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REJECTION AND COMPASSION IN TONI MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison is widely considered to be one of the most important writers of African American tradition and in her novels the focus always has been the emotional and traumatic life of the African Americans. From her first novel *The Bluest Eye* to the last novel *God Help the child* Morrison explores different kinds of rejection experienced by the African American people and the struggle to build their own identity. This paper attempts to discuss the representation of rejection and compassion in Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*. The paper deals with various rejections each individual in *God Help the Child* encounter in life. The reasons behind one's rejection and the struggle to overcome all kinds of rejections are discussed in brief. The study also seeks to address how the children are prone to various abuses and rejections and each person's reaction to the familial and social rejections. With a brief discussion of compassion the paper indicates the importance of compassion in the society and analyses how the characters in *God Help the Child* displays compassion towards others and the subsequent change it brings to the life. Though rejection and compassion are contrastive ideas both has equal importance in Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*.

Key Words: Rejection, Compassion, Alienation, Child molestation, abandonment

Rejection is a real life experience most of the human beings endure in one's life on earth and compassion is a virtue one has to cultivate in order to become a better person. The Cambridge English Dictionary defines compassion as a strong feeling of sympathy and sadness for the suffering or bad luck of others and a wish to help them ("Compassion"). While rejection is negative phenomenon, compassion is positive in its expression. Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child* is a caution against familial and social rejections and indicates the need of cultivating human values like compassion and empathy. It is also a plea for all the children who are being oppressed in various ways. *God Help the Child* is the story of Lula Ann Bride, a black girl born of light skinned parents who transforms into Bride, a successful cosmetics entrepreneur. Her story unfolds the rejection she experiences from her parents because of her black skin and her ceaseless effort to conquer all the rejection of her life. *God Help the Child* also emphasizes the importance of compassion. Compassion enables the characters to detect others' requirements and act accordingly.

At the time of her birth itself Lula Ann experiences rejection from her parents. Being light skinned and high yellow, her parents emotionally rejects her for her black skin. Initially a child has to experience warmth of love from his/her mother. On the contrary, in Lula Ann's life, her mother is the one who rejects her initially. Sweetness gets scared gazing at her child even a few minutes after her child's birth. She hatefully says "from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies even the African ones, but it changed fast" (Morrison 4). Being light skinned, Sweetness never expected her baby would turn to blue black color. Her disgust is evident when she explains, "She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison3). Sweetness even tries to kill the child for she "held a blanket over her face and pressed" (Morrison 5).

When Sweetness fails to kill her child she thinks of handing over the child to an orphanage and denies her child's right to call her mama. Her rejection is obvious when she says, "I told her to call me "Sweetness" instead of "mother" or "mama". It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too thick lips calling me "Mama" would confuse people" (Morrison 6). Sweetness emotionally rejects her black daughter and it is evident when she says, "All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle- feeding soon as I home" (Morrison 5). Sweetness avoids touching her child whenever possible and instead of love she adapts strictness to form Bride.

Sweetness' husband abandons her for delivering a black child and she anticipates the forthcoming rejection of society for nurturing a black baby and pays no attention to Bride's emotional requirements. In his article "Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over": Child Abuse in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*", Lopez Ramirez argues, "Nevertheless it seems more likely that Sweetness, at least in part, neglects her maternal duties so as not to confront the rejection of the society" (Alicante Journal 151). To avoid rejection from the society she hesitates to give any freedom to Lula Ann instead teaches how to behave and act when others accuse her. Bride's father also rejects Lula Ann and he suspects Sweetness, does not accept the child as his own instead fights over baby's skin color. He blames his wife and treats Lula Ann as a stranger and "he never touched her" (Morrison 5). He rejects Lula Ann only because of her black skin and abandons his wife and child forever. Being an abandoned wife, Sweetness finds her daughter as a burden. All these events indicate the terrible familial rejection Lula Ann undergoes during her childhood.

