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Politics of Selfhood and Magic Realism in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*

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Abstract:

Toni Morrison has written eleven successful novels spanning over four decades of her career. The following paper proposes to deal with the very first and the latest of her novels---*The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *God Help the Child* (2015). The reason for such a choice is to show how the eminent author has used the postmodern technique of magic realism to underscore the suffering that children face at the hands of cold and indifferent mothers in both these works. Morrison has offered a magic realist utopia for Pecola in *The Bluest Eye* who has become psychotic after having been mentally abused by her mother and physically violated by her father. While in *God Help the Child* she has put her protagonist Bride in a magic realist dystopia where she reverts from her adult body to that of a child.

Keywords: African American Literature, Dystopia, Magic Realism, Motherhood, Postmodernism, Utopia

Introduction

Right from Morrison's first book *The Bluest Eye* (1970) till *God Help the Child* (2015) abusive mothers is a leit motif in her work. Sethe's murder of her infant daughter in *Beloved* (1977) is the most horrendous and unprecedented example of the same. But thematically speaking the mother daughter relationship at the heart of both *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child* is somewhat similar. The daughters Pecola and Bride appearing in these books are detested by their mothers because of their looks. While Pecola internalizes her mother's rejection and is desperate to feel accepted through the means of obtaining blue eyes, Bride apparently overcomes her mother's disapproval and is able to construct a meaningful identity, albeit temporary, for herself. Another striking similarity between Pecola and Bride is that none of them have the right to address their mothers as mothers. Pecola is taught to approach her mother formally as Mrs. Breedlove thus underscoring her unwanted status in her own home. Bride is taught by her mother to address her as Sweetness. Bride's mother believes, "It was safer. Being that black and having what I think too-thick lips calling me 'Mama' would confuse people." (*God* 6)

The other point of convergence between these two works that are actually four decades apart is magic realism. The author intensifies the suffering of the two girls Pecola and Bride through magic realism. Pecola reaches a parallel world where she is appreciated by a mysterious entity for her blue eyes. In contrast to Pecola, Bride is set on a magic realist path of dismemberment which however leads to a final coming to terms with her own self.

What is Magic Realism?

Franz Roh had coined the term *magical realism* and his essay had been translated into Spanish published by the influential *Revista de Occidente* in 1927, even so according to Erik Camayd-Freixas, the essential link in the dissemination of the idea of magic realism was Arturo Uslar-Pietri, a close friend of Massimo Bontempelli. Since Franz Roh first coined the term 'magic realism' in his 1925 article on post-expressionist art, the term according to Franco has become a catch-phrase which obscures the many varieties of fiction that have appeared in the last decade. Massimo Bontempelli was actually the first to apply the term to both art and Literature.

Magic realism is a technique in art and Literature that allows the inclusion of fantastical elements in the arena of daily life. Magic realism, at the very first glance is problematic because the term itself is an oxymoron. 'Magic' is something supremely unreal and yet it is placed beside the 'real'. Zamora and Faris in the introduction to their seminal book, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, have noted that whereas realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective representation of natural and social realities, magic realist texts use magic as cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, and motivation.

Afro-American use of Magic Realism

Continually fractured by regional wars, border conflicts, internal disputes, regimes of various political persuasions, magic realism was the ideal choice of genre for the New Latin American Novel. Something similar happened with American writers of colour. Being judged at every point of life for their darker skin colour and curly mass of hair was the fate of African Americans long after they were freed from bonded servitude. The unforgettable trauma of the slavery days were recounted in the memories of successive generations. Life in America had never been easy for those who were coloured. The authors of African American fiction thus chose to portray the politics of being black through the use of magic realism. Unfortunately little or no critical attention has been spared on the expansive presence of magic realism in black American Literature. Jose David Saldivar notes that the possibility that magic realism functions as a force or as a

discursive formation in contemporary African American Literature however, has not fully been explored. In the same essay, Salvidar mentions W Laurence Hogue's Foucauldian analysis of African American writing was deficient because:

...[it] was not in a position to recognize was how some African American writers such as Morrison and Shange was profoundly engaged in a bold cultural conversation with the Afro-Caribbean and Latin American tradition of magic realism. (Quinby, 177)

Despite the fact that major critics failed to note the presence of magic realism in African American fiction it became integral to the soul of the fiction penned by the coloured Americans. Ana Nunes has noted that magic in African American Literature has origins in beliefs and superstitions ingrained in black folklore and is, therefore, distinct from other literary traditions that merge the real and the magical. In as early as 1952 Ralph Ellison in his novel *The Invisible Man* had experimented with the mode of magic realism. Disenchanted and sickened by his experiences in society, the invisible man comes to realize the cruel extent of his powerlessness.

