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## Racism in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Recurrent racism, its social impacts, is a central theme of immigrant writing that creates many landscapes in contemporary literature. The immigrant writer takes an opportunity to attack and tackle racism and its consequence from different angles – religious, cultural and historical. The writer does not randomly preoccupy with and write about her/his intricate experience in the new land, but explicitly unfold his/her race/gender experience with its ups and downs. This type of writing has created a new understanding of theories such as racism/gender/ethnic/counter-narrative and post colonial studies among many others. This alternative genre is maneuvered by political, psychological, social and cultural processes of power that is influential to its construction.

Various multiple meanings and definitions are located for racism, its relevance, to contemporary situation reflects the work of mitigating inequalities between natural groups of people by modern methods. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1998) defines Racism as:

an ideology that gives expression to myths about other racial and ethnic groups, that devalues and renders inferior those groups, that reflects and is perpetuated by deeply rooted historical, social, cultural and power inequalities in society. (Graeme Gower and Matt Byrne 397)

According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Racism is defined as “unfair treatment of people, or violence against them, because they belong to a different race from your own”, and “the belief that different races of people have different characters and abilities, and that your own race is the best”. In *The Handbook of Race and Adult Education: a Resource for Dialogue on Racism*, the term “racism” is:

[T]he belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person's social and moral traits are predetermined by his or her inborn biological characteristics. Racial separatism is the belief, most of the time based on racism, that different races should remain segregated and apart from one another. (Vanessa 334)

In her interview with *The Telegraph's* Gaby Wood, Toni Morrison states her obsession on writing about racism, driving the causes to criminal justice systems that did not get rid of conspicuous “racial disparities”. She argues that: “I want to see a white man convicted for raping a black woman.” In this case, we would agree that racism is over.

The paper textualizes the repeated theme of Morrison and contextualizes the condition of her surrounding in which she strongly works to construct the identity of African American women. Her novels provide insight into the miserable condition of the suffering and oppression of her people. It is observed from the first novel, *The Bluest Eye*, till the recent and may be the last one, *God Help the Child*, the attempt of Morrison is to problematize the dilemma of *Being Black* in America. Therefore, blackness is the key force that shapes this novel and among many

other. The black central character brings out the profound suffering and struggle for countering racism and sexism. Creating a black women-voice, Morrison counters the mainstream portraying the abuse, marginalization and dehumanization of her people. Thus, this paper analyzes Morrison's revisiting theme of racism and re-examining the novelist's voice on black women.

In her eleven novels, Morrison is obsessed with the urgency of racism. For example, in her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), she brings out the awful experience of a victimized adolescent black girl named Pecola and describes, to profound extent, the value of black women. In *Sula* (1973), the author discovers the rejection of conformity within the community including many internal and external factors such as social differences. *Song of Solomon* (1977) is told by a male narrator in search of his identity. It questions African American identity and the relationships between black and white individuals and communities. In *Tar Baby* (1981), Morrison explores the sexual, racial, familial, and social tensions associated with the individual's journey to self-independence. *Beloved* (1987) is a haunting story of slavery based on racism. *Jazz* (1992) is a story of violence and passion drawn with the sense of divergent colour. *Paradise* (1998) is a comprehensive portrait of a black utopian community in Oklahoma. *Love* (2003) is a complicated family story that reveals alienated African Americans and white people in public places such as schools, trains and buses, theaters, and resorts focusing on the spirit of discrimination. *A Mercy* (2008) deals with slavery discovering the African American experiences of slavery and freedom. In *Home* (2012), a shocked Korean War expert encounters racism after returning home and later overcomes indifference to rescue his sister. In *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison affirms and revisits the same topic of racism that has been involved in all her works. She records the history of Lula Bride and its consequences in the contemporary era.

