

Negotiating Race from within: Intra-Racial Discrimination in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Abstract

The exploration of intra-racial discrimination and its implications has always been at the heart of the literary works of African American writers. Toni Morrison is one of those African American writers who have explored intricate race issues, including racism, intra-racial discrimination, as well as questions of identity and self-image. This paper seeks to investigate Toni Morrison's portrayal of intra-racial discrimination in *God Help the Child* and its profound repercussions on the self-perception, identity formation, and overall well-being of African American people, revealing the complex interplay between intra-racial discrimination and the broader framework of racism in America. Morrison's *God Help the Child* explores the intricacies of internalized racism catalyzed by dominant cultural discourse, which marginalizes African American's voices, and views their experiences through a prism that reinforces white cultural values and norms. Over centuries, African Americans have been subjected to many forms of racial discrimination, marginalization, oppression, and stereotyping, which have permeated into various aspects of their lives, shaping their perceptions of themselves and their identities. Caught in this pernicious, vicious circle of negative stereotypes and uprooted from their own identities, they began to question their capabilities, intelligence, attractiveness and worthiness in society. Consequently, they engaged in intra-racial discrimination, blindly eroding the cohesion and social fabric of their own community.

Keywords: Intra-racial discrimination, Identity, marginalization, Racism, Stereotypes, Toni Morrison.

Introduction

Racism shapes the lives of Black people and certain racial or ethnic minorities in ways which are more often than not invisible to the members of privileged groups. It impacts their overall well-being by virtue of encounters with racial discrimination and internalization of prevailing stereotypes regarding their appearance, intelligence, and self-regard. Toni Morrison has dedicated her literary career to investigating the complex dynamic between African Americans and the broader American society in dreamlike and nonlinear plots, which embody the harsh and turbulent lives of Black people. Throughout her oeuvre, Morrison reveals the fact that racism is the primary factor that leads to and catalyzes intra-racism within the African American community in particular and other racial minorities in general. The

more Black people experience racism, the more they yield to the racist narratives and thus embrace them within their race. African Americans with a darker hue of colour experience discrimination within the circle of their race because there does exist a nuanced colour stratification system inside the African American community, wherein lighter-skinned people perceive and treat those with darker skin tones as inferiors. In this regard, Jeff Chang contends that:

Cultural blindness led to the creation of images of otherness and blackness that promoted the notion of their inferiority: “Racism, in other words, was supported by a specific kind of refusal, a denial of empathy, a mass-willed blindness. In this context, the Other’s true self might always remain unseen. The Other might always bear the burden of representation” (14).

In her “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination”, Morrison undertakes a critical examination of the racist depiction of African-Americans in literature, drawing attention to the power relations that have been shaping and reshaping the social dynamics. She astutely points out that “race has become metaphorical –a way of referring to and disguising forces, events, classes, and expressions of social decay and economic division far more threatening to the body politic than biological ‘race’ ever was” (Morrison 63). Morrison’s discerning analysis sheds light on the white writers’ racial representation of African Americans, which has inflicted deleterious consequences on their sense of self-esteem, while simultaneously perpetuating systems of oppression, and nurturing a climate of racial discrimination based on the colour tone of one’s skin.

Intra-racial discrimination is obviously seen within the African American community through the manifestations of hostility, ostracism, and the perpetuation of preconceived biases concerning levels of cognitive capabilities and physical beauty. Sandi J. Robson defines intra-racial discrimination as colour-based discrimination, which involves discrimination by a member of one race against a member of the same race because of a difference in skin colour (983). In her *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens*, Alice Walker defines colourism as “prejudicial or preferential treatment of the same race people based solely on their color” (290). Similarly, Deborah Gabriel defines colourism as “a pernicious, internalised form of racism which involves prejudice, stereotyping and perceptions of beauty amongst members of the same racialized group, whereby light skin is typically more highly valued than dark skin” (Layers of Blackness11).

