

COMPREHENDING THE IMPACT OF MATERNAL INFLUENCE IN TONI MORRISON'S GOD HELP THE CHILD

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ABSTRACT

This study deals with the struggle and focuses on the interpretation of the individual and importance of the role of Mother in the life of an individual its impact, disordered and traumatic behavior resulting from an unsettling and disturbing experience. The work attests to the physical and emotional oppression worked out upon children with special regard on the protagonist Lula Ann Bride well in Toni Morrison's novel God Help the Child and strives to investigate alternative modes of thought and behavior in dealing with children. The study further throws light on the true essence of motherhood, the role of a mother in the initial years of an individual. And how the mother contributes to the individual development of the children with the right kind of attention and love leads to the attainment of selfhood.

KEYWORDS: *Motherhood, Individual, Oppression, Behaviour, Attention, and Love*

INTRODUCTION

There can be no systematic study of women in patriarchal culture, no theory of women's oppression, that does not take into account women's role as a daughter of mothers and as a mother of daughters, that does not study female identity in relation to previous and subsequent generation of women, and that does not study that relationship in the wider context in which it takes place: the emotional, economic and symbolic structure of family and society.

The mother--daughter relationship is evidently a recurrent theme in most of the autobiographies written by women writers. Most autobiographies focus at least on one parent, naturally, the one who has influenced them more. This influence which is positive in most cases could also be negative at times.

Critics of women's writing have questioned whether women's writing is characterized by female poetics of affiliation that depends on the daughter's relation to her mother. Feminist writers like Adrienne Rich and Nancy Chodorow have strongly supported with path-breaking works like *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (Rich, 1976), and *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Chodorow, 1978). They have argued that the relationship of the infant to the female parent is an important factor in the development of identity.

They are of the opinion that it is the girl-child's role as a daughter and later as a mother that forms an integral part of her womanhood. Rich observes in her book *Of Women Born* that:

The cathexis between mother and daughter- essential, distorted, misused- is the great unwritten story. Probably there is nothing in human nature more resonant with changes than the flow of energy between two biologically like bodies... (225)

The “mother” here implies not only the biological mother but all those other mother-figures who influence a girl-child. Their role in the lives of a child has a greater significance. There are many untold stories where the breach between the mother and the child leads to the psychological unpredictability in an individual.

Nancy Chodorow’s psychoanalytic feminism is especially mother directed, even if it is not mothercentred. According to her, it is the intimacy to the mother that defines the process of women’s development in culture. Chodorow believes that children wish to remain one with their mother, and expect that she will never have different interests from them, yet they define development in terms of growing away from her. Chodorow in her book *Of Women Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* states that: “In the face of their dependence, lack of certainty of her emotional permanence, fear of merging, and overwhelming love and attachment, a mother looms large and powerful” (82)

On the other hand, several psychoanalysts suggest that the mother symbolizes dependence, regression, passivity, and the lack of adaptation to reality. Turning from the mother represents independence, individuation, progress, activity, and participation in the real world. It is by turning away from our mother that we finally become, by going our different paths, grown and women. Sometimes the mother-daughter connection is so strong and overwhelming that it stifles the daughter’s growth as an individual. In her efforts to plumb the depth of human emotion, Toni Morrison returns again and again to that most fundamental of personal relationships- the tie between mother and child. Motherhood is at the very core of human experience, and truly grasps our capacity for love, for grief, for pain, for survival, one must take the full measure of motherhood.

GOD HELP THE CHILD

Morrison is able to take historically and culturally African American interpretation of maternity and strip away the socially imposed limitation on motherhood, thereby exposing the universal humanity of that experience. Morrison dissolves the boundaries of the maternal role, creating an ever-widening, integrational definition of the concept of mothering.

Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* leads through the consequences of the recurrence of the past terrible experiences in the makeup of the present and the memory of childhood on the individual’s psyche. The inter-racism characteristic of America in the times of slavery, represented in the novel through the character of Sweetness; and the second is the contemporary American society where blackness represents beauty, also represented in the text through the black protagonist, Bride.

The novel discusses Morrison’s major themes in her well-known works as racial bigotry, black skin color and center-periphery relationships. It is also, as the title indicates, about childhood and the way to confront childhood past ghost to better reclaim the present and the future. The story of the novel revolves around Lula Ann Bridewell, Morrison’s black protagonist, born to light skin parents, the father Louis and the mother Sweetness.

Morrison’s novel starts with the birth of Lula Ann. From the moment she is born, her mother is repelled by her, as she has skin so black that it scares her mother, Sweetness explains “Midnight black, Sudanese black” (3).

The hostility grows when Lula Ann's father leaves them because he does not believe that he can be the father of a girl as black as Lula Ann. Lula Ann's mother looks back at how she and her husband had three good years together and how it changed when Lula Ann was born. He blamed her "and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger – more than that, an enemy" (5).