If the *Bluest Eye* is a celebration of Morrison's preoccupation of her racial identity to portray the suffering of her people, *God Help the Child* is a lamentation of it. As she starts writing about a young black girl named Pecola in her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970, the same theme has been repeated in her novels including the recent novel *God Help the Child* (2015). This is because the same dilemma of inequity and oppression upon African American is repeated, through four decades, despite the law and human organizations that call for fighting against the discrimination and social dissimilarity.

In the novel, *God Help the Child*, Morrison has created a new understanding of social justice questioning the matters related to African American women and their tragic condition in America. Her preoccupation with idea of loss and the dilemma of blackness predominates her writing. Racism is a type of bias that ideologically ingrained in the mind of white people that may not be easily cured. Therefore, Morrison strikingly drives us to this point from her first novel *The Blues Eye* in 1970 till her last novel *God Help the Child* (2015).

Morrison reflects the title of her novel, *God Help the Child*, throughout the episodes in protagonist's life. It starts from the birth-delivery of Lula Bride to the final stage of her meeting with Booker, the lover, after a long time of abandon. Despite her social obstacles, Bride exceeds her father, mother and society's borders and strives to live as a bride in the hostile society.

The novel frames the series of the protagonist's life, throws light on the central character, Bride, and her relationship with Booker, who loves her then, leaves her before loving her again. A young girl, Lula Ann Bridewell is abandoned and ill-treated by the light skinned parents who are ashamed of her. As a child, her mother punished her for her dark skin that causes the end of

her marriage. Sweetness's husband Louis could not afford to love a child with a black skin as Bride's. Sweetness tells us "We had three good years together but when she was born he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger— more than that, an enemy."(5)

In this novel, Morrison depicts a very strong child as the central character who struggles with lost innocence and lost identity. Based on Bride's thinking and probing into the mind of her mother, she remembers her joining with a medical student's friend who introduces her to his white family. Racially, she is vividly rejected and driven by the parents to the train stop (37). Later, in her account of her relation with her lover, Booker, she states "Six months into the bliss of edible sex, free-style music, challenging books and the company of an easy undemanding Bride". She disappointedly further reveals "the fairy-tale castle collapsed into the mud and sand on which its vanity was built. And Booker ran away."(135). She feels that she loses the only handsome man who knows her and her dilemma of the partiality in the country. She remembers her complaining about her mother's ill-treatment to her lover, Booker and his reply "It's just a color A genetic trait—not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin" (143). He adds: "Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice" (143).

In this recent novel, the difference drawn in a comparison of mother, Sweetness to her daughter, Lula Bride illustrates many social and racial aspects. While the mother disgustingly laments the future of her daughter, her daughter, Bride, teaches her a lesson of boldness and confidence matching her black figure with white dress. Also, the terrible treatment of the mother sketches a significant point to all "what you do to children matters. And they might never forget", that is seen in the negative reaction of the daughter towards her mother (43). Moreover, the racism is built in the mindset of the mother, Sweetness, who affirms that, even in the school, many problems may occur, explaining the response of the children and their relatives, who has made signs "Kill The Freaks and No Mercy For Devils" (42) This is an exploration of the deficiency law and regulation that protects only white people. Also, when the mother scolds her daughter because of her black skin, Bride remembers and stops calling and visiting her mother.

The novelist affirms the diversity of human attitudes towards each other, while Bride's parents hate her due to her blackness, for instance, the mother dislikes even touching her daughter's skin for punishment. On the other hand, Bride has been loved by Rain, the mysterious white child with whom she crosses paths to look for Booker. Moreover, Bride's love story with Booker is significant and considerable.

