



Toni Morrison And Motherhood In God Help The Child

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Abstract

Morrison revisits her favorite theme of the politics of black mother in all her novel. Morrison in her last novel *God Help the Child* she presents the power of other mothering and the challenges of biological mothering in the racially prejudiced society. Most interestingly Morrison presents her protagonist Bride, a victim of child abuse as a successful beauty icon. As in her earlier novels, Morrison emphasizes the need of accepting ancient cultivable properties. She recommends the young members of the black community to lead life in accordance with black foremothers as it provides them with moral strength. This paper aims at critically analyzing the role of mother in making the child, both young and adult, socially acceptable and empowered with special reference to Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*.

Keywords: Motherhood, Socially acceptable, Help the child.

1. Introduction

God Help the Child is Toni Morrison's eleventh novel and in this novel she revisits the theme of child abuse, trauma of racial discrimination, and the impacts of ruptured mothering on children. This plot carries several stories in an interwoven structure in polyphonic voice and in third person narrator. The book has four parts and each part is narrated by Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn and a male narrator. The plot revolves around Bride who owns a cosmetic company, her internal conflicts and her troublesome relationship with her mother. On the surface level the story sound like the emotional conflicts among human becoming but the inner layers of the actions deal with strong racial discrimination. Each chapter of the book appears with the name of the prominent narrator as its title. Along with these principle narrator, Morrison presents a portion of story in the voice of Sofia Huxley who was testified by Bride and yet another chapter through the voice of the little girl Rain.

Morrison's *God Help the Child* begins with the birth of Lulu Ann Bridewell who is known Bride later. Soon after her birth of Lulu Ann she was disregarded by her light-skinned parents because of her dark complexion. Her birth resulted in the devastation of the family as Lulu's father could not believe that he was a father of such a dark-skinned girl. Her mother Sweetness refused to feed her because of Lulu's dark skin. Later the family broke as her father left the family who kept treating Lulu as a stranger. As a child Lulu Ann tried every possible means to please her mother. She testified against Sofia Huxley her school teacher for fifteen years of imprisonment. After the trial Bride saw her mother pleased for

the first time: “Brilliantly, I know because after the trail sweetness was kind of motherlike”. (Morrison 32).

Sweetness in *God Help the Child* represents the impact of economic factors that remain a hindrance to perform mother work. The issue of racial discrimination stops her from loving her daughter. As a mother Sweetness is completely afraid of Bride’s survival in the racially prejudiced world. She is shamed, worried and scared of the child’s skin as it was “midnight black, Sudanese Black...tar to the closet.” (Morrison 4) The color difference that is found amidst of mulatto and quadroons is somehow enabled the black people escape slavery. The reason for her fear goes back to Sweetness’s childhood memories. The racially biased treatment that Lula Mae, the mother of Sweetness received from the Church where she was not even allowed to touch the Bible meant for Whites. Furthermore, she was never allowed to touch anything and not even allowed to use public ladies room. Moreover Sweetness, whose skin is lighter color and who is considered a high-yellow black, thinks herself as superior to darker-skinned blacks, including her own daughter. Her ill guided actions and beliefs teach Bride that she is ugly and inferior. Sweetness rationalizes her behavior by telling herself that she is trying to protect her daughter from racism. In a way how she rationalizes her oppressive attitude towards her daughter is agreeable. Because, according to Collins “racial ethnic children’s lives have been held in low regard”. (Morrison 98) Sweetness remains rigid with Lulu Ann and she never even allows her to call her “mother” rather she prefers to be addressed as “Sweetness” by Lulu Ann. She decides to be careful in rearing Lulu Ann who “needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble” (Morrison 7).

The impact of racism on Sweetness make her stern, rigid, and authoritative mother where she is expected to be flexible, spontaneous, democratic, affectionate, nurturing and playful. Sweetness’s ultimate aim is to nurture Bride to survive in the racially prejudiced world but the way in which she executed the act of mothering has proved her to be ineffective and methodologically a failure. She too often recognizes her flaws and says, “Oh, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lulu Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn’t know the world ... She couldn’t know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her” (Morrison 41).

Sweetness’s aims at immunizing Lulu Ann from racial exploitation. She once confesses thus: “See if I hadn’t trained Lulu Ann properly she wouldn’t have known to always cross the street and avoid white boys” (41). Time and time again in her writing, Morrison emphasizes the need for the parent to have strong sense of self to nurture the same in the growing child. Morrison believes that the nurturing of self-love in children depends on the self-love of the parents. Morrison argues that self-love depends first on the self being loved by another self. Before the child can love herself, she must experience herself being loved and learn that she is indeed valuable and deserving of affection. Bride tires to do everything that she told as a child because she is always seeking to gain love and approval from her mother. Sweetness’s attitude can be viewed as an issue of matrifocality as in matrifocality mothers are structurally in the center and they have the status that has some degree of control over the kin’s unit’s economic resources and is critically involves in kin-related decision making process irrespective of the presence or absence of males. Sweetness’s autonomous status in dealing with her daughters is to make her socially acceptable. Finally she reconciles with her daughter emotionally and completes her narration thus: “I wasn’t bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her ... I think she understands now. I think so” (Morrison 43).

Sweetness though she seems to fail in her mother duty, she lived a life, as Patricia Hill Collins writes in *In Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, “fashioned an independent standpoint about the meaning of Black woman-hood. These self definitions enabled Black women to use African-derived conceptions of self and community to resist negative evaluations of Black womanhood advanced by dominant groups. In all, Black women’s grounding in traditional African-American culture fostered the development of a distinctive African American women’s culture” (11).

