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Feminism and Racism in Morrison's Novels God Help the Child and The Bluest Eye: A Comparative Study

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Abstract

This paper presented a comparative literary study of Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye (1970) and God Help the Child (2015), and how Morrison builds and critiques the intersection of feminism and racism in her literary works over the past 50 years. The paper drawn on Black feminist theory, Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, and postcolonial theories to showed that Morrison's texts consistently revealed how race and gender operate as mutually reinforcing dual systems of oppression that inflict different forms of psychological, social and physical trauma upon Black women and girls. While The Bluest Eye dramatized the internalization of white beauty standards as a form of racial self-annihilation in mid-20th century America, God Help the Child revisited these dynamics in a neoliberal context of today characterized by colorism, childhood trauma and the commodification of beauty. Through textual analysis, the paper found that Morrison's female narrators—Pecola Breedlove and Bride—find themselves in worlds shaped by the same colonial logic, but that they respond in different ways. The paper also highlighted Morrison's use of narrative structure, voice and symbolism as feminist critique. The research concluded that reading Morrison's novels in conversation with each other highlights her consistent commitment to foregrounding the black female subject, and the psychology of living on the intersection of racial and gender subordination.

Keywords: *Toni Morrison, Feminism, Racism, Intersectionality, Black Feminist Theory, The Bluest Eye, God Help The Child, Colorism, Black Womanhood*

Introduction

Toni Morrison is one of the most important American writers of the 20th and 21st century, a Nobel Prize laureate whose novels have consistently refused to divorce race from gender. Throughout her career, Morrison repeatedly asks: what is the experience of being a Black woman in a society structured by white supremacy and patriarchy? Morrison's first novel, The Bluest Eye (1970), and her last novel, God Help the Child (2015), are bookends to her career, providing both consistency and change in her exploration of how racism and sexism work in concert to construct, mar and sometimes obliterate black female subjectivity. Reading these two texts together sheds light not only on the evolution of Morrison's art and politics but also on the enduring systems of oppression that she examined in her career.

The theoretical tools that best support such a comparative approach are those of Black feminist theory. For example, scholars like bell hooks (1981), Collins (2000), and Angela Davis (1981) have shown us that the experiences of Black women cannot be explained solely by reference to race or to gender. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) notion of intersectionality, which describes how race, gender, class and other categories of identity intersect to create different forms of privilege and oppression, is perhaps the most specific term to describe Morrison's novels. The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child enact the kind of intersectional violence that Crenshaw describes: their women characters experience hardship not only because they are Black or because they are women, but because of what it means to be both, in particular historical and social

circumstances.

This paper proceeds as follows. It begins by locating the novels in the fields of Black feminist literary studies and postcolonial studies. It then proceeds to parallel close analyses of the two novels, focusing on (1) the construction of beauty, desire and racial self-hatred; (2) the representation of Black motherhood and its disruptions; (3) the presence of sexual violence and bodily injury; and (4) the possibilities, albeit limited, of resistance and empowerment that Morrison envisages for her female characters. The paper suggests that, together, The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child offer a feminist reflection on the psychological and social effects of living at the juncture of racial and gender subordination in America.

Theoretical Framework: Black Feminism and Intersectionality

Black feminism, as Collins (2000) has developed it, rests on recognition of Black women's standpoint - that is, their position in the "matrix of domination" that structures race, gender and class as interlocking systems of power. This standpoint gives rise to distinctive vulnerabilities as well as distinctive knowledge. According to Collins, the experiences of Black women's oppression have historically produced intellectual and cultural traditions, including literature, that subvert dominant ideologies. Morrison's novels are part of this tradition. Her novels don't simply depict the oppression of Black women, they analyse its operations, contradictions and victimhood.

Crenshaw's (1989) intersectionality analysis adds to this work by focusing on the different ways that identity categories intersect. In her seminal essay, Crenshaw suggests that feminist movement has tended to centre white women's experiences, while antiracist movement has tended to centre Black men's experiences, obscuring Black women's experiences at the intersections of both. Morrison's fiction might be read as a literary expression of this argument: her most memorable characters, female characters such as Pecola, Bride, Sula, Beloved, are figures whose suffering and agency cannot be captured by either a white feminist or a Black masculinist frame of reference.

