Negotiating Race From Within: Intra-Racial Discrimination in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child

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Abstract
The image of dark-skinned people and its implications have been at the heart of the literary works of Afro-American writers. Toni Morrison is one major African American writer who vividly articulates the issue of racism and its attendant effects on African Americans in her fictional works. In God Help the Child (2015), Toni Morrison creates a thoroughly racialized community crippled by the devastating effects of racism. This paper aims to explore the issue of intra-racism within the African American community in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child. The study centers on the analysis of the experiences that the novel’s main characters go through, spotlighting how they are affected by the racist ideology prevalent in their community. The protagonist, Bride, is a dark-skinned girl born into a light-skinned family. Due to her dark complexion, Bride encounters rejection by both her parents and members of her community. As a result, she undergoes racial trauma that drastically disrupts the course of her life, and pushes her into the hellhole of degradation after being a successful regional executive of a cosmetics company.

Keywords: Afro-American Writers, Intra-racism, Racism, Racial Trauma, 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 affects their mental health through experiences of discrimination and internalization of stereotypes about their appearance, abilities, and self-regard. Toni Morrison devoted her literary career to investigating this intricate issue throughout her work in dreamlike and nonlinear plots, which embody the harsh and turbulent lives Black people lead. Meanwhile, Morrison seems to suggest that this racism, and oppression by white people against Black people engenders intra-racism within the Black community and multiplies the jeopardy. The more Black people experience racism, the more they surrender to the racist narratives and thus enact them within their race. African Americans with a darker hue of colour experience discrimination within the circle of their race because there is a colour caste system inside the African American community wherein lighter-skinned people treat darker-skinned people 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 “Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination”, Morrison exposes the racist depiction of African-Americans in literature, highlighting the power relations that have been shaping and reshaping the social dynamics. She notices 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). The way white authors have portrayed African Americans has harmed their sense of self-esteem and led to more oppression and racism based on skin colour. Hostility, ostracism, and preconceived notions on the levels of intelligence and beauty are manifestations of intra-racial discrimination that occurs on a daily basis within the African American community. 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). The colour caste system is well documented in history and literature, and many African Americans know that racist white people more often than not treat lighter-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 colour means a better and easier life ahead, while a harder life awaits those born with a darker colour. 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 tone and features. Because of a lighter skin hue, some enslaved people had the privilege of learning how to read and write, 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. Though “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 is Beautiful". The cliché "White is Beautiful" influenced the 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, straighter hair, and facial features, which give white folks supremacy over other folks of colour became the factor against which one’s social status is judged. Levine-Rasky interprets 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). Thus, the attribution of norms by the (white) centre pushes all other colours to the periphery, making them strive for an unattainable symbolic ideal. The white ideal of beauty has become a symbol of transcendence, while its absence reduces the self to a polarized Other. Consequently, this white ideal of beauty sparked a race among darker-skinned people to turn every stone to achieve fairer skin so that they enjoy a better social status. Looking at oneself through the eyes of a racist white society and measuring oneself by the norms of a society that looks back in contempt makes the condition of African Americans worse. The sense of “double consciousness” – “the two warring ideals in one dark body” (Du Bois 5) ruins the body-ego relationship, creating a distorted reality which eventually results in racial self-hatred. In addition, the embrace of the white ideal of beauty results in the worthlessness and “physical ugliness of blackness”, which mirror “a deeper ugliness and depravity” (Taylor 16). Thus, Morrison unmasks the destructiveness of the hegemonic standards of white beauty,
encouraging African-Americans to form their identities away from the racist discourse prevalent in American society.

**Discussion**

Toni Morrison unequivocally demonstrates a deep insight into the African-American community. Her writing mirrors 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 lived and experienced every moment of African-Americans’ daily life, and as an intellectual, she tried to interpret the situation of African Americans and their position in a hierarchal racist white society. She realized that the Black community is a victim of the White norms, which place the white characteristics in the center and push all different colours towards the margin, making them seem to be mere satellites in the orbit of whiteness. Orbiting ever in the Black periphery, Black people aspire to come closer to the unattainable white centre- a centre which dispels all other colours. For the Black people to reach this impossible center, and enjoy its privilege, they do their best to shed off their dark skin and wear a lighter one that makes them acceptable in the society. In so doing, Black people go through a complicated dilemma of searching for identity and end up with 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. In her novels, Morrison delineates how African Americans have developed a "colour complex" and initiated a hierarchical system within their race due to their blind surrender to White Supremacy.

