

# Black Feminism, Womanism, and Intersectionality: Assessing the Skin Hierarchies, and Triple Jeopardy in Morrison's *God Help the Child*.

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**Abstract-** Analyzing the narrative arc from traumatic childhood to resilient adulthood in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the paper explores the interplay of racism, sexism, and capitalism within the contours of intersectionality. In *God Help the Child*, Black feminism is contextualized as a tool that unveils how these intersecting forces perpetuate gender-based power imbalances, cultivating a pervasive sense of victimhood among women. This research impels a radical re-positioning of blackness in the white imagination. The theoretical praxis of Black feminism, elucidated in this research, becomes a transformative agent, restoring the subjectivity of the (ex)marginalized Black women. By creating spaces for self-expression and fostering a profound sense of agency, Black feminism disrupts traditional power dynamics, effectively challenging and redefining the influence of capitalism within the context of Black women's liberation.

**KEYWORDS:** Black Feminism, Triple jeopardy, Womanism and Black liberation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

- II. Bride's journey in America unfolds amidst challenges imposed by her light-skinned parents, resulting in a rejection by both her lover and her biological parents. The emotional toll inflicted by her family haunts her throughout her childhood. However, Bride's resilience and unwavering commitment to self-acceptance empower her to navigate these challenges successfully. Despite being dismissed by her lover, she manages to reconcile with him, ultimately becoming pregnant. Nevertheless, the novel takes a somber turn as Bride's mother forewarns her about the impending challenges of motherhood, encapsulating it with the ominous phrase, *God Help the Child* Morrison's work, therefore, confronts established narratives concerning gender and race, underscoring the imperative of black liberation.
- III. Embedded within the narrative is the recognition of the unique struggles faced by black women, a tenet fundamental to Black feminism. This framework accentuates the intersectional nature of oppression, encompassing race, class, and gender. Black women, subjected to triple jeopardy

arising from the interplay of capitalism, racism, and sexism, grapple with the erosion of subjectivity. Gender-based violence, systemic oppression, and the perpetuation of stereotypes consign black women to societal margins. Black feminism, as evidenced in Morrison's narrative, endeavors to deconstruct discriminatory tropes, redefine narratives surrounding black womanhood, and cultivate a sense of agency. It posits that concerted efforts from black women can disrupt the stranglehold of capitalist forces.

- IV. Expanding the discourse to include womanism within the framework of Black feminism seeks to decolonize the feminist narrative. This extension aims to empower black womanhood by dismantling various forms of oppression that have historically contributed to the desubjectification of black women. In essence, both Black feminism and womanism strive to illuminate the multifaceted struggles faced by black women, urging a collective dismantling of oppressive structures to foster empowerment and agency within the black female experience.

## REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

In his article entitled "Questioning Black's Existence in America: Toni Morrison's Vision of Black Beauty in *God Help the Child*," Yapo Etian undertakes an intricate exploration of the thematic underpinnings concerning black beauty within the context of Toni Morrison's work, specifically analyzing the novel *God Help the Child*. Etian adeptly delineates how the narrative challenges prevailing societal norms pertaining to blackness and beauty in the American milieu. The article delves into the imposition of conventional American beauty standards on black women, thereby giving rise to sentiments of inferiority.

Etian contends that Toni Morrison, through the portrayal of Bride, the protagonist, employs a deliberate strategy to disrupt established norms and subvert the derogatory characterization of African American women. Bride, with her markedly dark complexion and resplendent long hair, serves as a literary embodiment through which Morrison celebrates the unparalleled essence and indomitable spirit inherent in black womanhood.

Etian astutely notes in the discourse that Morrison deliberately crafts Bride's narrative to expose the stigmatization of the black race, presenting the protagonist as a figure subjected to abjection within the societal context.

Grazyna Maria article, "A Dissolution of Borderlines in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*," undertakes a comprehensive examination of the multifaceted borderlines existing within the narrative fabric of Morrison's work. Branny intricately dissects the binary oppositions entrenched at various levels, encompassing the realms of race, social dynamics, morality, and psychology. The thematic emphasis on border crossing and the dissolution of societal and cultural constructs serves as a pivotal focal point, underscoring Morrison's literary prowess in challenging prevailing dominant narratives within the social and cultural milieu.