Despite hardships, unlike Toni Morrison's earlier creation Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, Lulu Ann emerges as successful empowered soul who is widely known for her beauty. She wears white dress and changes her name into Bride. The transformation from the victim of child abuse into an empowered and beautiful business woman Lulu Ann Bridewell to Bride symbolically represented through the change of name from Lulu Ann Bridewell into Bride and wears white dress to present herself impressively. She does not imitate the beauty standard of White people but projects her blackness as bold and beautiful and successfully establishes a cosmetics company "You Girl ... for ... woman of all complexion" (Morrison 20).

The racial discriminatory issues have a deep rooted impact on the romantic love life of Bride with Booker who also is a victim of child abuse and racism. Booker as his name suggests was raised by his family which gives importance to intelligence, education and communication. As a well education man he pursues his passion for music and poetry. He becomes psychologically upset when his brother was kidnapped and abused, He carries the painful incident in his heart as Morrison says "memory is the worst thing about healing". (29) This gets reflected in his personal life with Bride. When Bride decides to meet Sofia Huxley after the release, Booker goes way saying she is "not the woman" he wants in life. (Morrison 5).

Unlike Booker, Bride wants to reconcile with his childhood trauma and guilt. Her guilt conscience towards her testimony against Sofia Huxley bothers her throughout her life and she decides to meet Sofia for a reconciliation. This moment brings a change in her life as Booker leaves her and Sofia beats her up and refuses to forgive her. After the unsuccessful attempt of reconciliation with Sofia she decides to go in search for Booker and this journey turns to a metaphorical journey of her healing process. She understands the state of mind of Booker who has been hunted by the memory of his brother's abduction and molestation and his eventual death.

On her journey Bride meets with an accident in which she is severely injured. She is rescued by Steve and Evelyn, the white couple who live among woods. They live together with Rain, an emerald eyed little girl. Bride understands the ruptured relationship that exists between Evelyn and Rain as Rain thinks that she has been stolen by Steve and Evelyn. As Bride has been staying with them for a long time, she establishes a bond with Evelyn. Rain confesses about her discontent with her "fake" (Morrison 101) family. Though Bride feels sorry for Rain's attitude towards Evelyn, she feels happy about Rain's affection towards her. As Bride was saved from a jaguar, Rain too was once rescued by Steve and Evelyn. Rain asks Bride to be her black sister forever. Finally she lands in the place of Queen Olive, the aunt of Booker where her physical and psychological wounds heal.

Morrison's Queen Olive, a powerful and successful mother who crosses the boundaries of biological mothering and traverses through other mothering and emerges as a community mother. Queen Olive is Booker's favorite aunt and she is one among the two that Booker trusted and loved. Queen Olive monitors him to realize that he is haunted by the memories of his brother Adam who was victimized by the racial extremism. As a result he could accept anything as it comes. It also forces him to leave Bride assuming that she is a supporter of child molester, without either knowing the truth or the true love of Bride for him. He does not give her a chance to explain herself.

It is Queen Olive who makes him realize that meeting and getting to know Bride is the only true happiness that Booker has found since the death of his brother Adam. She functions to be a perfect and successful othermother by making Booker realize that Bride did everything to please her mother and not for anything else. Queen Olive fulfills all the required qualities of black othermother, "Biological mothers or bloodmothers are expected to care for their children. But African and African-American communities have also recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be wise or possible. As a result, "othermother," women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities, traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood." (Collins 47).

She firmly says that “She (Bride) says the truth. What’s yours? Booker did not answer. The two of them sat in silence with Bride’s light snoring sound until Queen Olive said, “you need a noble reason to fail, don’t you? Or some really deep reason to feel superior”” (156). This act of Queen Olive helps in conceptualizing Morrison’s theory of Motherhood that aims at preservation of children and grooming them to be socially acceptable. She also reveals the mystery behind Booker’s silence to Bride. She is shown as typical mothering with quilt metaphor in it. She “sewed, knitted, crocheted and made lace. . . . A quilt on the headboard of an empty bed, whose springs were apparently cooling outside, was pieced in soft colors and, like everything else, cleverly mismatched” (Morrison 145). Her role as a peace maker has played a crucial role in the life of Booker and Bride. Collins explains the need for othermothers in the black society as,

Black women’s experiences as other mothers have provided a foundation for Black women’s social activism. Black women’s feelings of responsibility for nurturing the children in their extended family networks have stimulated a more generalized ethic of care where Black women feel accountable to all the Black community’s children. (49)

Queen Olive fits within this prescriptive norms of the othermother.

2. Conclusion

In *God Help the Child*, Queen Olive heals Bride. In this novel Olive’s biological mothering role is challenged by the sexist oppressive attitude of her husbands and child molesters. But she succeeds in helping Bride and Booker united and in helping them the continuation of generation. Morrison’s matriarch Queen Olive remains as the life force who show nurturing qualities and ancestral healing properties. They have the tar quality who have the ability to nourish family and community. Through these matriarchal women Morrison reclaims the lost connection with black ancestors as well as asserts matrilineage and motherline. Motherline is a journey back to her female roots where they will encounter ancestors who struggled with the similar difficulties in different historical times. Bride’s Motherline ground them in their feminine nature and through which they reclaim the carnal knowledge of their own bodies, its blood mysteries and power. She unfolds the connection with the archetypal mothers and to the wisdom of the ancient world view which hold that body and soul are one and all life is interconnected. Thus, Morrison through her final work *God Help the Child* asserts the need for biological mothers and othermothering for successful survival of African American community.

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