Regarding Bride's color Sweetness feels, "Her color is a cross she will always carry" (Morrison 7). Apparently Sweetness was wrong and instead of being a cross, Bride's skin color turns out to be the greatest asset in her future life. Lula Ann Bride abbreviates her name into Bride and becomes the regional manager of a small cosmetics business. Even though successful in career, she still yearns for love and acceptance in personal life because of the rejection she experiences in her childhood. She feels alienated when her lover Booker Starbern rejects her. She notices the changes happen in her body. It happens only when her lover Booker leaves by telling "You not the woman I want" (Morrison 8). As Lopez Ramirez views in his article "Racialized Beauty: The Ugly Duckling in *God Help the Child*", "Booker's spiteful words haunt her and she sinks into an identity crisis, feeling "dismissed" and "erased", which Morrison represents by dabbling in magical realism" (Complutense Journal183). Nobody make comments about the visible changes happens in Bride's physical body but she realizes the transformation and it brings on a nostalgia of the past.

Booker confides nothing of his life but Bride tells him how she was badly treated and rejected by her mother, school mates, and everyone in the society only because of her black skin. Booker consoles her by saying, "It's just a color" (Morrison 143). Bride feels lonely and helpless at Booker's departure because she could share her rejected experiences with him. In "Racism in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*" Battah argues, "She feels that she loses the only handsome man who knows her and her dilemma of the partiality in the country" (Battah 215). She ponders the reason behind his sudden take off and assumes it as her decision to visit a parolee Sofia Huxley. Bride also reconsiders her decision: "I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Good Samaritan thing not directed at him". (Morrison 12). Bride feels restless but conceals her lover's rejection from each and every one.

Bride put aside the pain of Booker's rejection and set off to visit the parolee Sofia Huxley. Bride introduces herself to Sofia as the one who testified against her at the court but even before completing the sentence Bride finds herself in a terrible situation: "I search through the blood with my tongue. My teeth are all there, but I can't seem to get up. I can feel my left eyelid shutting down and my right arm is dead. The door opens and all the gifts I brought are thrown at me, one by one, including the Vuitton bag" (Morrison 21). Sofia beats her violently and rejects all the gifts she brought for her. Being helpless Bride calls Brooklyn for help for she feels comfortable with her. Bride acknowledges Brooklyn's friendship and asserts "she does not annoy me like those fake ones who come here just to gaze and pity me" (Morrison 29). Brooklyn feels compassion for Bride and it is evident when she tells, "she was hysterical when I found her bloody and crying out of one eye, the other one too swollen to shed water. Poor thing" (Morrison 23). Bride accepts Brooklyn's sincere help and confirms, "She is a good friend" (Morrison 43).

Bride discloses Sofia's rejection and violent attack to Brooklyn and convinces her that "I tried to help her and she would have killed me if she could" (Morrison 46). Bride also informs Brooklyn how she testified against a kindergarten teacher who was allegedly accused for child molestation. It was lie she tells in her childhood only to win her mother's appreciation and it haunts her even after years. Moreover Bride feels compassion for Sofia and it is obvious when she tells "I just thought she would be sad, lonely after all these years" (Morrison 47). Bride's empathy for Sofia inspires her to take the risk of visiting her and wishes to offer sufficient money and support for her future life. Sofia Huxley's violent attack and her angry rejection of the gifts aggravate Bride's agony and she feels that "she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life" (Morrison 98).

In her desperation Bride asks herself, "So why am I miserable? Because he left me?" (Morrison 53) She finds no answers and decides to pursue Booker whom she loves passionately. During her quest for Booker, Bride encounters a kind hearted gypsy couple, Steve and Evelyn who rescues Bride from a car accident. Steve brings a doctor to attend Bride, takes her to the hospital for further treatment and assists her in all the possible ways. His wife Evelyn and their adopted daughter Rain also succor Bride even without asking of her whereabouts. She wonders at their compassion and feels grateful: "They simply tended her, fed her and arranged for her car to be towed for repair. It was too hard, too strange for her to understand the kind of care they offered – free without judgment or even passing in whom she was or where she was going" (Morrison 90). Initially Bride finds it difficult to cope with the limitations of Steve's house but appreciate their love and compassion. She learns a new lesson from the gypsy couples whose readiness in helping others without expecting any rewards.

In Steve's house Bride confronts a new friend Rain, a white girl with green eyes. Rain shares her story of rejection with Bride and the circumstances which lead her to Steve's house. Although the couple rescues Rain from her prostitute mother she fails to recognize the compassion shown towards her by Steve and Evelyn. Rain tells Bride, "They stole me" (Morrison 100) at once admits "This is the best place. Besides there's no place to go" (Morrison 101). Tracing her past Rain says "She threw me out. Said 'Get the fuck out'" (Morrison 101). Rain also informs Bride about the sexual abuse she endured from the regular guys who visited her prostitute mother. When Rain fails to act accordingly her mother simply discards her. Steve and Evelyn provide shelter for her and love her as their own daughter. It is nothing but the compassion for a helpless child persuades them to do such a merciful act.

