

Comparative Analysis of 'Beloved' and 'God help the Child' by Toni Morrison

Myra Ikram

M.Phil. (English Literature), Department of English,
Government College Women University, Faisalabad,
Pakistan.

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Abstract- Toni Morrison is an influential African American writer who writes about contemporary literature. Most of her work revolves around slavery, its aftermath, and racial segregation, motherhood, suffering women and confined in her vivid flashbacks of the horrors a past may contain. The present research work undertakes an analysis of the representation of the elements of motherhood and racism with respect to the feminism in Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *God Help the Child* (2015) by drawing attention to the characters' past experiences of distress and anguish and their weight upon the present. Qualitative approach has been employed in the study and content analysis is done as part of data analysis to explore the particulars of characters depicting motherhood and racism. Findings indicated that both the novels are filled with specific attributes of motherhood, racism and feministic features that have been displayed and manifested through the characters of the novels. It was concluded that discrimination on the basis of gender, racial segregation leading to massacres have been the subject matter of Morrison in both the novels.

Index Terms- Slavery, Motherhood, Racial Segregation, Women Suffering.

I INTROUCTION

Toni Morrison, an African American fiction writer of the post-modern era and one of the best post World War II novelists, owns a strong command over flashbacks, and holds her entitlement to the past life of her characters with such a confidence that not only gives her an authoritative certainty, but also spills a realist feature in each of her character's present lives, as they try to compose themselves from their destructive past.

Most of her work revolves around slavery, its aftermath, and racial segregation, motherhood, suffering women and confined in her vivid flashbacks of the horrors a past may contain (Singh, 2016).

Slavery and Racism have been the highlight of non-political world affairs for centuries, breaking from which, the Africans somewhat owe to Martin Luther King's efforts and mesmerizing speech "*I have a Dream*", making the dark-skinned people realize that their skin color does not define their fate as doomed to be slaves forever. Racism is extreme hatred or condescendence towards someone just because of them being different. Likewise, the inferior treatment and the scorn of whites towards the blacks over the centuries has been a major subject of Toni Morrison's writings, however, without servitude and with an utmost freedom.

Being an African American herself, having a lavishly oriental dark skin, Morrison wears her identity with pride and owns it truly to the core. She serves as the omniscient narrator who has seen the horrors of slavery and racial segregation. In most oriental writings, we trace racism and imperialism against the blacks by the white skinned people. However, with utmost realism, Morrison turns the tables when she brings her audience face to face with the insecurities of the black household itself, having faced generations of slavery, inferiority complexes and racism. Thus, the racism seems to be 'internalized' or common-sensified (Bacon, 1620).

Her Pulitzer Prize winner novel *Beloved* (1987) and another milestone of hers *God Help the Child* (2015) are two comparable post-modern novels which reflect the struggles of motherhood confined within the boundaries of racial segregation. Therefore, a reader finds traces of maternal misery in being unable to save their children from the horrors they themselves have faced. *Beloved* is a depiction of such helpless woman who was left with the only option of killing her children to save them from the life-long misery of servitude. In stark contrast stands the motherhood of *God Help the Child*, the story of a twenty-three-year-old black lady Lula Ann Bridewell who suffers from rejection throughout her childhood because she's born midnight-black to a fair-skinned pair of parents (Zayed and Maseeh, 2016).

Her themes seem to be repeating in different works as well. She constantly draws comparable imagery with similar situations, marked by some contrasting features. However, the peculiarity lies in the fact that even though racial segregation and colorism shouldn't be sexist, the maternal share of suffering seems to be much more than the paternal while dealing with the horrors of racism, as is the case with both novels, where one father is invisible and the other abandons family due to a midnight-black born daughter.

The researcher aims to highlight Morrison's elements of African Feminism in the two novels through portrayal of suffering women who gradually attain peace. African Feminism differs by degrees from the mainstream Western Feminism, as it doesn't

oppose, it only builds on women rights, unlike the Western feminism that combats oppression of women by attacking the male counterparts.

In Morrison's novels, a reader can trace how her protagonists' fights against their miserable conditions, rather than fighting against their male counterparts, while beautifully managing the traditional gender roles entitled to them by the African norms of society.

Background of the Research

Feminism arises from gender discrimination in the form of oppression and suffering of women and combats against sexist attitudes which have been prevalent throughout the history. This research focuses primarily on the heart-wrenching racism and prejudice against the black Africans not only by the White people but also by their own race that has accepted the reality of their supposed inferiority, while the main sympathy of the researcher remains with the black women who bravely combat both racial and sexist segregation and come out victorious as the protagonists of both the novels.

