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QUESTIONING BLACKS' EXISTENCE IN AMERICA: TONI MORRISON'S VISION OF BLACK BEAUTY IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

Abstract: The objective of this paper is to examine the issues of African American identity by questioning Blacks' existence in America. Indeed, in *God Help the Child* Toni Morrison renders black beauty a central issue. In seeking to sublimate black beauty in general, and particularly that of the African American woman, the writer makes a relatively humiliating presentation of the African American woman through Bride, the protagonist, who appears to be an abject character under the stigmatization of the black race. Through a multivocal narrative, Morrison establishes an intersubjective relationship between various African American narrators who share the stigmatization of their identity as it is conceptualized prior to the Civil Rights Movement and still prevailed during the 1990's. Their commitment in such a relationship is a vibrant manifestation of their becoming conscious of their identity as the opposition between Whites (the Self) and African Americans (the Other) in American society. Accordingly, Bride's constructivist shifting from ugliness to beauty helps her assert her femininity and refuse the image of Blacks' inferiority too. Thus, she demonstrates that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity because they concretely testify to Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women are not born women but they rather become women. So, in her novel Morrison deconstructs the racial bias and posits blackness as a positive racial trait.

Keywords: Blacks' existence, identity, stigmatization, constructivist shifting, femininity, colorism

Introduction

Many African American writers, for instance W.E.B. Du Bois, James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Ernest J. Gaines, focus on the issue of African American identity because it has always been difficult to be Black in America owing to the trauma of slavery and racial prejudices. Accordingly, Toni Morrison, a contemporary African American woman writer, also explores this issue in her novels.

In her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison foregrounds the complexity of the notion of black beauty. Set in the 1990s, it relates the story of Bride, the protagonist, who is rejected by her parents because they are scared by the blackness of her skin, as a result of their conformance to the standards of beauty promoted in a racist America. Therefore, in seeking to sublimate black beauty in general and that of African American women in particular, Morrison makes a relatively humiliating presentation of Bride. As a consequence, Bride appears to be an abject-subject whose story summons the study of Morrison's vision of black beauty. This paper seeks to examine the issues of African American identity by questioning Blacks' existence in America. The first goal is to show

that black beauty is a stigmatized beauty because an African American is a constructed other that favors group or racial distinction in multicultural America. Secondly, the article focuses on the ways in which African American women refuse to be ugly and struggle to assert their beauty although some of them internalize the stigmatization. Finally, Morrison's deconstruction of the racial bias and positing blackness as a positive racial trait by asserting black femininity are explored.

Black beauty: a stigmatized trait

In *God Help the Child*, the stigmatization of African Americans in general, and black beauty in particular, is indicated from the first pages when Sweetness, Bride's mother, confesses that she was compelled to disdain her baby daughter because of her blue-black skin color: "It's not my fault. [...] An hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong, she was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. [...] Tar is the closest I can think of ..." (3). Even her husband blamed her as if she had decided by herself to give birth to a blue-black child. Of course, in general, we cannot talk about black beauty, blackness, black race, and African American identity without referring to specific Black American experience from which these concepts stem. Accordingly, the attitudes of both parents result from their internalization of racist conceptualizations of beauty, a process that constitutes one of the ingredients of African American experience.

Not only Sweetness but also Queen and Bride are characters whose attitudes reveal the stigmatization of African American femininity. For instance, Bride wonders whether or not Booker, the man she loves, repels her because of her physical appearance. She asks, "I am not exciting enough? Or pretty enough?" (8). In fact, not only does she reflect upon her boyfriend's bad feelings towards her, but she also relates the abuse her mother inflicted on her. She has been rejected by her parents, and perhaps by other members of her community not because she is really ugly but because of her skin color.

Like in her other novels, Morrison uses the multivocal narrative coined by Bakhtin in *Problem of Dostoevsky's Poetics* as the polyphonic narrative to display the meeting of the characters' consciousness with her own. Indeed, for Bakhtin, the author only can express the truth directly and non-authorial truths remain an attribute of mere characters. Therefore, polyphony implies the meeting of multitude consciousnesses. He maintains, "the consciousness of the creator of a polyphonic novel is constantly and everywhere present in the novel, and is active in it to the highest degree" (1984, 68). To clarify his idea, he further asserts: "The author of a polyphonic novel is not required to renounce himself or his own consciousness, but he must to an extraordinary extent

broaden, deepen and rearrange this consciousness (to be sure, in a specific direction) in order to accommodate the autonomous consciousnesses of others" (1984, 68).