Postcolonial theory, specifically Frantz Fanon's (1952/2008) account of the psychological underpinnings of colonialism and racialization in Black Skin, White Masks, is also crucial for understanding Morrison. Fanon's contention that the colonized subject identifies with the colonizer, that racialization results in a psychic "split" or self-alienation, is dramatized in The Bluest Eye, where Pecola Breedlove literally wishes she were white. God Help the Child develops a more recent iteration of this in the form of colorism: the privileging of lighter skin tones within African-American communities, which is itself an effect of internalized racism.

Desire, Racial Self-Hatred, and Beauty

The most obvious commonality between The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child is the theme of the politics of beauty and the effect of internalizing white beauty standards. In The Bluest Eye, Morrison develops this theme with pinpoint accuracy. The novel's protagonist, Pecola Breedlove, is a young black girl in Lorain, Ohio, who believes that beauty, in the form of white girlhood with blue eyes (or the Shirley Temple ideal) holds the key to her happiness. Pecola's wish for blue eyes is not vanity but rather a reaction to a world that constantly tells her she is ugly, undesirable, and

unlovable. In a world, writes Morrison (1970), where the "entire country" of the novel's setting tells Pecola she is ugly, she believes it.

Morrison stages this point through formal means. The opening Dick and Jane primer, first in its "proper" punctuated form, then squashed together, and then as a blizzard of letters, illustrates the shattering of the normative white family structure as it encounters the realities of the black family. The Breedlove family doesn't live in the house the primer describes; they live in an old storefront. They cannot aspire to the beauty they are supposed to want. But, far from questioning the standard, Pecola accepts it, and her acceptance becomes her undoing. At the end of the novel, she is mad, her imagination of blue eyes having eaten away at her reality (Morrison, 1970). This is Fanon's (1952/2008) description of the psychic violence of racial ideology manifest: the colonized subject who internalizes the gaze of the colonizer and destroys herself.

In God Help the Child, Morrison (2015) revisits the politics of beauty through the character of Bride (formerly Lula Ann Owens), a young African-American woman who has turned her dark, blue-black skin, which caused her parents to reject her as a child, into a product as the CEO of a cosmetics company. Bride's blackness, once the source of her objection, is now in the 21st-century neoliberal economy, a commercial asset. Morrison complicates this victory, though, by depicting Bride's success as not erasing her from the politics of racialized beauty, but rather repositioning her within them. Bride continues to measure her value by her looks, continues to aspire to whiteness, and still bears the trauma of her mother's rejection, a rejection that was rooted in the idea that "light skin girls" were better.

The two novels, therefore, trace a historical genealogy of the politics of Black beauty and racialized desire. In The Bluest Eye, the ideology is brazen: white is beautiful, Black is ugly. In God Help the Child, the ideology has been partially renegotiated - Bride's blackness is a product for sale - but the logic of racial capitalism and the self-esteem problems it creates remain. As hooks (1992) has written, in her analysis of the image of the black woman in American culture, the marketability of black female bodies does not mark emancipation; it marks more subtle forms of objectification. Morrison's two novels together witness this transformation while also emphasizing continuity.

Black Motherhood and Its Disruptions

The second key point of comparison is Morrison's depiction of Black motherhood. In both novels, mother-daughter relationships are sites of deep failure and trauma - not because of the incompetence of individual mothers, but because of the untenable conditions that racism and patriarchy place on Black mothers. Morrison neither sentimentalizes motherhood, nor simply pathologizes Black mothers; she examines how systemic oppression warps motherhood.

In The Bluest Eye, Pauline Breedlove is one such mother. Pauline has internalized white standards of beauty to the point of hating her own child. She projects her affections, self-esteem and sense of aesthetic worth onto the white child she works for, in whom she sees the beauty she has learned to equate with virtue. When Pauline's daughter accidentally drops a pie and burns herself in the white family's kitchen, Pauline is more concerned with the white child's anguish than her daughter's (Morrison 1970). This moment is heartbreaking in its particularity: it illustrates the ways in which racial capitalism (Pauline's work is structured around the needs of a

white family) and internalized racism combine to undermine the mother-daughter relationship.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) has written about how Black motherhood has been devalued and misrepresented under racial capitalism throughout history, beginning with slavery. Slavery removed Black mothers from their children by legal decree; after slavery, economic pressures forced Black women to do "motherwork" for white women - Pauline is employed to do just that. Collins suggests that these circumstances gave rise to forms of "motherwork" in Black communities - practices and ideologies of mothering that were produced in response to, and in opposition to, such circumstances. This history is a consistent theme in Morrison's books; they show how its effects continue to this day.