Within the context of *God Help the Child*, the protagonist, Bride, emerges as a literary instrument that transcends and traverses diverse boundaries, including those delineated by race, gender, and identity. This deliberate narrative strategy employed by Morrison reflects a profound intention to disrupt and interrogate entrenched social norms, particularly as they pertain to the experiences of black women. Bride's traversal of these boundaries becomes a symbolic act of resistance, a means through which Morrison challenges the rigidity of societal constructs that have historically marginalized black women.

In Patricia Hill Collins' seminal work, "Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment," a comprehensive framework is presented for the analysis of the intricate intersections of race, gender, and class. Collins accentuates the empowering potential of black feminist thought in resisting and challenging the entrenched structures of oppression that have historically marginalized black women. She posits this intellectual framework as a means through which black women can subvert the enduring traumas inflicted by historical exclusion from dominant discourses of knowledge.

An essential dimension of Collins' argument involves the call to center the voices of black women in discussions surrounding intersectional oppression, skin hierarchies, and the enduring effects of generational trauma. By doing so, Collins advocates for a transformative approach to achieving social justice and empowerment for women.

### **The Power of Black Feminism: Black Protagonist's Resistance to Traditional Gender Roles and Racial Narratives in *God Help the Child***

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* intricately weaves a narrative that challenges conventional gender expectations and racial prejudices through the multidimensional character of Bride. The dark-skinned protagonist, unloved by her light-skinned parents, emerges as a symbol of resistance against societal norms that prescribe submission based on gender. Morrison deftly deconstructs the intricacies of gender roles

through Bride and her lover, Booker Starbarn, presenting a nuanced portrayal that transcends traditional binaries.

In the exploration of self-discovery as a woman, Bride undergoes a transformative journey, reclaiming agency in the face of oppressive patriarchal structures. The narrative unfolds with Bride's declaration of self-respect, signaling a departure from the submissive expectations imposed upon her: "You don't have to love me but you damn well have to respect me" (Morrison 12). This empowerment is further manifested in her assertion of financial independence and career success, challenging the societal norms that confine women to predefined roles (Morrison 53). Bride emerges as a resilient figure, transcending the traumatic experiences of her childhood and confronting the patriarchal norms that seek to confine women to submissive roles.

To address the racial inequalities faced by African-American women, Morrison emphasizes the significance of self-acceptance as a catalyst for Black Liberation. The novel critiques the damaging effects of internalized racism, highlighting the trauma inflicted by racial prejudice against dark skin. Bride's rejection of societal and familial mistreatment reflects a resolute spirit that leads to her liberation from racial oppression. The protagonist grapples with her racial identity, ultimately embracing herself despite discrimination and familial hatred, as evidenced by her poignant statement, "I didn't want to be white, but I didn't want to be black either. I just wanted to be me" (Morrison 21).

### **Narratives of Liberation: Empowering Black Womanhood in Morrison's *God Help the Child***

Morrison guides Bride in resisting the imposition of societal beauty standards, notably prioritizing her dark skin over lighter complexions. Bride's mother, Sweetness, symbolizes the confinement of her daughter's childhood, perpetuating the internalization of dark skin as inherently inferior. Sweetness articulates this by stating, "Her color is a cross she will always carry" (Morrison 27). However, Bride, in her transformative journey, defiantly reconstructs her identity by embracing her Blackness, thereby dismantling prevailing narratives of racial inferiority.

The novel illustrates Bride's use of her voice as a potent tool against racist narratives, embodying a resilience that challenges stereotypes imposed on Black women. Learning from her mother's experiences, Bride rejects the internalization of White beauty standards and societal expectations. Morrison underscores the significance of challenging such mentalities, asserting her voice in solidarity with the Black community to empower them against race and gender oppression. Bride's success as a businesswoman stands as a testament to her refusal to conform to societal expectations, becoming an exemplary figure of liberation and empowerment through self-acceptance.

Morrison delves into the theme of solidarity among Black women and the broader community, urging Bride to recognize and confront internalized prejudices within the Black

community. The narrative critiques the prevalent tendency to internalize light skin as a means to adhere to societal beauty standards and escape oppression. The character of Sweetness, Bride's mother, serves as a poignant illustration of conforming to White beauty standards and perpetuating societal expectations. Instead of fostering resistance against oppressive systems, Sweetness instructs her daughter to anticipate mistreatment based on gender and race, encapsulated in her belief that "The lighter the skin – the better the life is" (Morrison 15).