Statement of the Problem

History has witnessed an evolution of suppression and torture of women, from the primitive physical danger to the modern psychological damage caused by the society in general. The researcher has narrowed down this feministic study to black women who, once miserable against slavery, start combating against it at one point. Thus, focus is not only on racist attitudes of society towards dark skin, but also the psychological damage that this racism can cause, as portrayed in both the novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*.

Delimitation

This study is limited to find out the elements of racism and motherhood from a feminist perspective, in Toni Morris's two novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*. Former was published in 1987 and latter was published in 2015.

Objectives

- To find out the elements of racism in characters of *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*
- To explore the elements of motherhood in characters of *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*

Research Questions

- What are the elements of racism portrayed in characters of *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*
- What are the elements of motherhood depicted through the characters of *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*

Significance of Study

The research will be beneficial for further researchers in understanding how women may suffer from abandonment and psychological damage for the choices they didn't make. This will enable future researchers to understand how gender disparity still exists in the form of gender roles or attributes, often leading to psychological abuse and torture. Hence, they may raise their voices against the correct epidemic in the future.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Critics Views on God Help the Child and Beloved regarding Feministic Approach and Racism

Many critics talk about the distinctive branch of feminism found in Morris's novels, i.e.: the African Feminism that holds intricately the load of cultural values while claiming an identity of its own.

Badejo (1998) asserts that:

“African feminism embraces beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It is always poised and centered (sic) in womanness. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical.”

Itang Ekpe Amissine maintains about African Feminism:

“The distinction between African Feminism and Western Feminism by some scholars is the fact that African Feminism underlines the notion or motherhood and is not ‘anti-men’, as opposed to Western Feminism, which rebels against any form of gender inequality, irrespective of cultures and traditions. In traditional Africa, women were considered to be docile and existed as mere exotic accessories to men.”

These definitions of the African Feminism are visible in both the novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* where we see suffering of women and combating against it but no sign of revolt against the more privileged gender, conforming to the more acceptable remnants of traditional norms of African society. The concept of motherhood has been badly devastated in both the novels.

Beloved shows the devastation of motherhood to a higher degree, owing to slavery. The relationship of Sethe with her mother and her own children explain by degrees how women had to abandon their kids as objects unto the masters, an obligatory act which now sends shivers down the spine of independent and free mothers (Singh, 2016).

As Beaver (2012) observed in her analysis of the *Beloved* in:

“Morrison explores the fact that slave mothers often were not allowed to raise or nurse their own children, and shows the damage it does to the mother-child relationships. Slavery turned children of slaves into property—property that was not the slaves,’ but the masters;’ mothers could not nurse or raise their own children: a provision to ensure they would not become attached to them; and the horrors of slavery caused emotional disconnects that led to mothers mentally neglecting their children.”

However, in *God Help the Child*, motherhood takes a different turn and is not entirely devastated by slavery, but shows remnants of internalized colorism disguised by “concern for a colored child” (Ramtani, 2017).

As Sweetness’s self-defense is:

“Some of you probably think it’s a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color – the lighter, the better – in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity?”

Here, her entire claim of ‘mistreating Bride for the sake of hardening her heart against the harsh society’ and ‘preparing her for the World’ seems to be shaking, as the above lines tell us that she takes pride and hides her dignity in her light skin, rather than her maternal concerns.

Gay (2015) has traced out the notion as:

“While Sweetness will apologize for her child’s dark skin, what she will not apologize for is how she sees the world and how she raises her child. If colorism is what allowed black folk to hold on to their dignity, Bride was never going to be allowed any. With a mother who disdains her very existence, it comes as no surprise when Bride tells a lie that sends an innocent woman to prison just so her mother might see her, claim her, and love her – so she might have some dignity of her own.”

English Writers on Feminism

Feminism evolved from a societal need to reform the status of women. Many books and literary pieces have thence been dedicated to the topic.

Charlotte Bronte’s (1847) *Jane Eyre* is the prototype of a feminist, paving way to the idea of female status and individuality, as the protagonist breaks away from the conventional norms and travels alone far and wide, leading a spiritual journey, attaining the status of “Bildungsroman” for a woman for the first time. Moreover, the protagonist chooses to love on her own terms rather than being dictated by a man.