In God Help the Child, the mother-daughter relationship is even more explicitly at the forefront of the novel. Bride's mother, Sweetness, is so embarrassed by her daughter's dark skin that she won't touch her, won't publicly acknowledge her, and repeatedly communicates disgust. Morrison (2015) begins the novel with a monologue from Sweetness, in which the mother justifies her actions as protective: she is teaching Bride to expect to be treated poorly because of her skin colour. This justification is a sign of internalised racism: Sweetness has so internalised the hierarchy of colourism that she cannot recognize the damage she is doing. Her "protection" is actually the original trauma.

Morrison's maternal characters in these novels seem to point to a systemic claim: that the maternal capacities of Black women have been undermined by factors beyond their control. The novels do not blame individual mothers but rather the social forces - racial capitalism, white supremacy, colorism - that make mother-daughter relationships so fraught. This is a deeply feminist argument, one that refuses the pathologization of the female psyche and character and affirms the role of gender in racial oppression.

Sexual Violence, Bodily Trauma and the Black Female Body

Both novels foreground the black female body as the site of their political and aesthetic attention, and explore sexual violence as a mechanism for the convergence of patriarchal and racial powers onto the black female body. Morrison's approach to the representation of rape and sexual violence in these novels is neither sensational nor underplayed, but rather carefully, insistently attended to.

In The Bluest Eye, Pecola is raped by her father, Cholly Breedlove, in one of the most sophisticated scenes in American literature. Morrison writes the rape from Cholly's point of view, showing how he has been humiliated and dehumanized, raped as a young boy by white men who forced him to continue having sex while they looked on and laughed, without in any way condoning or exculpating his rape of his daughter. The formal strategy is a Fanonian one: it demonstrates the generational transmission of racial violence, of humiliation and humiliation. But it doesn't exonerate Cholly. Pecola suffers from his trauma as well as her own (Morrison, 1970). Davis (1981) has suggested rape has historically been used as a weapon of racial violence against African-Americans, and that the rape of African-American women in particular has been ignored or excused by white society. Morrison's novel renders this history palpable and its toll on the psyche.

God Help the Child deals with sex violence differently, but equally intriguingly. Bride's imprisonment and subsequent bodily transformation - she seems to be

returning to her pre-pubescent form, losing her pubic hair and breasts - allegorises the effects of trauma on the body (Morrison, 2015). More importantly, the plot's pivotal moment is about a miscarriage of justice: when she was a child, Bride accused a teacher of sexually abusing her, when in fact the teacher had done nothing. Bride's true trauma was her mother's rejection. This plot twist complicates the clear-cut victim-perpetrator binary while insisting on the reality and diversity of harm. The novel also presents Sofia, the woman Bride wrongly accused, whose incarceration is another form of bodily and spiritual abuse. Morrison does not allow any of her characters, including Bride, who is in many ways the novel's protagonist, to be innocent.

In both novels, Morrison is interested in the Black female body as a site of racial and patriarchal trauma. She demonstrates that Black women's bodies are violated through several, intersecting sources - by white supremacy, by patriarchy, by colorism, by intergenerational trauma. And she insists, in her formal and narrative strategies, that these violations matter - that the harms to Black female bodies and psyches are real, significant and important for literary and critical inquiry.

Resisting, Acting and Healing

While Morrison's vision in both novels is unsparing in its depiction of violence, it is not completely bereft of resistance and agency. The novels, however, vary in the amount of hope or resolution they offer their female characters, a variation that is an indication of their historical distance from each other and from the different cultural moments they represent.

