

MAGICAL REALISM AND POLITICS OF INDIVIDUALITY IN TONI MORRISON'S "GOD HELP THE CHILD"

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ABSTRACT

Toni Morrison has spanned over four decades of career as a successful writer and written eleven novels. The study attempts to find, how the renowned author has used the postmodern technique of magical realism to underscore the hardships that children come across at the hands of cold and indifferent mothers in God Help the Child. She has put the protagonist Bride in a magic realistic dystopia where she reverts from her adult body to that of a childhood form. Morrison remains deeply imaginative in depicting the historical ravaging of the black body. In her work this is never merely a physical matter but a symptom and reminder of the country's blood stained past. The novel deals with a combination of love and hate so integral to African – American self-image. Morrison attests to her ability to write intensely felt chamber pieces that inhabit a twilight world between fable and realism, and to convey the desperate yearnings of her characters for safety and love and belonging. The scars inflicted on Bride and Booker by their childhoods are metaphors of sorts for the calamities of history and the hold they can exert over a country's or a people's dreams.

Keywords: magic realism, dystopia, post modernism, childhood.

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INTRODUCTION

In *God Help the Child* (2015) abusive mother is a *liet* motif in her work. The mother-daughter relationship does not seem to be sound and healthy at situation throughout the novel. Bride the protagonist is completely detested by her mother because of her appearance and dark skin colour. Bride apparently overcomes her mother's disapproval and is able to develop a successful identity for herself. Though Bride was not able to address her mother as 'Mother' she was taught by her mother to address herself as Sweetness. Bride's mother believes, 'It was safer being that black and having what I think too-thick lips calling me 'Mama' would confuse people' (God 6). The author intensifies the suffering of Bride through Magic Realism. Bride is set on a magic realist path of dismemberment which however takes to a final coming to terms with her own self. Although Lula Ann succeeded in transforming herself from a lonely, frightened child into the beautiful career woman who calls herself Bride (a transformation that oddly recalls that of Lulamae Barnes into Holly Golightly in "Breakfast at Tiffany's"), she finds herself physically turning back into "a scared little black girl" after Booker dumps her. All her confidence evaporates as memories of her mother's cruel lessons (to "keep her head down and not to make trouble," to know that "her color is a cross she will always carry") return to haunt her. There is always a touch of what could be called Morrison's magical realism, a term that has ever felt a little trite. There's no reincarnation, as in "Beloved," or humans taking "Song of Solomon flight." Instead, as Bride finds herself reckoning with her past, she physically reverts to childhood. Morrison remains deeply imaginative in depicting the historical ravaging of the black body. In her work this is never merely a physical matter, but a symptom and reminder of the country's blood-stained past. Finally it is seen that discrimination on the basis of gender, racial segregation leading to massacres has been the subject matter of Morrison in the novel. Purpose of magic realism portrays fantastical events in an otherwise realistic tone. It brings fables, folk tales, and myths into contemporary social relevance. Fantasy traits given to characters, such as levitation, telepathy, and telekinesis, help to encompass modern political realities that can be phantasmagorical.

What is Magic Realism?

Magical realism, magic realism, or marvellous realism is a style of fiction that paints a realistic view of the modern world while also adding magical elements. It is sometimes called **fabulism**, in reference to the conventions of fables, myths, and allegory. "Magical realism", perhaps the most common term, often refers to fiction and literature in particular, with magic or the supernatural presented in an otherwise real-world or mundane setting, commonly seen in novels and dramatic performances. It is considered a subgenre of fantasy. Matthew Strecher defines magic realism as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe".

Franz Roh first coined the term 'magic realism' in his 1925 article on post-expressionist art, the term according to Franco has become a catch-phrase which obscures the many varieties of fiction that have appeared in the last decade. Massimo Bontempelli was actually the first to apply the term to both art and Literature. Magic realism is a technique in Art and Literature that allows the inclusion of fantastical elements in the arena of daily life. Magic realism, at the very first glance is problematic because the term itself is an oxymoron. 'Magic' is something supremely unreal and yet it is placed beside the 'real'. Zamora and Faris in the introduction to their seminal book, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*, have noted that whereas realism intends its version of the world as a singular version, as an objective representation of natural and social realities, magic realist texts use magic as cultural corrective, requiring readers to scrutinize accepted realistic conventions of causality, materiality, and motivation.