Bakhtin's position can be verified through the analysis of *God Help the Child*, in which the narrative sequence is clearly set up because each chapter bears the name of its narrator, except for the first and the third chapters of the second part, and the first chapter of the third part, which are narrated by an unnamed heterodiegetic narrator. Bride, Sweetness, and Queen, the African American characters-narrators, who share the stigmatization of their identity that was conceptualized prior to the Civil Rights Movement and continued to prevail during the 1990's, the time of the setting of the novel, develop intersubjective relationships. They reveal their respective identities, but mainly their voices carry the physical and psychological trauma of African Americans.

Intersubjectivity and experience are linked. Intersubjectivity can be applicable in case of searching to determine one's relation to others, and the link between one's experiences of others as subjects of experiences that cannot automatically be given to self. Therefore, the characters' commitment in such relationships is a vibrant manifestation of their consciousness of their stigmatized identity, which highlights the opposition between Whites (the Self) and African Americans (the Other) in American society. As Jean-François Staszak argues,

Otherness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us", the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them", Other) by stigmatizing a difference real or imagined – presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. To state it naively, difference belongs to the realm of fact and otherness belongs to the realm of discourse. (2)

Thus, the potential difference between Whites and African Americans is simply biological: the skin color. African Americans' skin color is the category employed to justify their discrimination in American society, and it is on the basis of that biological difference that Whites, the dominant in-group or community, have constructed the dominated out-group, which is the African American community. In this respect, the "Negro" appears to be a victim of white civilization, which determines that blackness equals sin, ugliness and immorality. Black man's identity is constructed and imposed on him by the White power structure. As such, he appears as a cultural subject defined by his belonging to a community whose history, memory and authentic values are denied.

Consequently, and paradoxically, White cultural values and standards of beauty are idealized and internalized by African Americans themselves, which, to a large extent, engendered African American physical and psychological trauma as well. Therefore, some African Americans pass for white because of their belief that the lighter you are, the better you feel in American society, as evidenced by Sweetness's statement regard-

ing her mother: "Because of my mother's skin color, she wasn't stopped from trying on hats in the department stores or using their [white] ladies' room" (4). Her mother is accepted as a member of the in-group, the dominant group, because she has a light skin color. Since white standards of beauty are idealized, Bride's "skin color is a cross she will always carry" (5). This psychological pain is endured by all the black people because blackness has always been associated with negative traits, with everything that is ugly. Through *Bride*, Morrison denounces racism and demonstrates that beauty is discursively constructed.

In this line, *The Bluest Eye* (1987) appears to be a prequel of *God Help the Child* because it deals with the idealization of the Caucasian standards of beauty. In this novel, Morrison also denounces racism through Pecola, the protagonist, who believes that she is ugly because she does not have blue eyes, which would make her beautiful. Nevertheless, while this ugliness causes Pecola to be an abject character, *Bride* resists racism and the psychological trauma it causes, and she succeeds in sublimating black beauty by imaging blackness positively. Thus, she transcends the mainstream conceptions of ugliness by recognizing her beauty.

From ugliness to beauty: a constructivist shift

Ugly and beautiful are two contradictory adjectives that give rise to the following question: can ugliness be converted into beauty or vice-versa? The answer to this question might obviously be positive because both concepts are not immutable. With time, something held to be beautiful can undergo changes and become ugly. It loses its value. As a matter of fact, in *God Help the Child*, blackness, regarded as a signifier of ugliness, sin, and immorality for a long time and utilized to determine African American racial identity is turned into beauty, an ideal that symbolizes the divine perfection and sensibly represents goodness.

Indeed, contrary to some African Americans like *Bride's* parents who have internalized racist conceptions of beauty and stigmatization of the black race, *Bride* refuses to be ugly. She also refuses to believe in the so-called inferiority of the black race. As such, she overcomes all the obstacles, even the most objective ones, to her integration into American society. She receives school education and succeeds in taking advantage of a job opportunity after several refusals. She becomes the regional manager of *Sylvia Inc.*, the cosmetic company. She thinks she was given this job opportunity thanks to her attractiveness. For her, then, beauty is a means to get opportunities. With high self-esteem, she proudly asserts, "I am young; I am successful and pretty. Really pretty, so there!" She adds, "I am proud of myself, I really am ..." (53). In addition, her beauty is

generally admitted because "neighbors and their daughters agreed: 'She's sort of pretty under all that black'" (35).

