

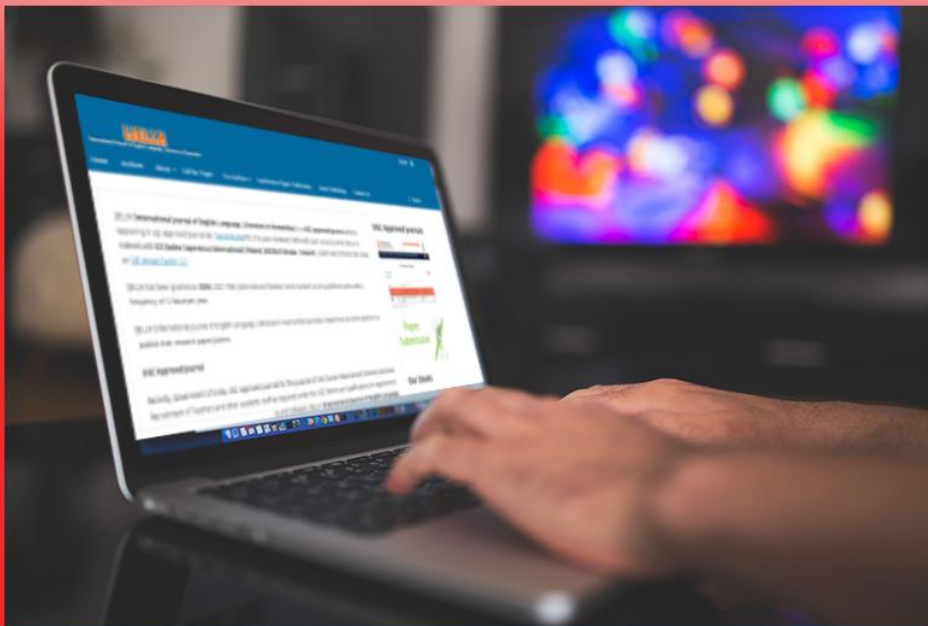
ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

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Facets of Racism: Internalized Racism and Intra- Racial Racism in Toni Morrison's
God Help the Child

Abstract: Toni Morrison's novel God Help the Child is a realistic portrayal of racism and its effect on the psyche of African Americans. Through the characters of Sweetness and Bride Morrison highlights the racism in contemporary America. The present paper is an attempt to explore the delineation of race in the Novel. The paper will highlight how its characters suffer from internalized racism and how it leaves an indelible mark on their lives. The African American women's marginalization will also be examined in the paper. Sweetness and Bride both suffer from racism. Bride because of her tar black colour and Sweetness because of the internalization of inferiority complex.

Key Words- racism, African American women, intra- racial racism, beauty, internalisation of racism

PAPER

Toni Morrison's concern for racism is wide and varied. Her novels ranging from The Bluest Eye to Tar Baby and the recently published Home have provided different shades of

racism and its impact on African Americans. Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child* is another addition to the portrayal of racial discrimination and its impact on the people discriminated. *God Help the Child* published in 2015 is Morrison's 11th novel. The novel is the story of Sweetness and her daughter Bride, born as Lulla Ann and how their life is affected by the prevalent racism in United States. The theme of racism and its impact on African American people is intricately interwoven with the major themes of the novel like, child abuse and role of the past in an individual's life.

God Help the Child is a story of Lulla Ann, a black girl born to a light skinned African American mother named Sweetness and the racial discrimination borne by Lulla Ann due to her black skin, both by the society as well as her family. The paper is an attempt to analyze the treatment of racism in the novel and its impact on a person through exploration of the characters of Lulla Ann and Sweetness. The novel's narration which jostles between the first and the third person aptly brings out the troubled consciousness of the victims of racism. The novel manifests its theme of racism through the exploration of its protagonist Lulla Ann, the self-acclaimed Bride.

The centuries of racism endured by African Americans has emanated into psychological trauma. Web Dubois "double consciousness" manifests this troubled state of African Americans who are grinded between their identity as an American and a black, he says "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (14). Racism had perpetrated into people's psyche through internalized racism and intra-racial racism.