Morrison accomplishes the herculean task of calling attention to the cultural amnesia surrounding the past such as slavery and physical and cultural dispossession against the background of the Latin American magic realism and within the African American literary context of the supernatural. The latter context includes the interaction between individuals and their haunted pasts and the silence that often accompanies the black experience in America. Critic Jasmina Murad has observed that Morrison focuses on those experiences which the Euro dominant majority because of its lack of interest in the subject, has failed to experiment with its representation. "Morrison's strategic and emancipatory introduction of magical realism is evident to varying degrees, in all of her fiction." (4)

Morrison however is unwilling to be labeled as a magic realist for she believes that African culture is rich enough to provide her materials for writing. Subscribing to Euro-centric term called magic realism is what she wants to prevent. Morrison's rejection of the term 'magic realism' has been defended by the critic Maggie Ann Bowers in the following terms: "Although Morrison has acknowledged that she uses the technique...rejected the term due to misconceptions brought about by the overly frequent use of the term in the 1990s." (80)

Toni Morrison has repeatedly said that she does not aspire to be stigmatised as a magic realist, but since the general critical consensus does label her as one, it would be interesting to explore some aspects of her writing that might qualify as magic realist, to a varying degree. If we start by sifting through the previously mentioned general symptoms

of magic realist fiction, Toni Morrison's work definitely abounds in detailed sensory input and symbols and imagery; in addition to this some of her work does at times contain unexplained and inexplicable fantastic or dream-like elements and combines these with reality and, what is more, ostensibly treats these as normal.

Magic Realism in *The Bluest Eye*

Pecola Breedlove of Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* is the one who desires the bluest eye. Her mother Pauline has instilled in her a hatred of her looks so strong that she wants to eradicate every trace of it. Her reactions to this situation are twofold. On the one hand she wants to make her body disappear into nothingness and on the other hand she devours the Mary Jane candies in order to feel her and become in essence the socially idolized glamorous woman. Both the approaches are portrayed magic realistically underscoring the tragic life of Pecola on the grounds of her skin colour:

Little parts of her [Pecola] body faded away...Her fingers went one by one; then her arms disappeared all the way to the elbow....The face was hard, too. Almost done, almost. Only her tight, tight eyes were left. They were always left. (33)

Once rejected by her mother Pauline, Pecola tries to fathom as to exactly what will make her acceptable to the former. Pecola observes that the daughter of Pauline's white employer derives love from her while she herself---Pauline's own flesh and blood---is treated as an intruder. Pecola is brutally made to understand that "the white child is the sole object of attention of Mrs. Breedlove's gentler feelings." (Hurst 86) This hurt is just too great for a young girl craving love. She desperately looks for a solution which appears in the shape of a candy bearing the picture of a white child. Pecola succumbs to this media propounded image of the desirable woman---the one with white skin, blonde hair and most importantly blue eyes. In a magic realist setting we see Pecola finding her salvation in devouring the candy which makes her own critiqued identity disappear. She feels elated as she believes that she has been magically transformed into a white child by the means of the candy, "She eats the candy, and its sweetness is good. To eat the candy is somehow to eat the eyes, eat Mary Jane. Love Mary Jane. Be Mary Jane." (38)

Pecola's tale of sorrow does not end with Mrs. Breedlove's rejection alone. It takes the ugliest turn when her father violates her. The pathetic vision that we are left with in the end of the novel is depicted with poignant narration. Now she is left with only one desire in life that is to have the bluest eye. Soaphead Church hypnotizes her into believing that she does indeed have her cherished blue eyes. He feels her demand is justified and thus provides her the illusion of the desirability she craves, "No one else will see her blue eyes. But *she* will. And she will live happily ever after." (144)

The closing pages of the novel guide the readers to a parallel world of Pecola. Here she is intimately talking to someone about her new found blue eyes by the courtesy of Soaphead. The readers are not given any hint as to the possible identity of Pecola's confidant. But there are references in the text that help us understand that possibly this person does not exist. Critics have pointed out that at this stage Pecola has turned insane and these pages are a vivid account of that lunacy. But from a literary perspective this episode is a magic realist one in which the wronged protagonist reaches a utopia where she feels loved for her blue eyes. Her companion ascertains that he/she has arrived because of Pecola's new pair of blue eyes, "And you were right here. Right before my eyes. *No, honey. Right after your eyes.*" (154) In a way then this magic realist utopia actually saves Pecola from total breakdown after the massive blows that had been dealt to her selfhood by her parents.

Magic Realism in *God Help the Child*

The title of Morrison's latest novel reveals the central concern of the work which is childhood. It also makes the readers presume that the 'child' is suffering since 'God' has been called upon to help him/her. But the determiner 'the' is a misnomer here since more than one character in the book suffers from a difficult childhood. The protagonist of the novel *Bride* realizes that she is melting away in the very first lines that she gets to speak in the book. It is something on the lines of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and yet quite subtle. Our protagonist unlike Gregor Samsa does not transform overnight into another creature. Her change is slow; allowing her to tell the readers about all aspects of her life while the sections where her body surprisingly changes come intermittently. As with the definition of magic realism, the protagonist here is subject to both magic and reality simultaneously. The question arises: Why?