Thomas Hardy’s (1891) *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* is an antithesis of feminism, which is clinging frantically to conventional norms and designs a character whose ultimate hamartia is her servitude and selflessness. Suffering will find its way to Hardy’s Tess eventually, which in his view is humanly possible, whereas the 21st century feminist sees it as a disgusting and exaggerated portrayal of a mute woman without a claim on human rights.

Emily Bronte’s (1847) *Wuthering Heights* also manifests in the characters of Catherine and Isabella some defiance against the male hierarchy.

Elizabeth Bennet from Jane Austen’s (1813) *Pride and Prejudice* is the complete feminist embodiment in contrast to the other women of the novel. She’s highly intellectual, skeptical, opinionated, well-read, genuine, independent, authoritative and sensible.

The Second Sex by Simon De Beauvoir (1949) reveals the brutal treatment of women throughout history, attributing it to cultural manipulation of women into characters that are supposed to surrender rather than revolt.

Pakistani writers on Feminism

Kamila Shamsi’s (2005) *Broken Verses* portrays women as multi-dimensional and well-rounded characters, finding loopholes in relationships and making peace with it.

A very well-known novel *My Feudal Lord* by Tehmina Durrani (1991) points out the societal flaw of creating chauvinistic hierarchy in society, as the male character Mustafa Khar is molded into a chauvinist by societal privileges. There are many occurrences in the story which display that the source of women's suppression and men's domination lies in social discrimination.

Durrani's (1998) *Blasphemy* is another novel that depicts without fear the violation of women rights in a male dominant society. There are more contemporary writers who touch the topic with brevity or detail, and women rights' activists are merging into quality writers highlighting the vices women have to face in this male hierarchy which exploits and misuses its power against women.

English Writers on Racism

Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mocking Bird* depicts the horrible fate of the black people in America at the time, where a Negro is accused of raping a white girl and despite being proved to be innocent is jailed and commits suicide, whereas Atticus Finch the white lawyer puts everything at stake to proclaim justice but to no avail.

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe (1958) takes the reader to a journey of pre-colonial life of Nigeria which gets destroyed by the advent of The English colonizers.

Joseph Conrad's (1899) *Heart of Darkness* exclaims 'savages' all over it, a term used for the black people of Africa. The hostility with which they are treated and slaved and murdered during history seems to be evident in the book.

Burmese Days by George Orwell (1934) depicts the British hierarchy in Burma during their British rule i.e. Colonization.

Jean Rhys (1966) wrote her *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966 which is a post-colonial commentary on racism also benefitted by feminist exploration of power struggle between men and women, written as a prequel to Bronte's *Jane Eyre*.

Pakistani Writers on Racism

Not many contemporary writers have contributed to this genre owing to the post-colonial legacies of Western superiority embedded in our mindsets. However, we do see some potential writers in the Urdu language describing the horrors of war of independence and the separation of East Pakistan and West Pakistan, thus covering the brutalities rooting from religious discrimination (1947) and racial discrimination of Bengalis and non-Bengalis (1971).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm

Qualitative research paradigm has been applied since the research is literary. The primary source of the data collection of this research is Toni Morrison's two novels, *God Help the Child* and *Beloved*. The books are related to harsh realities of slavery and racism, and their aftermath on the destroyed family lives. We also trace feminism in the novels as the protagonists are females who go through traumatic conditions due to racism and societal narrow mindedness.

Sample

Toni Morrison's two novels '*Beloved*' and '*God Help the Child*' have been taken as sample texts to shed light on racism and feminism. It was a Systematic Sampling technique because novels were chosen in their chronological order written twenty-eight years apart; *Beloved* being the first written by the writer in 1987 and *God Help the Child* is the latest, published in 2015.

The novels portray the psychological trauma of black women based on their racial and color differences from the whites.

Data Collection

Data of this research is Toni Morrison's two novels, *God Help the Child* and *Beloved*. The books are related to harsh realities of slavery and racism, and their aftermath on the destroyed family lives. We also trace feminism in the novels as the protagonists are females who go through traumatic conditions due to racism and societal narrow mindedness.

Instrument

The researcher itself is the instrument of the research as the researcher employed the observation techniques to explore the elements of motherhood and racism in the novels.

Method of Data Analysis

Content analysis was used as the procedure of data analysis for the research. The two novels were thoroughly studied and the constituents of motherhood and racism were scrutinized from the two novels.

IV. CONTENT ANALYSIS

Feminism and Motherhood

Through Sethe's Character (Beloved)

Mocking the British spirit of 'civilizing mission' is Morrison's strong female protagonist Sethe, who displays in her character a sense of awareness and a far-sightedness embedded in the agony of a mother, unlike the 'savages' the British claim the Africans to be.