Bride is conscious of her-Self. And it is on the basis of her Self that she constructs her identity. According to Daphna Oyserman and Kristen Elmore, self-concept and identity provide answers to the basic questions "Who am I?", "Where do I belong?", and "How do I fit (or fit in)?" (2001). They distinguish three types of self-concept and identity: first, they view them as mental concepts, that is, they are mental constructs. Second, self and identity are social products because contextual effects on the self may be distal-parenting practices, schooling, the culture, the time, and place in which one lives, the experiences one has had early in life. And at last, self and identity stimulate action because the "self" influences individual behavior. In any case, these three types of self-concepts and identity are to be referred to as the respective answers to the above questions. And by reflecting on her-Self, Bride knows who she is, the community or society she belongs to, and how she integrates into this community.

In addition, Bride thinks about her-Self, and her reflection influences her behavior. The construction of her identity is viewed in connection to the active knowledge of herself, which is a conscious reflection that involves getting information about oneself. Thus, she becomes conscious of her identity as a human and a moral self. Then, she is regarded as an 'I' that reflects on an object that is 'me.' She reflects on herself because self consists of both the person who thinks (I) and the object of thinking (oneself). The awareness of having thoughts recalls the Cartesian syllogism "Cogito ergo sum" or I think, therefore I am (Descartes, 1973, 123): Bride thinks, therefore she exists. She apprehends the unmistakable character of the assertion of her existence as a thinking being. Her use of the "I" narrative and the pronoun object "me," and the possessive adjective "my" throughout all her narrating sequences testifies that she is a homodiegetic narrator.

As the protagonist of the novel, she constructs her narrative with her life experience. Doing it, she answers the existential question which is "who am I?". Of course, she focuses on the psychological trauma caused by the social rejection she has suffered during her childhood when her mother denied her affection because of her blue-black-skin. Thus, Morrison acts like a narrative therapist when she gives her the speech to narrate her life experience. She establishes a dialogic relationship between her and Bride. And Morrison's objective is to assist her to create a story about herself which helps the character to construct her identity by identifying her values. Consequently, Bride has been capable of using her skills to model her personality.

Moreover, Bride justifies the constructivist idea that identity can change over time. As far as self-identity is concerned, constructivism postulates that people actively play

a role in constructing who they think they are. Correspondingly, it focuses on individuals' self-representation in the construction of self-identity as a response to certain social environment. In sociology, the formation of oneself or of the "me" as the object of the "I" subject is an important means that serves to analyze various possibilities in which interactions between people direct a person's sense of self. Thus, as Bride reflects on her own image, she plays an important role in her identity construction. As it is written above, she actively contributes to constructing what she thinks she is by taking into account the social environment that she belongs to.

Through Bride, Morrison demonstrates that African Americans are human beings. Therefore, they share the same human attributes and qualities with people of other races. As a matter of fact, judging black people on the basis of their skin color is a subjective judgment because "the color's agreeableness belongs to subjective sensation, feeling, through which no object is presented, but through which the object is regarded as an object of our linking (which is not a cognition of it)" (Kant, 2000, 92). Indeed, Kant defines the word "linking" as a sensation (of pleasure). As he has a subjectivist approach of aesthetic judgement of objects, for him satisfaction is so indeterminate that it can not be used to define beauty. So, beauty remains a subjective trait because what pleases me or you may not please someone else. But it is something attractive to the sight, the heart, and the consciousness. It exists only for people who enjoy physical and moral integrity.

Physically, Bride has "silky hair" (23) which appears "like a million black butterflies asleep on her head" (131). She always dresses in white clothes, a color that allows her to be in the full radiance of her beauty, so that Jeri, a designer and her adviser, says that she has a "licorice skin." In fact, the licorice is a sweet, chewy and aromatic black substance made from the juice of a root. Therefore, "licorice skin" is a metaphor by which Jeri highlights her smooth and attractive skin.

Bride does not use makeup nor lipstick or eyeliner. She even wears no jewelry. So to speak, she is naturally beautiful. Instead of being upset by her blue-black skin color, she unlikely uses it to her advantage, and Sweetness, her mother states, "Each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes" (43).

In addition to her external beauty, Bride becomes morally beautiful and she has a strong self-love after she overcomes moral confusion. First of all, her lack of parental love and tenderness does not hinder her education and she becomes a successful regional cosmetics company manager. Her self-love, which obliges her to love others, is a catalyst to redeem herself for the lie she told during her childhood to send Sofia Huxley, an innocent woman, to jail because she hoped that in this way she would earn her mother's attention and love. That is the reason why she approaches the prisoner to express her compassion but she is beaten and wounded by her. When Booker, her

boyfriend, leaves her because he is angered by that affair, she finds solace in sex, drugs, and alcohol. Fortunately, she stops after a while and goes to seek for her lover. Though she experiences instability and pain, Bride always finds of psychological strength to overcome the vicissitude of life.