The colour stratification system is well documented in history and literature, and many African Americans are aware of the fact that racist white people more often than not treat light-skinned Blacks better than their darker counterparts, and this treatment was mirrored in the social life of Black folks. For Blacks, being born with a lighter skin colour means a better and easier life ahead, while a harder life awaits those born with darker skin tones. The beginning of intra-racial discrimination can be traced back to the era of slavery when miscegenation or interracial marriage produced a kaleidoscope of skin tones and bodily features. Owing to their lighter skin hue, certain enslaved people disproportionately had more access to a sort of informal education than those dark-skinned ones, while others were exempted from work in the fields and were later freed. The white standards of beauty rooted deep and firm in the consciousness of Americans have tremendously affected the social lives of Black folks. Although “beauty is not universal or changeless” (Wolf 12), white Americans persistently stressed their politicized and racist view of beauty and propagated the idea of “White Supremacy”. As a result, the African American community, among other racial minorities, has been colonized by the definitions of this

dominant culture. The Black-White dichotomy has wrecked havoc on Black community to the extent that they started to categorize their people into strata, discriminating against each other and demolishing their race from within. Ideal characteristics of beauty such as fair complexion, intelligence, straight hair, and bodily beauty, which give white folks supremacy over other folks of colour have become the criterion against which one's social status is judged. Levine-Rasky defines racialization as "a process in which 'race' is attributed to a population of people, facilitating the practice of racism against them" (90). According to her, whiteness is a "social characteristic" that defines the "normative social order" (4). Consequently, the imposition of normative standards by the dominant white centre relegates all other ethnic groups to the periphery, compelling them pursue an elusive symbolic ideal. The white ideal of beauty has become a symbol of transcendence, and its absence reduces the Black self to a polarized other. That being the case, this white ideal of beauty sparked a race among darker-skinned people, urging them to turn every stone to achieve lighter skin tone so that they hold a better social status. The African Americans failed to realize the fact that evaluating one's worthiness in society by the white standards of physical perfectionism and looking at one's self-image through the lens of Whiteness erode one's self-esteem and self-identity. W. E. B. Du Bois aptly describes this situation of oscillation between Blackness and Whiteness as "double-consciousness, [a] sense of 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" (201). Thus Morrison in *God Help the Child* subtly probes the intricacies of this "twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body" (Du Bois 201), revealing its devastating repercussions on the African Americans' self-image, self-esteem and sense of belonging.

Discussion

Toni Morrison unequivocally demonstrates a deep insight into the African-American community. Her writings explore the complex experiences of being brought into existence in America and the consequential emotional burdens that stem from this state of being. As a Black woman, she shows a sophisticated understanding of African-Americans' daily life, and as an intellectual, she endeavors to interpret the complex circumstances of African Americans and their positioning within a system of racial hierarchy. She subtly indicates that the Black community is a victim of the White norms, which place the white characteristics in the center and relegate the characteristics of other racial groups towards the margin, showing them as mere satellites in the orbit of whiteness. Ostracized to the Black periphery, Black people aspire to come closer to the unattainable white centre- a centre which drives away any color that is not white. In the hope of reaching this impossible center and reaping its privileges, they strive to shed off their dark skin tone and wear a lighter one, which qualifies them to be acceptable in society. In so doing, Black people go through a complicated dilemma of quest for identity, ultimately culminating in serious consequences.