She is well-aware of the fate of her children as slaves, as she herself has suffered all her life from the horrors of slavery. It is important to note that slavery has not corrupted her sense of duty and motherhood.

As Paul D. thinks,

"For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love."

What is later revealed through flashbacks is the event of Sethe's escape from the happy home, which to no avail leads to a recapturing of Sethe and her kids by the former master as was the custom back in the 19th century. As Sethe runs away from fear of getting caught again, she takes a motherly decision. Against all the softness of a mother's glance, she kills her two-year old daughter with an axe to save her from the future fate of slavery.

Despite her love for her children, her killing of her own child reveals the traumatic state of motherhood found in the black women of the time-period. As she says, "I wouldn't draw breath without my children."

Amidst the chaos, like any other parent of any other race, she wants a better life for her children than what she herself has endured.

As Sethe thought,

"O Lord, deliver me. Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer."

Through Denver's character (Beloved)

The little girl Denver who was the symbol of innocence in the novel later becomes skeptical of Beloved's presence and takes a stand to get rid of the problem. In addition to her mother's strength and courage, Denver possesses the resolution of a feminist and fights against her problems to save her family life and earn a living, without depending on any male figure. The end of the novel suggests that she was victorious in her triumphant attempts.

Through Sweetness's character (God Help the Child)

The character of Sweetness, a fair-skinned African mother, has a very superficial portrayal of motherhood in God Help the Child as compared to Sethe's selfless love in Beloved.

As she gives birth to a dark child, she loathes the child as if it would contaminate her skin. As she says about her own daughter, "So black she scared me," Moreover, she finds something "witchy" about her child's eyes, and never lets her child address her with a word showing motherhood like 'mama', instead she requires Lula Ann to call her 'Sweetness'.

Having ruined Lula Ann's childhood, Sweetness still refuses to take any blames even by the end of the novel, "I know I did the best for her under the circumstances,"

Through Lula Ann Bride's character (God Help the Child)

Despite a traumatic childhood, Bride's struggle and achievement in society shows an utmost resolution and a sense of selfhood characteristic to feminism. She refuses to surrender to the society and so the society accepts her the way she is. She also refuses to accept the abandonment by her boyfriend Booker, unlike her mother's surrender to her husband's decisions. She goes in search of Booker and what is achieved out of this resolute refusal of accepting fate is a beautiful life ahead with Booker and their child, something which her mother could not achieve. Morrison thus highlights the feministic attitude in Bride in contrast to Sweetness's fatalistic viewpoint.

Moreover, Morrison proceeds to compare the motherhood of Sweetness with that of Bride's.

"A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe."

Through Louis's character (God Help the Child)

One can evidently see in Louis's abandonment of Sweetness, for producing a black child, a juxtaposition of both racism and women suffering. He can't bring himself to believe that the child is black so he leaves his wife and daughter, declaring her to be illegitimate. Such is the power of a man. On the other hand, Sweetness delves in misery without confronting Louis depicting the African Feministic traditions.

Racism and Slavery

Through Baby Suggs character (Beloved)

In the book *Beloved* written in 1987, and set up in 1873 after the civil war, some major signs of racism occur portrayed through the characters.

The character of Baby Suggs reveals at various points how she and everyone she knew were treated as commodities. Everyone she loved was sold, sent away or killed. Her narratives and vague memories of her childhood and of giving births are ghostly nightmares creeping under your skin at midnight.

"Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it...And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty," Baby Suggs said.

Through Sethe's character (Beloved)

The protagonist of the novel *Sethe* is a living example of how horrifying slavery can be to mankind. Her strong character involves escaping from slavery of sweet home along with her children, without a male counterpart as her husband never makes it to Cincinnati, Ohio.

Her self-awareness is ironic, as the British claimed superiority over the blacks of all kinds, like intellectual ability to decipher rationality or reason. The racism thus proves to be baseless when Morrison presents to us a rationally-thinking slave mother of African descent in the 19th century.

We can also see her misery and her haunted life based on the one act of hastily judgment which was an outcome of the racism she faced.

Through Paul D.'s character (Beloved)

Paul D. is the most prominent male figure of the novel and a supporting figure for the protagonist *Sethe*. Being an escapee from the Sweet Home himself, Paul D. has faced the same racism and discrimination and has seen horrible events of racism against Negroes.

"During, before, and after the war [Paul D] had seen Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said anything."

Revealing to the audience his personal experience of deep-rooted racism, Paul D. says:

"Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was."