"She's gone, my black lady" (104) and "I miss my black lady" (106) are respectively the first and the last phrases uttered by Rain in her narrative sequence. She embodies a white girl taken in by the white family that receives Bride after she wrecks her car in northern California. She has her own torments owing to her hard background. Through various discussions she and Bride hold, she realizes that Bride is her listener and mindful of her. In other words, she regards her as a protector. That is to say, Bride brings her psychological relief. This bodes Bride's capacity to be a good mother.

Jeri asserts that black is the new black (33). It is in reference to the economic and sociocultural transformation occurring in the lives of African Americans that this phrase is uttered. It may reflect a resurgence of the New Negro ideology of 1920s which prompted African Americans to have self-confidence and be active to refuse the Jim Crow Law and change their plight. Then, the New Black is the African American who embraces new psychology and spirit to refuse racial prejudices. In this context of Blacks' social and psychological change, Morrison teaches us what it really means to be black. She demonstrates that Whites have a mistaken vision of the black race. Blackness is just a matter of color. It is "a genetic trait, not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin" (143). She thus deconstructs Whites' conceptualization of blackness as a villain feature. From this point of view, it appears that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity, the fundamental element of their beauty and that they proudly assert.

Black beauty: asserting black femininity

Generally speaking, asserting femininity means highlighting the qualities of being feminine. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison sublimates the black woman by specifically highlighting her qualities. But as there is no biological difference between white women and African American women, they share the same qualities and abilities. Consequently, the specific feminine qualities and abilities will be emphasized by taking the opposite course of view to the political and binary masculine-feminine opposition set up by feminists. As such, black femininity is not to be viewed in an explicitly symmetrical relation to masculinity. It is important to make clear that through questioning women's inferior status, feminism aims to make women and men equal by improving women's social position.

Indeed, like the white woman, the black woman is a motherly and educative subject. In this perspective, biologically, Bride embodies an ideal woman: she has a female sex

and spectacular, plump, and flawless breasts (166). She started to menstruate during teenage years (75), and she continues to menstruate during her adulthood (95), which is a symbol of fertility for a healthy woman, though she temporarily stopped menstruating when her body inexplicably changed after she had her car wreck (95). In general, a woman who does not have her menses is a barren or unhealthy person. In many traditions, especially patriarchal ones, all these features are considered to be characteristic of a true woman because they indicate her ability to procreate, a function devoted to women unless they refuse to have sexual relationships with men.

As far as human sexuality is concerned, and on account of the reproductive function of women, heterosexuality is the natural norm that can help preserve and perpetuate procreation and human species. Today, though technological practices can help procreate without direct sexual intercourses between a man and a woman, heterosexuality has this normal and sure aspect. If Bride gets pregnant and is expected to give birth, it is thanks to her heterosexual relationships with Booker, her boyfriend. Thus, the institution of normative heterosexuality viewed by the naturalized construct appears to be inevitable.

Furthermore, although homosexuality is expanding because it is legalized in many countries, including America, and homosexuals' rights are recognized, societal norms that establish heterosexuality as the normative sexual relationship still prevail. For instance, social institutions such as churches, mosques, and schools regard heterosexuality as naturally normal and morally compulsory. In those institutions, the term "sexuality" automatically refers to heterosexuality.

Obviously, it is on account of her heterosexuality that Bride accepts Booker as her boyfriend. He is the only man she trusts because he makes her feel safe. "Without him the world was more than confusing – shallow, cold, deliberately hostile" (78). Her relationship with Booker defines who she is, enhances her capacity to survive and succeed, and creates harmony in her life. As such, it implies perfection, a core element of the feminine universe. So, Bride contributes to the triumph of the good upon the evil. That is the reason why when she informs Booker that she is pregnant and she attributes the responsibility to him. He replies, "It's ours" (174).

As we notice, sexuality is an indispensable function in the assessment of the qualities of a true woman with regard to the biological renewal of oneself and the human species. And Simone de Beauvoir does not contradict it when she asserts, "the renewal of genetic diversity through mixing of parental chromosomes would benefit the line's rejuvenation and vigor; in this view, then, in the more complex forms of life, sexuality is an indispensable function (42).¹

¹ We use the version of *Le Deuxième Sexe* by Simone de Beauvoir edited by Gallimard in 1949 and translated in English (*The Second Sex*) by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier in 2009.