Despite the emergence of cultural movements such as "Négritude" and "Black is Beautiful" that aim to refute all the allegations of white superiority and to celebrate the value of Blackness, Black people still fail to escape the influence of stereotypes deeply ingrained in the social and cultural fabric of the United States. They have always been taught that "the physical differences between races are signs of deeper, typically intellectual and moral, differences [and thus] . . . the physical ugliness of black people [is] a sign of a deeper ugliness and depravity" (Taylor 16). The belief that physical differences between racial groups betoken underlying difference in intellectual and moral attributes has perpetuated

the notion that the physical “ugliness” attributed to African Americans denotes a deeper sense of unsightliness and lack of moral integrity. Morrison’s main concern here is to explain this complex dynamic by delving into the lived experiences of African Americans, exposing the intricate interplay between the external “white gaze” and the internal response of the object of gaze. Simply, she illustrates how this “white gaze” manipulates and shapes African Americans’ identity.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison engages in an examination of the complex predicament of being Black in America, elucidating the profound repercussions entwined with the Black experience. She questions the myth of post-racial America, featuring how the specter of racism continues to play out, exerting pernicious effects across the various aspects of the lives of African Americans. Morrison’s exploration delves into the mechanisms through which African Americans have been stereotyped, and their consequential internalization of these stereotypes, which drive them to discriminate against members of their own community. Razia Iqbal argues that “[t]he fault lines of contemporary racism are ever-present, but the complexity of the racism internalized by African Americans is also there. The impact of that secondary hierarchy of racism is the backbone of Lula Ann’s story” (“Pain and Trauma”). Caught in this vicious circle of discrimination, they endure family breakups, interpersonal tensions, community division, identity crisis, and cultural erosion.

God Help the Child narrates the story of Lula Ann/Bride, a successful and ambitious young African-American woman who works in the fashion industry. She undergoes many setbacks throughout her life due to her childhood trauma precipitated by her parents’ rejection of her because of her dark skin colour. In this novel, the African American community, rather than white society, is the source of racial prejudice. Within this community, skin colour is an important determinant by which African Americans evaluate themselves. Set in modern-day America, the novel carefully examines the plight of racism which continues to loom in what is called the post-racial America. Being uprooted from Blackness and having restricted understanding of her Black identity, Sweetness yields to the prevailing racial stereotypes and consequently discriminates against her very own daughter, Lula Ann. From the very first look at her daughter, she becomes conscious of her dark skin tone and suddenly dives into a deep introspection, trying to decipher why her daughter is born with such a dark skin tone.

Right from the outset of the narrative, Sweetness seems to be lost and frustrated. The narrative's stream-of-consciousness quality spotlights the extent to which her thoughts are fragmented and disorganized. The advent of Lula into a world where colour still matters badly shakes her life. She thinks that “[Lula Ann’s] colour is a cross she will always carry” (Morrison, *God* 7). In order to comprehend Sweetness' callous attitude towards her daughter, her shame of her own race, and her desire to identify herself with whiteness, it is imperative to revisit her family’s history with racism. Sweetness’s parents undergo unbelievable racial experiences. For instance, when they “went to the courthouse to get married, there were two Bibles, and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes” (4). In order to shun being ensnared in such embarrassing situations that erode their sense of self-worth, Sweetness’ parents resort to internalizing prevailing racial ideologies and embrace them in their lifestyle. This materializes in their detachment from the way of life members of their race lead, and their persistent endeavor to pass for whites as “neither of them would let themselves drink from a “coloured only” fountain even if they were dying of thirst (4).