Morrison aptly propounds how Afro-American people have been colonized by the white definition of beauty and the skin colour bias within the African American community. She depicts Black individuals, especially women, as disenfranchised and marginalized by the white-dominated society in which they live. Moreover, Morrison employs the technique of "magical realism", which has become a common narrative mode for fiction written from the perspective of the politically and culturally disempowered . . . those whose lives incorporate different cultural beliefs and practices from those dominant in their country of residence (Bowers 33). Morrison deftly marries realism to folklore, myth and magical realism, and she also does so in this novel. Through the technique of magical realism, Morrison combines the supernatural with the real in order to show the broken world of Black people. Elleke Boehmer argues that many writers resorted to magic realism in their fictional writings because of its ability to express their view of a world fissured, distorted, and made incredible by cultural displacement (235).

Like The Bluest Eye, *God Help the Child* conjures up the haunting images of being Black and the terrors and horrors associated with the Black experience. In addition, the novel vividly depicts the intricate dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship within a racial hierarchy, in which the lighter one's skin hue, the higher one's status in the pyramid of power. In this context, those with lighter skin hue are elevated to higher social statuses and are presented with greater opportunities in life, while those with darker skin are downtrodden and marginalized.

*God Help the Child* tells the story of Bride, a successful and ambitious young African-American woman who works in the fashion industry. However, Bride tumbles many times in her life due to her childhood trauma caused by her parents’ rejection of her because of her colour. In this novel, the African American community, rather than white society, is the source of racial prejudice. In this community, skin colour is
an important determinant by which African Americans evaluate themselves. Set in modern-day America, which is considered to be a post-racial era, God Help the Child carefully examines the plight of racism which is still looming out in what is called the post-racial America. Sweetness opens the narrative with her denial to bear the responsibility for the dark colour of Lula Ann. Born to light-skinned parents and a grandmother who forsook her children to pass for white, Bride is treated like a stranger by her parents right from the moment she comes into the world. Bride’s mother, Sweetness, feels ashamed of her infant daughter who is “midnight black, Sudanese black” (Morrison 3), and briefly considers throttling her to death because she is born with “that terrible colour” (5). 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). Feeling helpless before the ineffable American myth of white supremacy, she 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 was embarrassed of her colour to the extent that “he never touched her” (5). After a long argument, Louis abandoned his wife, accusing her of infidelity. Though Sweetness did her best to convince him that she has always been faithful to him, he never believed her because he could not accept the possibility of begetting a baby with such a dark complexion.

Intra-racial discrimination is a recurring theme in Toni Morrison's fiction. In The Bluest Eye, Geraldine differentiates between “Niggers” and “Colored”: “Colored people were neat and quiet; niggers were dirty and loud” (Morrison, The Bluest Eye 85). 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 affection and love like Lula Ann Bridewell in God Help the Child. The stories that unfold the experiences of Pecola and Lula Ann with blackness and expose the Black people’s proclivity to accept whiteness as the socially acceptable norm illustrate Toni Morrison’s statement 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 cases ….."You'd never know" (Morrison, Unspeakable 146). That is, the historical legacy of racism in America has created a cultural climate in which being black is more often than not 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.

In God Help the Child, Morrison confronts the enduring legacy of ingrained racism and its insidious impact on maternal instinct. As with all her works of fiction, 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 highlights the importance of maternal responsibility and childcare while emphasizing that mothering is not merely a task that revolves around "cooing, booties, and diapers" (178). Rather, mothering requires a lot of adrenaline and the whole community's involvement because Morrison astutely opines that "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” (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. She thinks that “being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me “Mama” would confuse people” (6). Sweetness, owing to her acceptance of the hierarchical system within the Black community, fails to prepare and introduce her daughter to a world that teems with racism. She fails to connect her daughter with the beneficial and empowering care of other women, which O’Reilly refers to as “other-mothering” or “community mothering” (O’Reilly 11). This type of nurturing could have alleviated the racial trauma that Bride undergoes. That is, she could have developed a real self instead of developing this "false self", which according to Elaine Savory Fido "is not only the result of patriarchy but the result of trauma between mother and daughter” (qtd. in Sougou 11). That being the case, Bride finds herself adrift, much like her mother, due to her lack of cultural grounding and absence of positive role models to identify with.