Besides, femininity determines the way of making love. Here, it is important to remind that Bride is a heterosexual because from this point of view one easily perceives her way of making love. According to Queen, Booker's aunt, Bride probably knows more about love than she does (160). And to demonstrate that she makes love very well, Morrison uses a crude language: "I stroke every inch of his golden skin"; "sucked his earlobes"; "I fingered the dimple in his upper lip"; "I poured red wine in his navel and drunk its spill" (37). "I'm tone-deaf but fucking him made me sing ..." (38).

In *God Help the Child*, therefore, Morrison highlights the black woman's femininity by describing love as the expression of beauty because lovemaking is an art. The idea according to which love is like art is not far from the hedonist doctrine whose fundamental element is the quest of pleasure. Obviously, in the sexual domain, the quest of pleasure is the hedonists' main objective even if loving or being loved remains an important factor of bringing a couple together. However, sex should not provide pleasure only, but it should also be the outcome of an act of love. In other words, sexuality should fully serve as a reproductive tool. And the offspring born of reproduction is the real sign of love between a man and a woman. It is in the respect of the reproductive function of sex that Bride gets pregnant at the end of the novel. The words of the novel's title *God Help the Child* are the wish that Sweetness addresses to that unborn child because she wants him/her to be protected by God and to avoid his/her mother's bad experience. In so doing, she worries about the future of that baby who will also have a dark skin.

Moreover, Bride belongs to the American women's middle class. She is a successful regional cosmetics manager. Although that professional accomplishment cannot heal the psychological trauma she experienced in her childhood owing to her blue-black skin, she breaks up the cliché that the black woman could not meet the standard of living conditions unless she is light-skinned. So to speak, contemporary black women are capable of achieving social and economic autonomy. There are for example Whoopi Goldberg, an award-winning comedian, actress and human rights advocate; Mae C. Jemison the first African American female astronaut; and Oprah Winfrey, the Billionaire and well known for hosting her own internationally popular talk show from 1986 to 2011.

Even in the political domain, many African American women occupy high posts, for instance, Condoleezza Rice who was the State Secretary of the George Bush Jr. administration. The ex-American first lady, Michelle Obama, is an African American. Her social and political success is linked to her husband's. In a way, this evidences the relative symmetric social evolution of African American masculine and feminine. Despite the obstacles such as the consequences of slavery and racism, and the idealization of White femininity which perpetuates the degradation of Black femininity, African American women have been able to be independent of both White supremacy and White men.

Like African American men, who challenge white men in the social, economic and political fields, they endeavor to assert their respectability as true women. They do not display a jeer image of themselves, but they rather present an image of dignity. Thus, they concretely testify to de Beauvoir's opinion about femininity when she asserts, "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman. (2011)

For de Beauvoir, women become women but they are not born women because what we are results from our will. We mold ourselves according to our own resources and those supplied by society. This implies self-consciousness and self-knowledge. In other words, it implies Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*. Yet, biology attests to sexual differentiation but gender is culturally constructed. Although some feminists and biologists have reacted against de Beauvoir's theory, it made her famous because she is one of the first scholars who theorized feminism.

Analogously, *Bride* and those successful African American women have created themselves and have acquired social, economic and political values because they have endeavored to be ideally feminine. As we notice, through *Bride*, Morrison focuses on the notion of an ideal African American woman in her novel.

Conclusion

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison shows that black beauty is stigmatized and internalized by some African Americans because blackness has always been associated with negative traits. This stigmatization is mainly due to the construction of the African American as an Other, a member of a dominated out-group. Through a multivocal narrative, Morrison denounces racism and demonstrates that the concept of beauty is discursively constructed. She teaches what it really means to be Black and argues that Whites have a mistaken vision of the black race. Blackness is just a matter of color. That is the reason why she sublimates the African American woman who constructs her identity as a beautiful woman. From this point of view, one must acknowledge that colorism has nothing to do with African American women's femininity, the fundamental element of their beauty they proudly assert by highlighting the qualities of being feminine. Their physical and moral beauty, their ability to give birth, and their professional accomplishment prove that they are capable of achieving social and economic autonomy. They endeavor to be ideally feminine and they simply demand to be loved. All in all, Morrison focuses on the notion of an ideal African American woman to deconstruct Whites' conceptualization of blackness as a villain feature.

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