Born to light-skinned parent and a grandmother who chose to sever familial ties to pass for white, Lula Ann experiences intra-racial discrimination owing to her dark skin colour right from the moment she comes into the world. She encounters rejection from both her own family and her community whose social fabric has been damaged by systematic racism. The narrative opens up with Sweetness, Bride's mother, disavowing any responsibility for the deep pigmentation of her daughter's skin. She feels ashamed of her "midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison, *God* 3). Sweetness seems to have borne the brunt of racism to the extent that she wants to escape the agony of being black, even if the price is killing her daughter. Being "light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow" (3), Sweetness is not ready to accept her "ugly, too black little girl" (3) simply because "ain't nobody in my family anywhere in that colour" (3). Lula Ann's formative years are marked by a distinct absence of affection and emotional warmth. This absence is manifested in a series of racially-infused incidents yet not limited to: firstly, her mother's reluctance to nurse her as nursing her is "like having a pickaninny sucking [her] teat" (3); secondly, her mother's contemplation of extreme actions, including the possibility of throttling her to death or giving her away to an orphanage because of "[her] terrible colour" (5); thirdly, her father's refusal to touch her; and lastly, her mother's "[d]istaste [which] was all over [her] face" (31) when she bathed her. Lula Ann sometimes intentionally misbehaved so that her mother "would slap [her] face or spank [her] just to feel her touch" (31). Feeling helpless before the inevitable American myth of white supremacy, Sweetness believes that categorizing black people "according to skin colour—the lighter, the better" (4) is not a fault as long as it is the only way to "hold on to a little dignity"- "to avoid being spit on in a drugstore, shoving elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that is free to white shoppers (4). Likewise, Bride's father, Louis, was awfully shocked at her colour. He distanced himself from his daughter and "...treated her like she was a stranger-more than that, an enemy" (5). He is embarrassed of her colour to the degree that "he never touched her" (5). Looking at her, he blurts out, "what the hell is this?" (5). After a long argument with his wife, Louis abandons her, accusing her of infidelity. Despite Sweetness' sincere efforts to prove to him her unwavering fidelity and the fact that Lula Ann is his biological offspring, he remains incredulous owing to his failure to conceive the possibility of begetting a baby with such a dark complexion. Sweetness blames Lula Ann, declaring that her birth "broke our marriage to pieces" (5). It is obvious that Sweetness and her husband have yielded to the belief that social acceptance for African Americans is reachable only through the possession of a light skin tone, which brings them more closely to white privilege.

Intra-racial discrimination is a recurring theme in Toni Morrison's fiction. Tracing the thematic interconnectedness between Morrison's debut novel *The Bluest Eye* and her *God Help the Child*, Bernardine Evaristo argues that "[t]here is . . . [a] sense of a circle being completed with this new work because Morrison's very first novel shares its two main thematic preoccupations of child abuse and shadism, the inter-black prejudice against darker skin tones that is rarely given a public airing" ("*God Help the Child*"). Both Pecola and Lula Ann are dark-skinned and rejected by their parents. Lula Ann is lead to believe "much like Pecola . . . that her dark skin was a sign of inherent wickedness, akin not to a temporary ailment but an irremovable curse" (Willoughby, *Visible Scars*). Pauline distances herself from her daughter, Pecola, because "she was ugly. Head full of pretty hair, but lord she was ugly" (124). She gives up her maternal duty towards her child and devotes all her life to the white Fishers family. Thus, Pecola is deprived of her maternal love and affection just in the same way Lula Ann Bridewell is in *God*

Help the Child. The narratives that elucidate the lived experiences of Pecola and Lula Ann within the framework of Blackness reveal the proclivity of Black people to embrace whiteness as a standard of social acceptability. In *The Bluest Eye*, Geraldine differentiates between “Niggers” and “Colored”: “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison 85). These narratives exemplify Toni Morrison’s assertion that “there is a clear flight from blackness in a great deal of Afro-American literature. In others, there is the duel with blackness (the quality/state of being a Black person), and in some casesYou'd never know” (Unspeakable 146). That is, the historical legacy of racism in America has created a cultural climate in which being black is frequently seen as a liability or a source of disadvantage. As a result, some African Americans may feel compelled to assimilate into the mainstream culture or distance themselves from their racial identity to make the cut.