Morrison's novel is noteworthy for its presentation of racism as well as internalized racism. The conflicting relation between Lulla Ann and her mother Sweetness brings out the

issue at the hand. Intra racial- racism “refers to discrimination within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features” (Tyson 362). The racism experienced by blacks has left a huge impact among the populace as the darker skinned blacks face prejudice due to internalization of the racist ideology. This feeling of inferiority of one’s own people exhibits hatred for one’s identity and race. Internalization of the contempt for one’s people is a consequence of the prejudice experienced at the hands of whites. Lulla Ann because of her tar black skin is a victim of direct racism as well as intra-racial racism.

Lulla Ann is born to light skinned African American mother Sweetness whose family of quadroons could pass as white. The mother and daughter do not share a cordial bond and in fact there’s relation of differences. The differences are physical as well as emotional. Sweetness, the mother cannot bear the sight of her daughter, and is repelled of her since her birth as no one in the family was as black skinned as Lulla Ann. She feels embarrassed of her and doesn’t take her outside with herself. Sweetness’s disgust for her daughter’s complexion is apparent in her thought of giving her up to an orphanage after not being able to kill her just after her birth by smothering with a blanket. The motherly instincts for her daughter take a back seat because of the darkness of the latter’s skin. She didn’t breast feed her long enough and starts bottle feeding her. The disgust for her own daughter is evident when she says “All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat” (Morrison 5). Sweetness didn’t even allow her own daughter to call herself “Mother”. She forced her daughter to call her by her name ‘Sweetness’ instead. Lulla Ann was never offered motherly love by Sweetness. Here Lulla Ann is a victim of intra- racial racism at the hands of her own mother.

If Lulla Ann is victim of intra racial racism Sweetness is also a casualty of racism. The novel highlights how the blacks who are victims of racism internalise a sense of race, colour prejudice, and a sense of inferiority for blacks and start idealizing whites. The character of Sweetness is also a victim of internalized racism. "Internalized racism results from the psychological programming by which a racist society indoctrinates people of colour to believe in white superiority. Victims of internalized racism generally feel inferior to whites, less attractive, less worthwhile, less capable, and often wish they were white or looked more white" (Tyson 362). Sweetness thinks of whiteness as the only means to survive in a world where being black has such hazardous implications, where most of the social rights are distributed according to one's skin colour, or "skin privileges". We come across an instance of this internalization of racism in the very first chapter of the novel when Lulla Ann reviews the history of blackness in her family. She points out that "Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color- the lighter, the better- in social clubs, neighbourhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity?" (Morrison 4). Sweetness's own grandmother also tried to pass for a white as she herself claims. She claims that's what all mulattos and quadroons used to do. Knowing that lighter the skin colour better the privileges, makes her effort to pass as white. Not only this she doesn't take Lulla Ann with her outside fearing what people will think of her, they might question her honour as does her husband Louis.

Another facet of Sweetness's stern treatment towards Lulla Ann is the former's awareness of the reality of racial prejudice in the contemporary world having witnessed the skin privileges accorded to people in the society. She teaches Lulla Ann how to behave in public according to the colour of her skin so that there is no trouble. She suppresses her motherly instincts to make her tough enough to take on the world which is full of racism. She

tries to make her aware of the everyday reality, that while walking on the sidewalk she'll have to give way to the whites first, so do "charged a nickel at the grocers's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers"(Morrison 4).

Morrison has used the wide spectrum of mother daughter relation to analyze the impact of racism through internalized racism leading to intra- racial racism. The novel through the portrayal of Sweetness and Bride bring to the fore the plight of racism experienced by African Americans specially Black women. As Katie Canon states "[T]hroughout the history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the Black woman's reality as a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed" (qtd. in Collins 26). Black women have been subject to patriarchy as well as racism. Sweetness exhibits this struggle of black women.