Nevertheless, Morrison is preoccupied with the idea of colour, the dilemma of race and the scare of blackness that predominates her writing. *God Help the Child* opens with an abrupt beginning of defiance and self-identification. The novel starts with the voice of the mother, Sweetness, saying: "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened" (3). She discloses from the beginning a big dispute that happened between her and her husband because of the colour of the child, Lula Bride, that is not in her hands and cannot be individually controlled. In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison's emphasis on colourism creates a strong voice to Sweetness, a woman recounting herself as "light-skinned with good hair, what we call high yellow". From the very beginning, Sweetness describes her depressed situation expecting the future victimization of her baby. She says, "It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black."(3)

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The author through the mother, Sweetness, believes that racism is a fact that cannot be denied or solved easily, indicating that: “[S]ome of you probably think it’s a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color—the lighter, the better—in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity?”(4) In *Confronting Environmental Racism: Voices from the Grassroots*, Robert Bullard affirms and argues “At the heart of the problem is the fact that the United States is a racially divided nation where extreme racial inequalities continue to persist” (7). It is agonizingly clear the mother’s choices have been shaped by the realities of being black in a white world – a world where lighter your skin, the more value you deserve. The question of Morrison is why the black child grows up without love, kindness, care or regret and when people intend to erase the standard of race and social prejudice.

The novelist locates racism in the past era referring to the story of Sweetness’s mother and her suffering, striving for livelihood for her and her daughter working as a slave. In the narration of the mother’s experience, the author focuses on discrimination and racism giving example of the two Bibles that are for whites and Negroes. The black has no right even to touch the Bible of the white. But at the end of the novel, everything has been changed, Booker, the white lover agrees to marry the black girl, Bride after she informs him of her pregnancy by him. Therefore, Bride’s aim is to tell the new generation of her marriage with Booker and their new portrayal of success.

Bride also sends a letter to her mother, Sweetness, explaining the matter of her pregnancy that leads her mother to remember the growth stages of her daughter with all its suffering. Finally, her mother thinks that everything did not and will not be changed even after her daughter becomes “a parent”, uttering her simple words “Good luck and God help the child” (178). Morrison focuses on the coming time that will not remove the social borders based on the dissimilarity of black and white. She draws her hope, in the end of her novel, expecting the new birth: “{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” (175). This conclusion is an expectation for a new child that bridges the racial and societal borders providing harmony and tolerance.

The paper is confined to racism as the predicament of African American that many writers have been involved in countering, the cultural racism, offering a worldview in which attributes such as character, behavior, social organization, and cultural expression of black are belittled and white are dignified. In this novel, it is mentioned the work of Sweetness’ mother as a slave in white people house and how racism is a result of her slavery. Also the story of Sweetness with her husband, who left her after the birth of Lula, depends on sexism that is strongly related with racism and its social problem.

The idea of Morrison’s writing about African American is not only writing on race with its struggle of equality but to provide the alternative understanding of African American literature. It is a history of a nation (African American black nation) that must be preserved and reserved in her narration. The notion of racism in Morrison’s work is a current attempt of constructing African American identity; the identity of her own community. The novelist portrays the protagonist individually as a symbol and a representative of the whole community. She obsesses and tackles the same subject of blackness through all her writing confirming their right to live, love and die as white people. Going through Morrison’s different interviews such as “The Pain of Being Black: an Interview with Toni Morrison”, and “In the Realm of

Responsibility: A Conversation with Toni Morrison”, and “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature”, the reader/ listener will certainly obtain the target beyond her writing without scrutiny. She counters the hegemony and power of white people focusing on her own people.

To conclude, Morrison’s sense of race, urgency and advocacy of racial problems is rooted in her belief to affirm the mis/unapplied rights of her people. The focus of Morrison, among many diasporic writers, is to produce the unwritten and ignored history of women, ethnicity, minority and slavery. Therefore, the essential subject matter of Morrison’s novels is the black American experience; in an unfair society her characters struggle to find themselves and their cultural identity. Morrison in her novels reveals how racial domination negatively affects black women through presenting the traumatic experience of her central characters. Her protagonists struggle to live the crisis of various forms of oppression stemming from colour, race and gender and the novels are about how they prove themselves in the world of injustice and bias. The recent eleventh novel, *God Help the Child*, is a typical novel on racism that reflects the recurrent dilemma of a black child, in a civilized country, from religious, social, historical and cultural parameters represented through many voices and different narrators.

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