In the latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015), the researcher has found several elements of Racism and internalized racism as well.

Through Sweetness's character (God Help the Child)

The character befitting the mother of the protagonist who calls herself Sweetness shows elements of both prevalent racism and women suffering. Being fair in complexion, she has attained this 'superiority' over the other people from her black race, and has allowed this superiority to creep in her skin as a validation of her existence.

Her harsh treatment of her black daughter through the innocent years of budding and prime youth show that her mind is still tangled in the extreme colorism America has seen, and she possesses an extreme level of internalized racism, which is provable because Sweetness disguises her harsh treatment of *Bride* as 'preparing for the World'.

However, the hard-earned successful adult life of *Bride* shows that Sweetness had mere apprehension and paranoia and she should have strengthened her daughter for accepting her reality rather than feeling inferior for her color. It is interesting to note that Sweetness's inability to understand child psychology is contrasting to *Sethe's* extreme care for her children. The more Sweetness attains the 'whiteness', the more she loses her sense of self.

Through character of Lula Ann Bride

Bride, the black child born to fair skinned parents, is a miserable creature doing all sorts of things to acquire her mother's love, to which she was entitled by birth. Her career shows that she wasn't oppressed much by the society but abandoned by her own parents who lost their dignity by producing a black progeny. Thus, colorism spills the black and white pages of the novel.

V. FINDINGS

The above research and collection of data shows that both the novels are filled with proofs of racism and feministic features, while the reader sees a contrasting depiction of motherhood in *Sethe* and *Sweetness*.

Psychological damages of Slavery and racism

It is quite evident that slavery leads *Sethe* to a point that she kills her own child, the psychological damage of which is never compensated for. She's haunted by it all her life until she loses her mind and goes mad. Similarly, *Bride's* mother antagonizing her for the black skin leads to a traumatic childhood where the child loses all sense of morality and testifies against a white woman and sends the innocent woman to jail just for pleasing her mother. The age that demands psychological upbringing and induction of morality gets plagued by racism.

Abandonment of women as mere objects

This is a recurrent theme of the novels. In *Beloved*, *Sethe* is abandoned by Paul D. for her past mistakes, committed in a state of trauma. In *God Help the Child*, *Sweetness* is abandoned by her husband Louis just because their daughter is naturally black. *Bride* is abandoned by her boyfriend Booker in innocence for trying to right her wrongs.

All these men seem to be authoritative and selfish and do not consider the feelings of their counterparts. They treat the women as mere objects without feelings.

Corruption of motherhood due to Colorism

Colorism and racial segregation causes *Sethe* to become a murderess that would otherwise have lived a happy life with her children and *Baby Suggs*, in *Beloved*. In the modern text of *God Help the Child*, *Sweetness's* motherhood is corrupted by being born fair to an extent that she withdraws maternal connection with her black child and prefers to be called *Sweetness* rather than 'mom'.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Violent reactions to differences has always been a part of mankind, may they be racial, religious or ideological differences. Racial segregation however earns the prize as it's one of the largest events of human history, leading to massacres and slaughter. In a world where tolerance is evaporating and differential negotiation is fading, the pattern of racism has a trail in history. Many writers raise their voices against the discrimination. i.e.: gender discrimination as depicted by feminist writers and racial injustice by the conscious and aware writers, may they belong to the oppressed or the oppressor community. Such is the voice of Toni Morrison. Detailed analysis of the books revealed that black women were not allowed the basic courtesy of raising their child as the child becomes a slave instantly at birth and is the property of the master.

Her writing depicts a panoramic vision of the issues discussed in the research and she holds a command over the language to produce her perfect ingredient soup of the two books, all in the right amount, without any harsh remarks towards the culprits. She elevates the spirit of being African by a sense of forgiveness to the oppressor, but being conscious and aware of the injustice of segregation, portrays her vision with a strong and undisguised realism. This creation of a magical realism effects on the reader without being offensive.

VII. FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

Toni Morrison's novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* can be viewed as powerful depictions of slavery traditions, racial segregation and African Feminism. These books can be recommended for a study of racism and female suppression to further researchers especially in analyzing different scenarios of motherhood. Her writing can influence future generations and can be used to raise voice against discrimination. People from any nation can utilize *Bride's* story to understand the vile and damage of colorism, as is also prevalent in Pakistani society, another colonial legacy of 'white beauty'.

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AUTHOR

AUTHOR- Myra Ikram, Department of English, Government College Women University, Faisalabad. Pakistan.
myra.haque@gmail.com