On another level, Morrison confronts the enduring legacy of ingrained racism and its insidious impact on maternal instinct. Throughout her oeuvre, Morrison masterfully weaves together various threads of the complex tapestry of Black motherhood, crafting a compelling drama that leaves an indelible impression on the reader. She foregrounds the importance of maternal responsibility and childcare, emphasizing that mothering is not merely a task that revolves around “cooing, booties, and diapers” (God 178). Rather, mothering requires a great deal of dedication and an involvement of a whole community as, Morrison astutely opines, “two parents cannot raise a child any more than one. You need a whole community – everybody to raise a child” (Angelo260). Regrettably, Sweetness, being in thrall to the insidious colour ranking system within the black community and the racial hierarchy as a whole, finds her daughter’s “blue-black” (Morrison, God 5) skin repellent, so much so that she does not allow her to call her “mother” or “Mama” (6). Instead, she insists on the sobriquet, “Sweetness” because it “was safer” (7). She thinks that “being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me “Mama” would confuse people” (6).

In *Beloved*, Morrison censures the atrocities of a system where Black mothers could not safeguard their children since, given the probability of dire consequences for doing so, they could have “been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, stolen or seized” (Beloved 28). In contrast to Sethe, whose profound love prompts her to murder her daughter, Beloved, Sweetness's actions stem from a self-centred urge to maintain the advantages associated with her skin tone. This underscores the extent to which hegemonic cultural discourse has widened the gap between light-skinned Black people and dark-skinned ones by associating whiteness with morality and beauty and blackness with immorality and ugliness. Sweetness regards her daughter as a “throwback” (God 3). She aligns herself with those who aspire to erase their colour; and therefore, she is unwilling to allow her daughter accentuate it. Denying the responsibility for her daughter’s black colour, she says: “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me” (3). Rather, she implicitly assigns full responsibility to the long-standing history of slavery and racism in America or maybe “to an unknown force akin to destiny” (Willoughby, Visible Scars). She justifies her callousness towards her daughter by claiming that she's preparing the girl for her integration into the world outside their home—“a world where you could be sent to juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, . . . where you would be the last hired and the first one fired” (41).

As a third-grader, Lula Ann resorts to a fabricated machination against her teacher, Sofia Huxley, accusing her of child molestation and testifies against her in the courtroom. This grave mistake seems to

be a desperate attempt to get the attention and affection of her emotionally distant mother. On the day of the testimony, Sweetness feels proud of Lula Ann, “smiling like [Lula Ann has] never seen her smile before” (God 31). Lula Ann feels happy yet surprised when her mother “held [her] hand, [her] hand” as “[she] never did that before” (31). In fabricating such a baseless accusation, Lula Ann believes that it would urge her mother to acknowledge her presence and help bridge the gap between them. This extreme action can be understood as a reflection of the tragic extent of Lula Ann's emotional deprivation. Her decision to resort to such extreme measures marks the depth of her yearning to win her mother's attention, even if only for a fleeting moment. It is also a poignant testament to the terrific lengths to which inter- and intra-racial discrimination effects may go, disrupting communal cohesion, straining familial relationships, eroding identities, and tearing psyches asunder. In essence, it reveals how racial ideologies can ruin into pieces the strongest innate bond human beings have ever known, the mother-child bond.

Early in the novel, Bride's body appears to be immaculate, making her a sought-after item at a time when "black is the new black" (33). Though Lula Ann succeeds in transforming herself from a lonely, depressed child into the beautiful and successful career woman who drops her “dumb countrified” name Lula Ann Bridewell and shortens it to “Bride with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one mem-orable syllable” (11) in order to get a job, she finds herself physically turning back into “a scared little black girl” (142). Right after Bride's partial revelation to her lover, Booker, about her past, he, unaware of Sofia Huxley's innocence, peremptorily breaks up their relationship with the bitter words "You not the woman I want" (10). He thinks that Bride has befriended a child molester—an act he cannot overlook after having lost his brother, Adam, to one. These "six words" shatter Bride's life into pieces and snatch away her happiness. She wonders, "[h]ow they rattled me so I agreed with them” (10). His departure heralds the resurgence of a recent past predating Lula Ann's transformation into Bride, a period marked by exclusion and rejection owing to the social stigmatization of her darker skin tone, a prejudice that unfortunately extended to her own light-skinned parents. It is only at this critical juncture of her life that her body characteristics begin to disintegrate and her “mem-orable” name Bride regresses to Lula Ann, who, she thinks, “was never a woman” (11). This regression of her physical features and of her name brings to light her traumatic wounds that have been latent rather than healed. The keloid scars of slavery represented by Sethe's chokecherry tree in *Beloved* still mark the black female body today. According to Justine Baillie, *Beloved* illustrates how, “If the past is not assimilated and spoken it will return to haunt the future” (Baillie 146). These scars bring to light the black women's subcutaneous wounds, which they sometimes repress in an effort to move past the legacy of slavery. Now, all her confidence ceases to exist as the memories of her miserable childhood, of her lover's harsh words, and of her mother's cruel lessons to “keep her head down and not to make trouble” (7), to know that “calling me “mama” would confuse people” (6) haunt her like anything.

