of self, to release the very creativity and generativity that the institution of motherhood denies to women” (2-3).

Thus ‘motherhood’ is a social and cultural construct, a patriarchal institution that controls, constrains and dominates women and their mothering in contrast to the non-patriarchal experience of ‘mothering’. Morrison’s positive approach to motherhood emphasizes the political dimension of black mothering, which defines motherhood as a site of power and resistance from which women can challenge racial oppression, “in loving her children the mother instills in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalize racial inferiority and commodify blacks as other and object” (O’ Reilly *Toni Morrison* 11).

Morrison challenges the stereotypes of the black matriarchy. This conventional black matriarchal figures, protective and powerful, whose selflessness equates them to their nurturing qualities and annihilates the identity of the mother as an individual, properties that have traditionally been assigned to black women to justify their oppression and submission. Her portrayals of maternity conflicts with the socially-sanctioned views that idealize it – her mothers are active agents who transform and confront the harsh realities of a racial society. Morrison unveils the contradictions of black mothering, which does not abide by conventional standards. Morrison’s opinion on motherhood is also shared by the views of Patricia H. Collins and she aptly argues:

African-American communities value motherhood, but the Black mothers’ ability to cope with race, class and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding but it can also extract high personal cost. The range of Black women’s reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood’s contradictory nature. (133)

Morrison’s oeuvre is crowded with atypical mother figures, which search for self-realization and self-worth in a world that has deprived them of values. Morrison highlights the relevance of motherhood for the woman’s fulfillment in the African-American community and “for the emotional well-being of children because it is the mother who first loves the child and gives to that child a loved sense of self” (O’ Reilly *Toni Morrison* 178). She stresses the tar quality that women possess. In an interview with Judith Wilson, Morrison talks about Jadine, the main character of *Tar Baby*, and how, as a result of the impact of white values and ways of life, the ties with her African-American ancestors have been sundered and she has lost the tar quality, “the ability to hold something together than otherwise would fall apart – which is what I mean by the nurturing ability” (31). In fact, mothers and motherhood are critical to African-American culture, providing “the physical and psychological well-being and empowerment of African-American people and the larger African-American culture” (O’ Reilly *Toni Morrison* 4).

Morrison, in *God Help the Child*, revisits a critical aspect of motherhood: how mothering is highly impacted by a racially-prejudiced society and the dramatic ensuing effects upon children, which she had already explored in her first novel *The Bluest Eye*. In Sweetness, “who’s been poisoned by that strain of color and class anxiety still present in black communities” (Walker 2015), Morrison personifies self-destructive and toxic modes of motherhood, which contrast with a positive mothering that includes, raising children in accordance with the values, beliefs, and customs of traditional African-American culture and in particular the values of the ancient propitities. In each of these maternal tasks – preservation, nurturance, cultural bearing – “Morrison is concerned with protecting children from the hurts of a racist and, for daughters, sexist culture, and with teaching children how to protect themselves so they may be empowered to survive and resist the racist and patriarchal culture in which they live and develop a strong and authentic identity as a black person” (O’ Reilly *Toni Morrison* 29).

Sweetness is an inter-racial individual, whose marginal and tragic state because of the two-world consciousness makes her victim of a race-conscious society. Unlike some of Morrison’s mothers such as Sethe or Eva Peace, whose terrible violations against their children can be seen as maternal acts of resistance against the oppressing patriarchal society, Sweetness’s low self-esteem and self-hatred, which poison her motherhood, are the outcome of her internalization of the patriarchal racist discourse and her disconnection

from the black motherline. The patriarchal institution of motherhood entraps her, revealing her powerlessness: "the power-relations between mother and child are often simply a reflection of power-relations in patriarchal society.... Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel... to return upon the world which it has visited on them" (Rich 38).