Black women like Sweetness are not only the victims of everyday racism but they are doubly oppressed because of patriarchy. In the novel's delineation of racism there are no fixed boundaries between victim and culprit. Looking from the feminist perspective we find Sweetness is not the culprit but she herself is a victim. She is a victim of the malignant practice of racism and patriarchal oppression as a woman. Her husband, Louis seeing Lulla Ann's dark skin accuses Sweetness of infidelity because of the child's dark skin. And when Sweetness argued that their daughter's blackness can be from his family he just leaves Sweetness and Lulla Ann with no means of their own. However he later realised his mistake and tried to amend for it by sending them some money. With no means of sustenance left for herself and her daughter, Sweetness makes ends meet by working at a hospital. Hers is a plight of a black and that of "an abandoned wife".

Being a single coloured mother is enough to make her life difficult. Due to the racist discrimination most people didn't rent their houses to coloured people. She was a victim of the segregation practice; her landlord raised the rent up to seven dollars because she was a black. As a single mother she faces a dual struggle one in the family sphere and the other in society. We can see that she was in a fix between her own dislike for Lulla Ann and racist society's hatred towards the blacks. Rightly do Tracey L. Waters's writes "the exigencies of racism and poverty in White America are sometimes so devastating that the mothers have neither time nor patience for affection" (qtd. in Walters 123). The novel poignantly brings before us the dilemma faced by African American women. The fight against racism impinges on a woman's role as a mother. Sweetness suffers from internalized racism, and her attitude towards Lulla Ann is the very result of it. Morrison makes a plea against the victimization of black women in society.

Lulla Ann is also subject to society's racism. From the childhood she had been at the receiving end of racial prejudice. The description of the racist remarks she was subjected to is heart wrenching. Her first experience of racism is with her landlord Mr. Leigh who introduced her to the word "Nigger". Her school introduces more racist experiences and words more hurtful than before. She was constantly bullied at the school by her fellow classmates. With no option left to her she just endures all the mocking with no one to tell. The heart wrenching experience at her school is aptly conveyed by Lulla Ann, who says "... school when other curses- with mysterious definitions but clear meanings – were hissed or shouted at me. Coon, Tops. Clinkertop.Sambo.Oogabooga.Ape sounds and scratching of side, imitating zoo monkey" (Morrison 56). She even faces prejudice in the beginning of her career, where she was not assigned the position which included direct encounter with customers knowing that her colour would affect the sales.

Raised in such racially conscious society and family affects Lulla Ann psychologically. Her mother's indifference leaves her forever longing for the motherly affection. In her childhood she was aware that her mother didn't like touching her. Her yearning for Sweetness's love and touch manifests itself in her deliberate mistakes, so that her mother could touch her. The anguish of the unloved child is brought forward by her when she recalls her mother's conduct:

Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated- bed without supper, lock me in my room- but her screaming at me was worst. (Morrison 31)

Psychoanalysis and feminist scholars like Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, have stressed the intricate bond of mother-daughter relationship. They all stress that a child's personality is deeply affected by the bond she shares with her mother. Similarly Lulla Ann's personality is negatively influenced due to the absence of motherly love.

The rejection from the mother breeds in her a desire of social acceptance. It is these desires of mother's love and acceptance that lead her to testify against an innocent woman Sofia Huxley who is falsely accused of sexual abuse of children. Bearing witness to the conviction of Sofia turns out to be an opportunity for the acceptance in the world which has ousted her from itself. She thought that if she conforms what it expected of her she would be accepted by society. As a child who is used to rejection when a prospect of acceptance in society opens before her she grabs it. She is overwhelmed by the response she gets after Sofia Huxley's conviction when "...mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up. Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the

courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand.” (Morrison 31). The emphasis on “my hand” twice is an emotional response of the loveless child who cannot believe that her mother is holding her hand. The rejection suffered in childhood haunts her to young age and made her question herself “Wasn’t she worth something? Anything?” (Morrison 98)

Psychological damage due to racism is delineated by Morrison in the novel. Self-alienation is the result of the hatred she experienced because of racism. Hardened by her experiences Lulla Ann develops a sense of alienation from the self. She rechristens herself after leaving high school from Lulla Ann Bridewell to just “Bride”. Rechristening herself is the first step towards escaping from her past self and orienting a new identity. After passing out of high school Bride leaves her mother’s home and lives separately and severs her ties off from the traumatic past by restricting her relation with the mother by just sending financial aid.