Compared to Pecola Breedlove, *Bride* has the courage to fight the revulsion of her mother towards her. In order to draw a little appreciation from her mother *Bride* commits a crime. She implicates an innocent woman of being guilty of child abuse in a court of justice. *Bride* does not testify against the real culprit Mr. Leigh since that is what her mother Sweetness had warned her against as Mr. Leigh was their landlord. But this trying- to-please-the-mother phase passes once she is sixteen. She had been named Lula Ann Bridewell by her mother. As her sense of self is strengthened she reacts against this autonomy of her mother. She shortens her name to Ann *Bride*. She further shortens her name to *Bride* when she starts working for a cosmetics brand to feel as stylish as the brand she represents.

Bride's unnatural physical reversion to the state of her childhood has a deeper significance than is apparently visible. Her rejection by her lover Booker is one of the causes. Booker's brother Adam had been a victim of a ruthless child molester. Booker

had never healed from the brutal death of his brother. When he comes to know that Bride has actually helped another child molester i.e. Sofia after she was released from prison he disowns his girlfriend abruptly. This change also stems from Bride's own guilt of having falsely accused Sofia for child molestation. Bride compares this process to the feeling of 'melting away' (8). The first step in this route of reversal is the disappearance of the foremost emblem of her womanhood---her pubic hair. She describes her amazement thus: "Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place." (12-13)

A few days later Bride while preparing for a party discovers that she has completely chaste ears. Her piercings had disappeared on their own accord. This reversal is significant. The author wants the readers to notice that Bride's transformation is not merely related to her sexuality. It is total reversal. She is shocked to find, "After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb?" (51) She further discovers that her armpits too have become bereft of hair like her pudenda, "There is not a single hair in my armpit." (52)

After Bride recuperates from Sofia's attack she tries to find out where her ex-boyfriend has gone. Her journey takes her to California. En route California she meets with an accident and is rescued by the adopted daughter of Steve and Evelyn, Rain. She becomes a guest at their home until she heals and is able to find Booker. Her movement towards reverting to the body of a child continues even in California where she finds her breasts have disappeared overnight, "It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only nipples to prove it was not her back." (*God* 92) There Bride also notices that she is physically shrinking to the extent of a young girl Rain whose jeans fits Bride perfectly. The 'irreducible element' of magic is present as always as Bride reasons that the cause behind her physical depletion is Booker's curse, "When did I get so small?... So what kind of illness was she suffering? One that was both visible and invisible. Him, she thought. His curse." (93)

This radical change though is not permanent. As soon as Bride is able to reconnect with Booker and subsequently confess the reasons behind helping the accused child molester she regains her former body. It is a kind of poetic justice. She is rewarded for having confessed her sins. As she is finally able to reconnect with her selfhood her body transforms back to normal. She is beyond herself with happiness as she discovers, "the magical return of her flawless breasts." (*God* 166) When she is gifted a pair of earrings by Booker's aunt her piercings return as well, "Bride touched her earlobes, felt the return of tiny holes....Everything was coming back. Almost everything. Almost." (169)

It is interesting to note here that neither the irreducible element of magic nor the theme of child abuse stops with just the protagonist Bride. The magic realist trope extends to

Rain and Bride's friend Brooklyn as well. Rain is a foundling. Evelyn and her husband had rescued her from the abusive relationship she had had with her birth mother. Her biological mother had forced Rain to child prostitution. Like the protagonist Rain too is a victim of the apathy of her mother. But since her adoption Rain has not grown. Evelyn says, "Her baby teeth were gone when we took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is as flat as a skateboard." (97) This magical stasis of Rain's body is perhaps because she is too scared to grow-up having been witness to the ugliest side of adulthood.

In the case of Brooklyn the magic is not without but within. Her mind is magical in the sense that she can sense other people's innermost desires and secrets. She claims that she can read her friend's mind like a headline crawling across the bottom of a TV screen. It's a gift she boasts of having had since she was a little kid. Here Brooklyn reveals that she too has been a victim of child molestation that too within her own family at the hands of her uncle. She confesses that she hid or ran or screamed with a fake stomachache so that her mother would wake from her drunken nap to tend to Brooklyn. She pleads, "Believe it. I've always sensed what people want and how to please them. Or not." (139) *God Help the Child* is perhaps Morrison's finest attempt to encounter the issue of child abuse through the apt implementation of magic realism.

Conclusion

In spite of the many similarities in the portrayal of the two persecuted daughters: Pecola and Bride there are a few differences as well. At the close of *The Bluest Eye* Pecola is still a young girl under the care of her mother while *God Help the Child* is mostly about the adult life of Bride with episodes of her childhood filling in the initial chapters of the work. Magic realism works on different levels in these novels. In the case of the first novel of Morrison magic realism offers a parallel congenial world of escape: a kind of utopia, to the ravaged mind of Pecola. In the latest novel however, magic realism works however slightly as dystopia where slowly Bride loses the bodily emblems of her womanhood. However it is not a wholly negative worldview that we get at the end of the novel. Bride regains her adult body once she comes to terms with herself. Magic realism plays a crucial role in both these novels underscoring the suffering that the mothers unleash upon the only people who look up to them in complete surrender as man looks up to God.

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