Toni Morrison deliberately latches on to the phenomenon of magic realism in order to make her novels more fashionable. The suspension of disbelief required by the ghost theme in her novels is made more difficult by the fact that so much of the rest of the novel is told in the traditional code of realistic narrative which has always characterized the novel of social protest. Morrison insists not only how natural the ill- treatment of blacks were in nineteenth century America, but how silent the white- controlled media then were. She is however setting the mind of her reader on to a track in which ghosts, real, imaginary, play little part. The horror of events related in her novels is of strictly human origin. The reality that is experienced is changing in structure and texture, is becoming thicker, more treacherous, more complex. There is no common sense of reality. Realistic approaches to literature are no longer adequate as the concept and meaning of reality change from person to person. Writers tackle this situation with the so called anti-realistic techniques. In *God Help the Child*, Bride the protagonist finds refuge in the painful reality and escapes the present. Bride's sudden physiological changes seem to a magic and this technique subverts the "rules" of artistic representation and literature's reproduction of the "real". The act of magic realism which is revealed among the Christian sects believe in evil spirits was also present in the Ohio of the year 1850's. Equally visible is Morrison's fascination with numbers, color,

plants, flowers, metals and the elements, all of which are important to the worlds of numerology, alchemy and mysticism; this is obvious in *God Help the Child* wherein number six plays a major role. Yet all would be considered natural and useful symbols and tropes to a writer of Morrison's caliber. Morrison typically passes on her sense of congenial myths that are rooted in the collective myths as well as in the collective imagination and sustained by deep emotional springs related to black history and black tradition.

MAGIC REALISM IN GOD HELP THE CHILD

The title of Morrison's latest novel reveals the central concern of the work which is childhood. It also makes the readers presume that the 'child' is suffering since 'God' has been called upon to help him/her. But the determiner 'the' is a misnomer here since more than one character in the book suffers from a difficult childhood. The protagonist of the novel Bride realizes that she is melting away in the very first lines that she gets to speak in the book. It is something on the lines of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* and yet quite subtle. Our protagonist does not transform overnight into another creature. Her change is slow; allowing her to tell the readers about all aspects of her life while the sections where her body surprisingly changes come intermittently. As with the definition of magic realism, the protagonist here is subject to both magic and reality simultaneously.

Bride's unnatural physical reversion to the state of her childhood has a deeper significance than is apparently visible. Her rejection by her lover Booker is one of the causes. The first step in this route of reversal is the disappearance of the foremost emblem of her womanhood---her pubic hair. She describes her amazement thus: "Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place." (12-13). A few days later Bride while preparing for a party discovers that she has completely chaste ears. Her piercings had disappeared on their own accord. This reversal is significant. The author wants the readers to notice that Bride's transformation is not merely related to her sexuality. It is total reversal. She is shocked to find, "After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb?" (51) She further discovers that her armpits too have become bereft of hair like her pudenda, "There is not a single hair in my armpit." (52)

After Bride recuperates from Sofia's attack she tries to find out where her ex boyfriend has gone. Her journey takes her to California... Her movement towards reverting to the body of a child continues even in California where she finds her breasts have disappeared overnight, "It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only nipples to prove it was not her back." (92) There Bride also notices that she is physically shrinking to the extent of a young girl Rain whose jeans fits Bride perfectly. The 'irreducible element' of magic is present as always as Bride reasons that the cause behind her physical depletion is Booker's curse; Bride thinks to herself "When did I get so small? So what kind of illness was she suffering? One that was both visible and invisible. Him, she thought. His curse." (93)

This radical change though is not permanent, as soon as Bride is able to reconnect with Booker and subsequently confess the reasons behind helping the accused child molester she regains her former body. It is a kind of poetic justice. She is rewarded for having confessed her sins. As she is finally able to reconnect with her selfhood her body transforms back to normal. She is beyond herself with happiness as she discovers, "the magical return of her flawless breasts." (166) when she is gifted a pair of earrings by Booker's aunt her piercings return as well, "Bride touched her earlobes; felt the return of tiny holes....Everything was coming back. Almost everything. Almost." (169)

It is interesting to note here that neither the irreducible element of magic nor the theme of child abuse stops with just the protagonist Bride. The magic realist trope extends to Rain and Bride's friend Brooklyn as well. Rain is a foundling. Evelyn and her husband had rescued her from the abusive relationship she had had with her birth mother. Her biological mother had forced Rain to child prostitution. Like the protagonist Rain too is a victim of the apathy of her mother. But since her adoption Rain has not grown. Evelyn says, "Her baby teeth were gone when we took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is as flat as a skateboard." (97) This magical stasis of Rain's body is perhaps because she is too scared to grow-up having been witness to the ugliest side of adulthood. In the case of Brooklyn the magic is not without but within. Her mind is magical in the sense that she can sense other people's innermost desires and secrets. *God Help the Child* is perhaps Morrison's finest attempt to encounter the issue of child abuse through the apt implementation of magic realism.

CONCLUSION

God Help the Child is mostly about the adult life of Bride with episodes of her childhood filling in the initial chapters of the work. Magic realism works on different levels in this novel. Magic Realism works however slightly as dystopia where slowly Bride loses the bodily emblems of her womanhood. However it is not a

wholly negative worldview that we get at the end of the novel. Bride regains her adult body once she comes to terms with herself. Magic realism plays a crucial role in the novel underscoring the suffering that the mother unleash upon the only people who look up to her in complete surrender as man looks up to God. Thus Morrison's work show the psychological turmoil and its effects on the behavior of black people and seeks to portray the meaning of living a life rather than mere survival. Her characters seek an adaptation for survival. Infact there is a quest for self and the inner beauty of each survival is combined with the spirit of adventure and rest that one can attain the ultimate.

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