As a dark baby girl, Lula Ann Bridewell was refused by her father and hated by her mother because of her black epidermal signs. The child's dark skin embarrassed the mother to the extent that she obliges the daughter to call her sweetness instead of mom. She even tried once to kill her by pressing a blanket on her face and withholds any kind of affection and love for her.

I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. 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. (4-5)

Sweetness, with her ironic name, rears Lula Ann in a patriarchal authoritarian way. Lula Ann grows up bereft of affection and love, which destroys the mother--daughter bond. Patriarchal motherhood prevents Sweetness from developing the necessary emotion and affection ties with her daughter, critical during the first years of a child's life. Lula Ann remembers how her mother loathed touching her dark skin, "distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me." (31) Lula Ann also recalls how she made little mistakes deliberately so that her mother would touch her hateful skin. Lula Ann actually feels glad when she soils her bed sheet with her first menstrual blood and her mother slap her, being handled "by a mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible" (79).

As an infant, Lula Ann misses being close to her mother. She remembers hiding behind the door to hear Sweetness hum some blue song, thinking how nice it would have been if they could have sung together. Sweetness's withdrawal of affection is her daughter's worst memory. Lula Ann is desperately in need of love. That is why she testifies against a teacher, Sofia Huxley, and lies about her pervert abuses of children, "to get some love- from her mama" (156).

Lula Ann remembers how Sweetness was kind of mother like the day she colludes with her classmates to accuse their teacher, a white woman named Sofia Huxley, of sexually molesting them. Smiling at her and even holding her hand when they walked down the courthouse steps, which she had never done before. "I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before- with mouth and eyes". (31)

Sweetness neglects her maternal duties so as not to confront the rejection of the society. She does not take Lula Ann much outside because those who see her baby in the carriage give a start or jump back before frowning. Sweetness does not want to be seen as her mother. She does not attend parent-teachers meetings or volleyball games either. The racial self-contempt that Sweetness, who has accepted an inferior definition of the black self, inculcates in her daughter does not allow her to have a sense of belonging or identity.

Things got better but I still had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don't care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry. (7)

Sweetness believes that “there was no point in being tough or sassy even when you were right.”(41) to help black children cope with racism, their parents teach them special skills, self-reliance, self-defense, dealing with pain and disappointments. However, Sweetness’s motherhood only seeks absolute and uncontested obedience. She does not foster a positive racial identity in her daughter so she can resist racist practices, cultural norms, values and expectations of the dominant culture.

Lula Ann’s upbringing and disciplining are really harsh and even more when she is turning an adolescent. Her rearing was all about following rules, which she obeyed. “I behaved and behaved and behaved” (32). And yet Lula Ann feels that

She never knew the right thing to do or say or remember what the rules were. Leave the spoon in the cereal bowl or place it next to the bowl; tie her shoelaces with a bow or a double knot; fold her socks down or pull them straight up to the calf? What were the rules when did they change? (78-79)

Despite all the suffering, Sweetness’ patriarchal motherhood cannot preserve her daughter from the curse that starts with Mr. Leigh’s insults when Lula Ann sees him abusing a boy. He calls her nigger and cunt. Lula Ann, who is only six years old, does not need the definitions of the words because she feels the hate and revulsion they are charged with.

Lula Ann learns her mother’s lessons and “let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through her veins, with no antibiotic available building up immunity so tough that not being a nigger girl was all she needed to win” (57). Sweetness’ patriarchal motherhood does not focus on meeting Lula Ann’s cultural and emotional needs. She is more concerned about her daughter living up to the standards, norm-abiding ideas, consensus values and expectation of the white-dominated racist society.

When Lula Ann has to testify, her mother is very nervous thinking that her daughter’s performance may put her to shame, instead of being worried about her stressful situation.

I was nervous thinking she would stumble getting up to stand or stutter, or forget what the psychologists said and put me to shame...I sat through most of the days of the trial, not all just the days when Lula Ann was scheduled to appear because many witnesses were postponed or never showed. She looked scared but she stayed quite (42).

Sweetness fails to fulfill the three essential tasks of maternal practice, without which the child will not be able to confront racial injustices or develop a strong sense of black selfhood. Deprived of affection, effective preservation and culture-bearing, Lula Ann has to struggle her whole life for self-definition, trying to protect herself from being hurt. At the age of sixteen, she drops out of high school and flees home. Lula Ann changes her “dumb countrified name” (11) and calls herself Bride. Bride’s memory as an adult is still stuck in her experiences of childhood traumas and refuses to forget her mother’s avoidance. She builds a new life for herself, escaping from her mother’s and society’s definitions. Bride reinvents herself. She becomes the regional manager of a prosperous cosmetic business, Sylvia Inc., and leads a glamorous life. “She had stitched together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love.”(79)

Being a successful woman she finds vengeance in selling her elegant blackness to her childhood ghost, her tormentors, so they can feel envious of her triumph. And still, her past is with her.

