

Challenges of Children's Health in *God Help the Child*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015) narrates the tale of a dark black girl Bride and some other children sharing similar experiences. In this novel, children suffer from not only racial discrimination, but also sexual abuse and mental disorder as well. Morrison draws attention to children's protection, which transcends ethnic boundaries to explore the universal problem of children's health.

Keywords: Children's Health; Toni Morrison; *God Help the Child*.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-2019) became the first female black American Nobel laureate for literature in 1993, which creates a new landmark of African American literature. Her oeuvre is well-known for the epic themes, vivid dialogue and richly detailed characters. Among her most popular fictions are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987).

Morrison's latest novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), accounts the story of a dark black girl named Bride, her boyfriend Booker and some other children who have similar experiences. Paula Martín-Salván interprets this novel from the perspective of trauma and narratology. Justine Baillie examines identity, gender and race under globalization. Mar Gallego argues that children are traumatized because of social inequality. Manuela López Ramírez claims that the novel reveals the new witches in the West. Professor Pang Haonong and Wang Shouren also attend to the trauma of children in this fiction.

This paper suggests that this novel exposes contemporary challenges in the United States that have threatened children's health. Morrison draws attention to children's protection, which transcends the boundaries of ethnic problems to explore more universal topic of children's health. Pang Haonong says, "it is manifested that the focus of Morrison's writing has moved from ethnic problems of black race to more profound universal problems of human beings" (A Social Ethics Approach to Trauma and Alienation in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* 11). The U.S. children nowadays are confronted with three challenges: racial discrimination, sexual violence and mental disorder. This essay aims to disclose how Morrison addresses these problems through her writings.

2. The Tumor of Racial Discrimination

Racial discrimination is a social tumor haunting the US all the time. After the passage of The Civil Rights Act of 1964, racial discrimination had been outlawed legally. African Americans eventually secured equal civil rights after hundreds of years of combat. Nonetheless, it does not mean racial discrimination has disappeared completely. Instead, it takes place implicitly and occasionally. The death of the 46-year-old African American, Gorge Floyd, killed in police brutality in 2020 was the most recent instance. "Black Lives

Matter" movement was thus ignited and a large number of citizens around the globe exhibited their anger and condolence. "Thus, the realities of racism and bigotry cannot be easily dismissed, nor their crucial impact on both bodies and identities at communal and personal levels" (Gallego 309). Morrison recounts three types of racial discrimination against children in *God Help the Child*: intraracial discrimination, internalized discrimination and institutional discrimination.

Intraracial racism "refers to discrimination within the black community against those with darker skin and more African features." (Tyson 362). It means the discrimination within a race or an ethnic group according to their skin complexion. In the novel, the female protagonist Bride has been discriminated against by her parents since her birth just because of her dark black skin. In her parents' eyes, their skin color is high-light which gives them pride and confidence. Therefore, it is unacceptable for them to have a baby with dark black skin. In general, a couple who become parents by the birth of their infant are supposed to be quite excited and happy, but Bride's parents feel even reluctant to touch her, and what's worse her mother even attempts to suffocate the newly-borne baby. "I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute because once—just for a few seconds—I held a blanket over her face and pressed" (Morrison 20).

Intraracial discrimination happens among those who have passed into "white" from black. The white-skinned mulattoes tend to deny their association with black. Pang Haonong points out that "Due to their desire for white life, white-skinned mulattoes deliberately cover their African heritage and deny themselves to evade the persecution and discrimination of racists, thus attaining higher social, economic and racial positions and satisfying their vanity repressed by law or customs" ("Psychological Exploration of Racial Passing in African American Literature" 130). In this novel, Sweetness' grandmother successfully passes into white, but she never mentions anything about her black children who are light-skinned though. Even worse, she never opens the letters from her kids, indicating that she never wants to have anything to do with her black kindred.

"In recent years, the term 'internalized racism' has emerged as a way of referring to the phenomenon of people of African descent, or people of color having taken in and internalized aspects of racism" (Watts-Jone 592). From this definition, we can infer that internalized racism or discrimination refers to the practices of discriminated race of people acknowledging

the idea imposed on them by another race. The group of people who think themselves superior control and confine another ethnic group in many ways. They would use modern sciences such as biology, anatomy or sociology to convince people that they are superior. Gradually, the discriminated group would accept these notions and thus internalize them. "Over hundreds of years, African Americans have encountered different ideologies that have legitimized and naturalized enslavement, confinement, and other forms of racial oppression, while simultaneously being blamed for their own racial plight." (Lofton and Davis 214) In *God Help the Child*, Bride consults her friend Jeri about a makeover for her interview with the Sylvia company. Jeri advises that she should always wear white which could highlight her charm. Bride takes his advice and eventually becomes very successful in Sylvia.