Morrison compellingly portrays Bride's journey towards a sense of belonging, challenging the divisive narratives within the Black community. Having experienced isolation during her formative years, Bride rejects conformity to traditional gender roles and embraces her Black identity. Morrison, through her narrative, advocates for the dismantling of solidarity based on imposed expectations, urging the Black community to embrace their core nature and unite against systemic oppression. In doing so, the application of Black Feminism becomes a powerful instrument for Morrison to amplify the voices of Black individuals, fostering empowerment, liberation, and a renewed sense of community.

### **Beyond Black and White: Breaking the Chains of Skin Hierarchies in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child***

"Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose (1983)," serves as a critical lens through which the harsh experiences of black women, encompassing oppression, exploitation, and discrimination, are examined. Notably, Womanism has found itself historically excluded from mainstream feminism, predominantly led by white voices, which failed to acknowledge the intricate interconnectedness of inequalities rooted in gender, race, and class within the black community. This theoretical framework places paramount importance on unraveling the double jeopardy faced by African-American women, signifying the intersectional oppression experienced at the nexus of race and gender. The concept of double jeopardy encapsulates the notion that the Black community encounters multifaceted forms of oppression within the American societal structure.

Through the prism of Womanism, the struggles of Bride during her formative years are analyzed, highlighting her journey towards self-discovery, self-acceptance, and self-love. Bride's ultimate triumph in breaking free from the constraints of skin hierarchies signifies a reclamation of self-worth and beauty. The novel effectively underscores Morrison's assertion that colorism, as an offspring of racism, perpetuates privileges associated with lighter skin tones.

Beyond challenging intersecting forms of oppression, Womanism also delves into the realm of self-determination as a means of dismantling oppressive structures that perpetuate skin hierarchies. Self-determination, as a process, empowers black individuals to navigate and redefine their true selves, values, and identities amidst harsh experiences. Bride, the central character in Morrison's novel, embodies this spirit of self-determination by refusing to acquiesce to imposed skin divisions. Instead, she embraces her true identity, paving the way for personal liberation and societal change. Bride's career choice in developing beauty products specifically for dark skin emerges as a manifestation of her commitment to reshaping beauty standards and fostering appreciation for diverse skin tones within American society.

### **Reclaiming Radiance: Unveiling the Healing Journey of Bride in *God Help the Child***

Toni Morrison's celebrated novel, *God Help the Child*, provides an insightful exploration into the wounds inflicted by racism and gender-based discrimination, laying bare the harsh realities experienced by the protagonist, Black Bride. Enduring severe childhood trauma marked by abuse and sexual harassment due to her dark complexion, Bride's journey unfolds as Morrison navigates the complex interplay of familial relationships within the African-American community. Bride's mother, Sweetness, perpetuates discriminatory views rooted in white beauty standards, leading Bride to internalize feelings of inferiority. The generational trauma and alienation experienced by the Black community manifest in Bride's upbringing, contributing to a pessimistic worldview. Morrison skillfully exposes the need for therapeutic intervention, specifically through the lens of healing justice, to transmute a wounded childhood into an empowered

adulthood. Bride's character emerges as a testament to this process, embodying resilience and empowerment as she confronts internalized traumas to achieve liberation through healing.

The transformative potential of healing justice takes center stage in *God Help the Child*, where Bride's fractured soul undergoes a profound healing process by embracing the power of self-love. The acceptance of her Black identity becomes a transformative tool for healing, propelling Bride towards a brighter future as a successful businesswoman. Morrison deftly portrays healing as an act of resistance against conformity to traditional gender roles, shaping Bride into an empowered woman through self-acceptance. Bride's journey becomes a testament to the collective healing process as she contributes to her own empowerment and reconstruction. In the African-American context, healing justice emerges as a pathway to move beyond the pain of racism, with Bride's acceptance of her physical appearance and refusal to internalize an inferiority complex serving as a powerful manifestation of healing from within.

### CONCLUSION

This research underscores the urgency of adopting a radically inclusive ideology embedded in Black feminism, not only as a theoretical framework but as a catalyst for tangible societal change. By challenging and deconstructing oppressive structures, Black feminism paves the way for a more equitable and emancipated future, redefining the narrative of Black women and reshaping the contours of societal imagination.

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