Bride tries to make amends for the terrible lie she told as a young girl but, in the process, her boyfriend Booker walks out on her and bride decides to approach her former teacher, who has recently been released on parole, to make recompense for her imprisonment but Huxley greets Bride with a vicious, disfiguring beat down. She learns that making amends does not always go according to plan.

I reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beat the shit out of me.... I didn't make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers.(32)

Bride's relationship with her lover, Booker Starbern, has just run aground. Bride suspects that Booker's leaving has instigated her body's melting away. As she heals from her run-in with Huxley, Bride notices that her body has begun regressing towards some prepubescent stage, her pubic hair suddenly disappears, her earlobe piercings close, and she stops menstruating.

I shouldn't have –trusted him, I mean. I spilled my heart to him; he told me nothing about himself. I talked; he listened. Then he split, left without a word. Mocking me, dumping me exactly as Sofia Huxley did.... but I really thought I had found my guy. "You not the woman" is the last thing I expected to hear.(62)

Bride decides to track down Booker to find out why he exited their relationship. Bride says, her failures in adult life her breakup with Booker, her boyfriend or being beaten by Sofia Huxley makes her realize that, in spite of her mother's strict lessons, she is helpless in the presence of confounding cruelty. She just obeyed, never fought back. She feels that she is "Too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley, there was nothing in the world left to do but stand up for herself finally and confront the first man she had bared her soul to, unaware that he was mocking her."(79)

All along the novel, the extent of harm sweetness's patriarchal motherhood has inflicted on Bride is exposed. Her traumatic childhood experiences keep surfacing. Her lost identity is symbolized by physical regression, "back into a scared little black girl" (142), triggered by Booker's rejection. She becomes conscious that "she had counted on her looks for so long-how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness or her own cowardice, the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it". (151)

Bride's journey to find Booker takes her to the woods of northern California, where she wrecks her car and meets with a white family. The bride also meets Rain, a semi-feral girl who has suffered terrible abuse on her mother's hands. Rain is the emerald-eyed girl who finds Bride stuck in the crashed car. Evelyn tells Bride that she and her husband had found Rain drenched in rain alone on a wintry night. They dried, fed and cleaned her and tried to find out the house of Rain. While Evelyn thinks that she rescued Rain from something terrible.

The hippy couple Steve and Evelyn have named her Rain in reference to her purity, innocence and unspoiled nature. Rain confides in Bride that she is prostituted and sexually abused for money, in return, for her mother. Once she opposes this act, her mother throws her outdoor. This steered the hatred towards her mother. The common memory of her mother is so bitter that a six-year-old confesses her urge to chop off her mother's head.

"She wouldn't let me back in. I kept pounding on the door. She opened it once to throw me my sweater." As Bride imagined the scene her stomach fluttered. How could anybody do that to a child, any child, and one's own?

“If you saw your mother again what would you say to her?” Rain grinned. “Nothing. I’d chop her head off.” (102)

In rural California, Bride confronts Booker and her confession to him makes her feel newly born. “No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father” (162). The bride tells him about her pregnancy and he offers her “the hand she had craved all her life, the hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for” (175).

At the end of the novel, Bride acquires, apparently, the sense of self-required to mother her baby and not to reproduce Sweetness. “A child. New life. Immuneto evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment...so they believe” (175). There is a ray of hope in the ending of this brisk tale. In the last chapter, Morrison discloses Sweetness as sick guilt-ridden women in a nursing home. She wants to believe that she had raised her daughter right to cope with the harsh reality black people had to face and states “I wasn’t a bad mother” (43). And yet, her words, “But it’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not” (7), a prayer or chant, seems to convey her concealed feelings of guilt at her distorted motherhood.

God Help the Child is filled with various themes that revisit traumatic moments in the black history and culture. Toni Morrison has voiced African American experiences of racism and has particularly concentrated on the oppression inflicted upon children. Indeed, the theme of child abuse and trauma has been recurrent in her major works including *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby* among the others.

The characters in *God Help the Child* are deprived of parental love and compassion and left alone fighting to overstep the ghost of childhood horrific experiences to build up their future. The bride is an example of survival; she firmly battled the nightmares of her past to offer them a happy living in the present. Mother is a child’s first link to any emotional bonding and attachment. Children learn their first emotion in relation to their mother. The way the mother bonds with the child in the initial years will leave a deep impact on the child’s overall well-being and development. The mother and child relationship created will greatly influence the way the child behaves in social and emotional settings, especially in later years. As a mother, how soon one reacts to the child’s needs and how one tries to take care of those needs will teach the child a lot about understanding others’ and his/her emotional requirements.

CONCLUSIONS

Mothers have a greater responsibility in shaping their child’s personality and psyche. The way a mother nurtures and cherishes her child is reflected in the future self of the individual. It may be destructive or constructive; it all depends on the way the child is treated from the infancy onwards. Mothers are like roots to a tree; their contribution to the growth of the tree is never seen on the surface but without the deep penetration of the roots and its aid to the tree, the tree will be soon lifeless.

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