The Bluest Eye is a tragedy. Pecola's insanity is Morrison's most eloquent metaphor for the unsurvivable consequences of the intersection of racism and sexism without support. Claudia MacTeer, the novel's narrator, can watch and grieve, but she cannot rescue Pecola. The novel's ending is steeped in guilt and loss: Claudia understands that the community (including herself) complicit in Pecola's annihilation by embracing its own values. Morrison (1970) does not offer the comfort of a happy ending, but instead insists upon the loss. This is a feminist and antiracist refusal: it denies the reader the right to a happy ending, and reminds him or her that Pecola's fate is systemic.

God Help the Child is more complex, more tenuous in its optimism, but it does offer a possibility of healing. By the novel's close, Bride is alive, having survived the bodily transition she has undergone, accepts her own role in Sofia's destruction, and agrees to carry the child she is expecting, which is offered as an act of agency, not compulsion. Her relationship with Booker, which is marred by his self-absorption and trauma, is also reconstructed on more authentic terms (Morrison, 2015). These are quiet endings, which Morrison does not romanticise. But they are a step toward what hooks (2000) describes as a feminist politics of love, which is not romantic love but the difficult and rigorous work of knowing ourselves and each other, and caring.

The contrast between the two novels' endings is a matter not only of the different historical periods they take on but also Morrison's growing consciousness, over the years, of the possibilities of feminist fiction. The Bluest Eye is a novel of disclosure: it does the work of naming what has otherwise been unnamed, revealing what has otherwise been hidden. God Help the Child, written with a lifetime of reflection on these issues, is more interested in transformation, but not the redemptive transformation of the self-help novel, but rather the more complicated, ambivalent,

partial transformation of survivors who are learning to live with the wrongs done to them and the wrongs they do to others.

Narrative Form as Feminist Practice

Form is an essential part of any account of Morrison's feminism. Morrison has always held that the form of Black literature must be equal to the content that it expresses, that it cannot simply reproduce the narrative forms of Europe without repressing or misrepresenting its subject matter (Morrison, 1992). Both The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child are formally inventive in their feminist and antiracist commitments.

The Bluest Eye's use of multiple voices, temporal dislocation, and the fracturing Dick-and-Jane primer is formal enactment of the experience of a besieged consciousness. The novel is structurally non-chronological, returning to events, viewing them from different angles, refusing to privilege any one explanation. This polyphony is itself a feminist form: it rejects the single, authoritative voice that has been associated in the West with masculine authority and insists on the multiple ways of knowing experience (Morrison, 1970).

Similarly, God Help the Child has multiple narrators (Sweetness, Bride, Booker, Rain, etc.) who offer their fragmented, partisan views of the events in the novel. None of the narrators is completely trustworthy; none of the perspectives is adequate. Morrison (2015) employs this narrative structure to dramatise her claim that the dynamics of racism and sexism can be seen from different angles but not from just one. The novel's narrative structure is therefore also an assertion about the nature of knowledge about oppression: there are multiple, often contradictory standpoints from which to consider how race and gender work.

Conclusion

A comparative reading of The Bluest Eye and God Help the Child showcased the remarkable consistency and complexity of Morrison's feminist and antiracist imaginative worlds over the course of five decades of writing. Both novels center Black women's experiences; both emphasize the intersectional nature of racial and gendered oppression; both highlighted the particular ways in which whiteness, racial capitalism and patriarchal violence shape Black female bodies and minds. And both make use of innovative narrative strategies that are feminist interventions in the face of dominant conventions.

Yet the two novels are not the same. The Bluest Eye is more apocalyptic, more adamant about the inability to endure systemic violence without transformative change. God Help the Child, while not offering simple solutions, enables the possibility of healing and reparations. This is a function of the times, 1970 to 2015, but it's also Morrison's evolving conception of the possibilities of feminist fiction to expose, to critique, but also, provisionally, to project alternatives.

The use of Black feminist theory and intersectionality to read these two novels affirms what Morrison's work has always taught: that the intersection of race and gender creates forms of violence and forms of survival that can't be reduced to either category. Her novels continue, 50 years after The Bluest Eye, to be essential reading for anyone interested in the complex, intimate and devastating effects of racism and sexism. Morrison's achievement is not just the beauty of her prose, but also the commitment to ethical attention that has characterized her novels.

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