From the very first of the novel, Sweetness seems to be lost and frustrated. The narrative's stream-of-consciousness quality highlights the extent to which her thoughts are disorganized. The advent of Lula into a world where colour still matters shakes her life. She thinks that the dark colour of her daughter is a curse that will always haunt her: "her colour is a cross she will always carry” (7). In order to grasp Sweetness's behaviour, it is necessary to reexamine Bride’s childhood and revisit a long history of oppression and aggression against black women and their children. Sweetness’s parents underwent 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). As a result, Sweetness’s parents started to internalize racist narratives and enact them in their lifestyle. They started to distance themselves from the way of life members of their race lead as “neither of them would let themselves drink from a "coloured only" fountain even if they were dying of thirst (4). Without looking back to the past and decoding the circumstances that led Sethe, the protagonist of Beloved, to kill her child, Beloved, we cannot understand Sweetness’s shock when she sees her daughter. The story that “was a story not to pass on” (323) in Beloved did pass on in God Help the Child: from Sweetness' firsthand accounts of forthright segregation during her youth to the more implicit yet still palpable forms of discrimination such as redlining and housing discrimination that she goes through after Lula Ann's birth, let alone the discrimination in the workplace that Lula Ann endures prior to her transformation, it becomes evident that Black women continue to be relegated to a secondary position within American society.

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 Beloved, Sweetness's actions stem from a self-centred urge to maintain skin privileges. The hegemonic discourse has widened the gap between light-skinned Black people and dark-skinned ones by associating whiteness with morality and beauty and blackness (the quality or status of being a Black person) with immorality and ugliness. Sweetness regards her daughter as a “throwback” (3). Sweetness belongs to those who long to rub out their colour; therefore, she does not want her own daughter to rub it in. Thus, she is in loath to bear the responsibility for her daughter’s black colour when she says: “It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me” (3). Rather, she assigns full responsibility to the long-standing history of slavery and racism in America.
She justifies her callousness towards her daughter, imagining that she's preparing the girl for her reception in the world outside their home- “a world where you could be sent to juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you would be the last hired and the first one fired” (41).

As a third-grader, Lula Ann colludes with her classmates to accuse their teacher, Sofia Huxley, of child molestation and testifies against her in the courtroom. The testimony of Lula Ann against her teacher is, I think, an attempt to win the attention and affection of her mother. On the day of the testimony, Sweetness feels proud of Lula Ann, thinking that her lessons have paid off. She confesses that the reason behind all the atrocities she has inflicted on Lula Ann is “…to protect her. I had to. All because of skin privileges” (43).

Bride's body appears to be immaculate at the beginning of the novel, 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 coun-trified” name Lula Ann and shortens it to “ Bride with nothing anybody needs to say before or after that one mem-or-able syllable” (11), she finds herself physically turning back into “a scared little black girl” (142). Right after her partial revelation about her past, Booker, unaware of the teacher’s innocence, peremptorily breaks up their relationship with the bitter words "You not the woman I want" (10), assuming Bride has befriended an child molester—an act he cannot overlook after having lost his brother, Adam, to one. These “six words” shatter Bride's life and snatch her happiness. She wonders, "How they rattled me so I agreed with them” (10). It is then that her body characteristics begin to disappear and her “mem-or-able” 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 had been latent rather than healed. The keloid scars of slavery, left by Sethe's chokecherry tree, still mark the black female body. According to Justine Baillie, Beloved illustrates how, “If the past is not assimilated and spoken it will return to haunt the future” (Baillie 146). They 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.

I think it is Bride’s breakup with Booker that triggers her trauma, driving her into a series of mishaps that make her question her identity and readdress her painful past. In order to overcome this disappointment, Bride conjures the painful memories and experiences she went through in her childhood. Bride realizes that “She 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. Thus, abjection, and dejection, love and loss constitute the axis of the traumatic experiences that Bride has gone through. This conforms to Paul Gilroy's claim 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 racial trauma and exposes its devastating effects.
core lies Morrison’s belief that race still counts in this post-civil rights era with its underlying colour-blind ideology. Despite the constant efforts of dominant discourse to mask the complexities of race and render them invisible, Morrison’s fiction powerfully reveals them. In this respect, 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). In fact, the novel is a tragic-comedy that accentuates skin colour and social class as essential determinants of identification and social acceptance.

Conclusion
In conclusion, Toni Morrison's novel God Help the Child (2015) explores the intricate issues of race and intra-racial discrimination within the African American community. The characters in the novel negotiate their identities and experiences of discrimination based on skin colour within their community. The social abjection of Bride’s colour and her dejection reinforce the traumatic backlash that wreaks havoc in her quest for identity. Morrison deconstructs racial stereotypes and dominant post-racial narratives that hide the reality of modern-day racism. Morrison illustrates how the experiences of intra-racial discrimination can be as damaging and traumatic as experiences of racism from outside the community. She specifically urges readers to break the silence imposed by assertions that we now live in a post-racial, post-Black, and post-feminist culture in order to acknowledge how racism still plays out and affects Black women's lives today. God Help the Child gives us insight into the lasting effects that abuse may have on a child. The novel is strewn with numerous accounts of child abuse, which makes it a heartbreaking story, yet compelling all the way through.

Works cited