The novel is unique in a sense that it not only presents racism and its victims, but how the victims counter the exploitation and fight off the colour game with confidence. In order to fight racism Lulla Ann carves a new identity. By portrayal of a strong character like Bride Morrison takes one step towards strengthening of African American women. Being discriminated and victimized whole childhood, Bride uses her blackness as a tool to craft a new self with courage. She uses her colour as a weapon to fight off all the disgust she faced as a child. As she confesses:

I built up my immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide deathlike pallor. ...I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. (Morrison 57)

Bride's new self has echoes of "Black is beautiful". She strengthens herself from the absence which haunted her all the while- Whiteness. Now the grown up Bride dresses herself only in white colour and its shades. Dressed up in all white, with no makeup and jewellery she uses her skin to her favour and turns the table around, as Bride retort that people still notice her but the disgusting glares are now substituted by "adoring looks", surprised by her beauty. Transforming what used to be her weakness into her strength and using it to her advantage she creates a mark for herself in the world. Boys desire her and girls are envious of her beauty and confidence. Transforming herself from a person who is rejected to an object of desire is Bride's revenge on the society and Sweetness. Who was once mocked as "Sambo", "Coon", (Morrison 34), is now the same person from whom people cannot take their eyes off. Bride now is no longer a scared little girl but a confident and bold woman. The new self is what Jeri, Bride's designer says "A panther in snow" with "Wolverine eyes" an alter ego of child Lulla Ann that no longer is afraid but focussed. She works in a cosmetic company Sylvia, Inc., as a regional manager. It is highly ironical that the same girl who was taunted and discriminated by society due to her black colour now heads a company of beauty products.

Bride is suggested as the alter ego of Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. Bride unlike Pecola who wished for blue eyes in order to look beautiful and accepted by her family and society uses her blackness to succeed. She doesn't sag into negativity like Pecola. She is rather unlike her mother Sweetness and doesn't foster the skin privileges. Even the cosmetic line that Bride takes out is named "YOU, GIRL". The name itself highlights confidence and independence. Her cosmetic line is for all complexioned women rather than only for dark complexioned women, as used to be before. She is fully career oriented and believes in empowering herself. Her confidence knows no bounds.

Morrison has used the technique of magical realism in the novel to underscore the effects of racism. Morrison exhibits her command over the technique like her previous works. Here the technique is used to bring to the fore the emotional insecurity Bride feels when Booker, her boyfriend leaves. When Booker leaves Bride experiences physical and hormonal changes like loss of pubic hair and discontinuation of menstruation. Through magic realism Morrison suggests Bride's transformation back to a child. The movement back to the childhood suggests the return of childhood loneliness, and emotional insecurity. She feels alone in the same way she used to feel as a child because of the absence of her mother's love. The same state of emotional vulnerability returns when she has been jilted by her boyfriend Booker.

Morrison uses the occasion of the critique of racism to condemn the concept of physical beauty. The character of Booker's aunt is used by Morrison to comment on the superficiality of the concept of beauty. The aunt's disregard for Bride's beauty shatters the latter's myth of superficial beauty. As later in the novel, Bride accepts "she had counted on her looks for so long- how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness or her own cowardice- the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it" (Morrison 151). The interlinked nature of racism and beauty is the target of novelist's satire. Furthermore Morrison uses the character of Booker to denounce race, and makes a plea against racism and colour prejudice. He becomes the author's mouthpiece and voices his view by consoling Bride "It's just a color...A genetic trait- not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin" (Morrison 143). He presents the scientific facts against the prejudice and demolishes the belief of race supremacy.

Thus the novel presents a critique of racism and delineates its psychological impact on African American psyche. The novelist major focus is women of colour who in addition to

racism are also burdened by patriarchy. Through the character of Lulla Ann novelist exhibits the seldom discussed topic of intra- racial racism.

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