Booker's life is revealed as a mysterious personality, a writer of prose poems and a player of jazz trumpet. Booker struggles with a memory of family tragedy that his brother was murdered by a child molester while he was young. He loved Adam so much so that it leaves a trauma in his mind and later this trauma turns into compassion for every helpless child he encounters. In "A Postcolonial Approach to the Problem of Subalternity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*", Al Omari argues, "After the murder of his brother by a child molester, he feels guilty for his brother and every helpless child in the world" (Al Omari 179). Booker once beats a predator on the brink of abusing a child. He notices him licking his lips and gazing the children in a lecherous manner. Seeing this, "Booker's fist was in the man's mouth before thinking about it" (Morrison 110). Besides he saves a two years old girl child from a child molester. He notices a child screaming and crying while standing in the back seat of a car. "He walked over to the car, yanked open the door, dragged the man out, smashed his

face and kicked away the pipe that fallen to the ground” (Morrison 128). His compassion for the helpless children forces him to act accordingly.

Once grew up, Bride abandons her mother and Sweetness’ loneliness is obvious when she says, “As soon as she could she left me all alone in that awful apartment. She got as far away from me as she could (Morrison 177). Sweetness regrets for what she did to her daughter in the past years: “All the little things I didn’t do or did wrong. I remember when she had her first period and how I reacted. Or the times I shouted when she stumbled or dropped something (Morrison 177). Sweetness feels proud of her daughter for she is a successful entrepreneur. She longs to see Bride and weeps, “She’s got a big time job in California but she doesn’t call or visit anymore. She sends me money and stuff every now and then, but I ain’t seen her in I don’t know how long” (Morrison 43). Sweetness feels rejected by her daughter and admits that it is her own fault. She learns a lesson from her life and also reminds the readers, “What you do to children matters. And they might never forget” (Morrison 43)

After deserting Bride, Booker finds refuge in one of his aunt’s house. Booker’s aunt Olive Queen plays a major role in helping Bride to reunite with Booker finally. Olive Queen experiences rejection throughout her life due to her own selfish ways. She had many husbands and many children but lives alone with the photographs and memories of her children. Each husband took their children with them and Queen had no opportunity to raise even a child after twelve years and now “she lived alone in the wilderness” (Morrison 159). When Bride asks details about Queen’s husbands and children Booker tells her that “they all hate her for some reason or another. I know she abandoned some of them to marry other men” (Morrison 169). Booker believes that it is her own mistake and nobody is accountable for her alienation. In “Impact of Child Abuse and effects of Post memory in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” Kumar Horizan argues, “Queen and Sweetness are mothers who ended up being abandoned largely because of their own doing or undoing” (Kumar 588).

Bride pursues Booker to seek answers for his desertion of her. When Bride asks him the reason for his sudden breakup he gets angry and asks “why you bought presents for a child molester” (Morrison 153). Bride tells him the story and Booker also shares his brother’s tragic death for when both of them realize and admit that it is the pain and rejection of their past life troubled their relationship, they forgive each other. Bride feels happy for being successful in her endeavor to conquer all the rejections she faces in her life. In “Comparative Analysis of ‘Beloved’ and ‘God Help the Child’ by Toni Morrison” Ikram Myra argues, “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” (Ikram 564). Bride happily announces Booker that she is pregnant with his child and decides to protect the child from “kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing and abandonment” (Morrison 175).

Toni Morrison draws our attention to various kinds of rejection individuals encounter in life. *God Help the Child* reminds the readers to muster courage and self-confidence in order to fight against harsh realities of life. *God Help the Child* also places considerable stress on the importance of protecting children from the abuses they face in the present scenario. By presenting the trauma and the pain of the children despite of their color or race she points out the precarious state of every child in today’s world and our obligation to become the voice of the voiceless. Through her novel *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison conveys the message that only compassion can bring out changes in the society and in the world. In today’s competitive and selfish world, where none is concerned for the other, the message of compassion has so much significance. *God Help the Child* displays selfless people who show compassion towards their fellow beings by stretching out their helping hands. Toni Morrison reiterates the fact that though there is evil in this world, still it is not too bad for goodness exists in people around us.

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