"Institutional discrimination refers to the formal and informal practices, policies, and laws of organizations that systematically privilege certain groups and disadvantage others" (Goldstein 1). This originates from the purposes to oppress the prejudiced group, such as to impose rulings, restrictions on exploitation. This type of discrimination can be found at the very beginning of the novel. "When she and my father went to the courthouse to get married there were two Bibles and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for white people's hands" (Morrison 16). Morrison also unveils the institutional discrimination by the narration of Sweetness. "But how else can we hold on to a little dignity? How else can you 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's free to white shoppers?" (Morrison 20).

Thus, Morrison exposes the racial discrimination inflicting children in this novel, which proves that the alleged post-black era is a fallacy. Because of the racial disparity, black children fail to enjoy their parents' full care and love, nor do they relish familial relationships. They encounter social inequities as well. Apart from racism, children suffer from sexual violence.

3. The Horror of Sexual Violence

According to the *Encyclopedia of Child Behavior and Development*, "Child sexual abuse is most commonly defined as sexual activity with a child where consent is not or cannot be given" (Elkovitch and Hanson). This includes all sexual contact with children in which force or threat of forced is used, regardless of the age difference between participants. This also includes all sexual contact between a child and an older person (typically 5 or more years older) regardless of whether force or coercion is used. In *God Help the Child*, Children are abused sexually. They are involved in forced prostitution, sexual harassment, and pederasty. Readers are terribly astonished and shocked when they learn about these troubles trapping the children.

Rain's mother prostitutes to earn her daily bread. Moreover, she even forces her only daughter Rain to receive male guests. Rain is reluctant to do the work assigned by her mother, and we even can say that she feels too disgusting and repulsive to accept this mission. "He stuck his pee thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made me stand outside" (Morrison 255). The consequences are so serious that Rain's mother has to return the twenty dollars to the guest, and little Rain was kicked out

of home by her mother relentlessly. Fortunately, Rain is picked up by Steve and his wife Evelyn. Even though, when she tells them her terrible experiences, they do not believe her words.

Children are harassed sexually in this novel. Brooklyn, Bride's best friend, is molested by her uncle, which forces her to leave home and depend on herself when she is only fourteen years old. "Or when my uncle started thinking of putting his fingers between my legs again, even before he knew himself what he was planning to do. I hid or ran or screamed with a fake stomachache so my mother would wake from her drunken nap to tend to me" (Morrison 338). Although Brooklyn does not complain directly that she is sexually molested by her uncle, she means it metaphorically. Brooklyn's mother is not qualified as she fails to pay enough attention and offer protection to her daughter. Booker's cousin Hannah is another girl in this novel who suffers from sexual harassment by one of her family members. What makes her more distressed is that her mother Queen refuses to believe what she says when she chooses to confide the secret to her mother. "There was a thing with Hannah. Rumor in the family was that Queen ignored or dismissed the girl's complaint about her father—the Asian one, I believe, or the Texan. I don't know. Anyway she said he fondled her and Queen refused to believe it. The ice between them never melted" (Morrison 416).

Morrison writes about a freak named Humboldt who is addicted to pederasty and abuses six children to death. The freak is a retired mechanic, considered to be "the nicest man in the world who always smiles and is ready to offer help. He is adored by adults as well as minors. The unlucky boys, seduced by his candies, toys and pets, are abducted to his basement and slaughtered. ".....the nicest man in the world was caught, tried and convicted of SSS, the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys, each of whose names, including Adam's, was tattooed across the shoulders of the nicest man in the world" (Morrison 292). When the police search Humboldt's house for the lost kids, they find bloody, cruel and unbelievable things. "When Mr. Humboldt's house was searched a dirty mattress sporting dried blood was found in the basement along with an elaborately decorated candy tin that held carefully wrapped pieces of dry flesh, which, on not very close inspection, turned out to be small penises" (Morrison 296).

Boys and girls are so vulnerable that they need parents' attention, care and guard. Nevertheless, the minor victims are not able to have enough protection from their parents. Therefore, they are prone to be sexually abused by acquaintances or even by family members. Their incredible experiences cause mental disorders when they become adults, which may affect them for a lifetime.