Despite all the sufferings, Sweetness' 'protective' motherhood cannot preserve her daughter from the cursed racial and gender discrimination and that starts with Mr. Leigh's insults when Lula Ann sees him abusing a boy. He calls her "nigger" and "cunt" (GHC 15). Lula Ann, who is only six years old, does not understand the meaning of the words, but she can perceive that the words carry the feeling of hatred. Sweetness' authoritarian patriarchal motherhood does not focus on meeting Lula Ann's cultural and emotional needs. She is more concerned about her daughter living up to the standards, norm-abiding ideas, consensus values and expectations of the white-dominated racist society. When Lula Ann has to testify, her mother is very nervous thinking that her daughter's performance may put her to shame, instead of being worried about her stressful situation.

Sweetness fails to fulfill the three essential tasks of maternal practice, without which the child will not be able to confront racial injustices or develop a strong sense of black selfhood. Deprived of affection, effective preservation and cultural bearing, Lula Ann has to struggle her whole life for self-definition, trying to protect herself from being hurt. At the age of sixteen, she drops out of high school and flees to home. Lula Ann changes her name and calls herself Bride. She builds a new life for herself, escaping from her mother's and society's definitions. Bride reinvents and redefines herself. She becomes the regional manager of a cosmetic business firm and leads a glorious life. Being a successful woman, she finds vengeance in selling her elegant blackness to her childhood ghosts, her tormentors, so they can feel envious of her triumph. Notwithstanding, as Bride says, her failure in adult life – her break up with Booker, and being beaten by Sofia, make her realize that, in spite of her mother's strict lessons, she is helpless in the presence of confounding cruelty: "She just obeyed, she never fought back. She feels that she is too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness or the landlord or Sofia Huxley" (GHC 79).

Bride suffers, all her life, because of lack of Sweetness' duty to her. Her traumatic childhood experiences often keep surfacing though she is a successful business woman. Her lost identity is symbolized by the physical regression, "back into a scared little black girl" (GHC 142), triggered by Booker's rejection. The loss of her pubic and underarm hair, thinning of breasts and closing of ear piercings push her once again into a kind of psychic imbalance. Bride's self-confidence and boldness are just an appearance, "thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control" (GHC 134), as the products she sells, while she is really a needy of love and acceptance.

Bride cannot bear Booker's runaway from her without saying a word. She wants to find out the reason of his disappearance. So she sets out to North in search of her boyfriend on a quest for self-realization and self-forgiveness. During her recovery from a car accident in northern California, she had time to think. She realizes that "she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life" (GHC 98). An encounter with Queen makes her feel as if she had been stripped of her beauty and glamour and had taken back to the time when "she was the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother's house" (GHC 144). She remembers Booker's rational words about race, which are 'contradicted' by blacks' day-to-day experience:

'It's just a color', Booker had said. 'A genetic trait – not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin'.

'But', she countered, 'other people think racial –

Booker cut her off. 'Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught, of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it.' (GHC 143)

In rural California, Bride also meets Rain, a semi-feral girl who has suffered terrible abuse in her mother's hands, a rendezvous that "conjures her repressed feelings of racial rejection" (Sturgeon 2015). Their short true companionship and Bride's genuine attempt to save the child are a healing experience for her, a true act of restitution. Finally, she confronts Booker and her confession to him makes her feel newly born: "No longer forced to relieve, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father" (GHC 162). Bride tells him about her pregnancy and he offers her "the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not

need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for" (GHC 175). At the end, Bride acquires, apparently, the sense of self required to a mother to nurse her baby and not to reproduce Sweetness's toxic mothering. There is hope in the end, "brisk modern-day fairy tale with shades of the Brothers Grimm" (Walker 2015).

Conclusion

Toni Morrison thus portraying the lives of Africans in the American continent from the moment of their immigration into America to till date, states the readers that the African Americans undergo a lot of traumatic experiences in the name of race, class and gender discrimination. She, herself, one of the successful African Americans in America delineates the pangs and pains of her people with care, concern and sympathy. Hence the portrayal of the trauma of her people in her works is real and nothing is imaginatively put forth. Therefore, her works are not to be read for pleasure but for the theme – social realism. Her novel, *God Help the Child* offers a painfully compelling detailed account of slave humiliation, gender oppression and class discrimination so that the African life in American soil is recorded, examined and understood for its complexity and significance and not excluded in a new version of American history.

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