Bride's breakup with Booker, her lover, triggers her trauma, driving her into a series of mishaps that lead her to question her identity and revisit her painful past. The traumatic experiences she endured during her childhood come to the surface as soon as Booker “[vanishes] like a ghost” (38), evincing how “pain inflicted in childhood ensnares and hobbles the adult” (Scrivener). Now, she feels “dismissed” and “erased” (38). She realizes that “[s]he had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life. Booker was the one person she was able to confront” (98), but confronting him is akin to confronting herself, as he has become a kind of alter ego to her. To cope with the distress of her lost love, she makes love with

men whose names she cannot recall. She wonders, “I’m young; I’m successful and pretty . . . so why am I miserable? Because he left me” (53). She has devolved into a human wreck, a debased individual whose morality and sense of self-regard have been turned upside down. Hence, love and loss constitute the axis of the traumatic experiences that Bride has gone through. In his *Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy's contends that the love and loss stories that predominate in Black popular culture "transcode other forms of yearning and mourning associated with histories of dispersal and exile and the remembrance of unspeakable terror” (Gilroy 201). This “unspeakable terror” prevails in *God Help the Child*, which delves into the depth of the complex social dynamics, and the tense interpersonal relationships that prevail in the American society. In the novel's core lies Morrison's belief that race still counts in this post-civil rights era and its underlying colour-blind ideology. Despite the constant efforts of dominant discourse to conceal the complexities of race and thus render them invisible, Morrison’s fiction powerfully reveals them. Delphine Gras relevantly argues that Morrison shatters the myth of post-racial, post-Black, and post-feminist discourse by unveiling its sophistries as the novel “disarticulates racial categories, exposing them as detrimental social constructs that still dictate the ways Black female bodies are perceived and treated to this day” (3). Indeed, Morrison's narrative lays bare the enduring influence of racial constructs on the perception and treatment of Black female bodies in America, underscoring the obvious role of race in shaping the experiences of Black people in the modern era.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Toni Morrison explores in *God Help the Child* the intricate issues of race and intra-racial discrimination within the African American community. She traces the nuanced ways in which discrimination operates from within the Black race, emphasizing the interconnectedness between intra-racial discrimination, and the broader framework of racism. She suggests that the internal struggles within the African American community are deeply intertwined with the external social dominance. She depicts the consequences of intra-racial discrimination, such as fractured identities, diminished self-worth, and restricted opportunities, as manifestations of racism on a larger scale. Otherwise stated, she illustrates that the experiences of intra-racial discrimination can be as damaging and traumatic as experiences of racism from outside the community. Moreover, Morrison deconstructs the racial stereotypes and dominant post-racial discourses that hide the ugliness of modern-day racism. She specifically underscores the necessity to break the silence imposed by assertions that we now live in a post-racial, post-Black, and post-feminist culture and acknowledge the fact that racism still plays out and affects Black people’s lives today. In a nutshell, the novel is a tragic-comedy that accentuates skin colour as an essential determinant of identification and social acceptance.

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