4. The Torture of Mental Disorder

As mentioned above, children in *God Help the Child* suffer from racial discrimination and sexual violence. These two types of childhood sufferings are bound to engender mental disorders like trauma, feelings of insecurity and paranoia among the inflicted victims. This is very evident in this novel that the victimized children are haunted by these mental disorders for a long time from childhood until adulthood, from singleness to marriage.

It is obvious that Bride's boyfriend Booker has been traumatized since his brother Adam is killed by "the nicest man". The trauma affects deeply and for such a long time that

it is extremely uneasy for him to recover from this trauma. When he comes to know that his love Bride shows her sympathy with Sofia, a freak in his eyes, he decides to split with Bride. This trauma nearly ruins his relationship with Bride and his family as well. What happens to Booker is called Post-trauma Stress Disorder or PTSD. According to the definition of American Psychiatric Association, “Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a psychiatric disorder that may occur in people who have experienced or witnessed a traumatic event such as a natural disaster, a serious accident, a terrorist act, war/combat, or rape or who have been threatened with death, sexual violence or serious injury.” The following dust-up between Booker and Bride reveals how the trauma nearly ruins their relationship:

“Shut up and talk! Why did you walk out on me?”

“Oh, God.” Booker wiped more blood from the side of his face.

“Look. Well, see. My brother, he was murdered by a freak, a predator like the one I thought you were forgiving and—”

“I don’t care! I didn’t do it! It wasn’t me who killed your brother.”

“All right! All right! I get that, but—”

“But nothing! I was trying to make up to someone I ruined. You just ran around blaming everybody. You bastard. Here, wipe your bloody hand.” Bride threw a dish towel toward him and put down what was left of the bottle. After wiping her palms on her jeans and brushing hair from her damp forehead, she looked steadily at Booker: “You don’t have to love me but you damn well have to respect me.” She sat down in a chair by the table and crossed her legs (Morrison 374-376).

Rain is traumatized by her mother and stranger’s sexual aggression, which brings her feeling of insecurity. When she flees away from her biological mother after she resists against serving the man, she is adopted by Steve and Evelyn. However, Rain is also reluctant to be taken into their truck at the very beginning, and she even grapples with the couple. For Rain, Steve is a stranger like the man she was forced to serve, so she feels anxious when grasped by a man unknown to her. This is an obvious syndrome of lack of security. “That’s when Evelyn and Steve came along, and when he touched her she thought of the men who came to her mother’s house, so she had to run off, miss the food lady and hide” (Morrison 260). Just because Rain is short of security, she depends on Bride and attaches to her tremendously. She retrieves trust and security from Bride who helped her out immediately when she was bullied by other boys. “My heart was beating fast because nobody had done that before. But that’s what my black lady did without even thinking about it. She’s gone now but who knows maybe I’ll see her again sometime. I miss my black lady” (Morrison 266).

Paranoia is a type of serious mental illness that a person falsely believes others attempt to harm him/her. In paranoia, people have wrong beliefs or make fake interpretations of other people’s facial expressions, behavior, acts or even the presence but doing nothing to him/her. This greatly hinders people’s trust and interpersonal communications or bring physical harm to the parties involved. Bride decides to seek her love Booker by driving to his hometown. However, she has an unexpected car crash on the middle way and was trapped in the car for a whole night. Luckily she was rescued by Steve, but when Steve approaches Bride and holds her out of the crashed car, she repeatedly begs him not to hurt her. “Enclosed in his arms and in unrelenting pain, she said, ‘Don’t hurt me, please don’t hurt me,’ over and over before

fainting.” (Morrison, 212) Readers may feel curious why Bride reacts so intensely when they read this scenario. Actually, paranoia could account for this because Bride once witnesses a boy being sodomized by the landlord of her family. Unfortunately, when she talks this to her mother, she is required by her mother to keep silent for they could be expelled if they bring this dirty thing into daylight.

In this section, we discuss trauma, lack of security and paranoia that afflict the children in the novel. The children are traumatized by the loss of family members, mother’s abuse and sexual violence. By exposing these mental disorders, Morrison successfully astonishes audiences and makes them sympathize with the victims.

5. Conclusion

In this novel, black children experience hardships and difficulties such as racial discrimination, sexual abuse and trauma which bring harm to them mentally and physically. Either unbelievable things befall themselves or astonishing events happen to their peers. The consequences are so intense that side effects impact on them, hurt them or potentially destroy them even when they become adults. By chronicling the stories of childhood miseries, Morrison draws attention to child care, which proves that she crosses the border of racial problems into a more universal topic.

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