



‘Racialized Beauty’: The Ugly Duckling in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

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Abstract. In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison’s latest novel, set in our contemporary times, her oeuvre seems to have come full circle when she revisits the main themes she dealt with in *The Bluest Eye*, child abuse and aesthetics relativism. Like her prime novel, her latest narrative is a modern-day fairy tale, a re-interpretation of Hans Christian Andersen’s story “The Ugly Duckling”. Morrison shows how destructive hegemonic female beauty standards and materialistic values are for black females. Lula Ann, like Pecola, their protagonists, illustrate racialized beauty and how African Americans have been colonized by white cultural definitions of beauty, even when the notion “black is beautiful” is commodified. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison devaluates the myth of racialized beauty and materialism, stressing the need to find your own definitions and self-worth. Like “The Ugly Duckling”, Morrison’s latest novel is a powerful and inspirational metaphor about transformation and self-discovery. At the end of *God Help the Child*, the signs of hope in *The Bluest Eye* become an almost fairy-tale ending in Lula Ann’s cathartic journey, her love story and pregnancy.

Key words: white aesthetics, mental colonization, African Americans, racialized beauty, shadism.

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[A] white dominated culture has racialised beauty, [in] that it has defined beauty per se in terms of white beauty, in terms of the physical features that the people we consider white are more likely to have.

Paul Taylor, “Malcolm’s Conk and Danto’s Colors; or Four Logical Petitions Concerning Race, Beauty, and Aesthetics”.

Its own image [...] no longer clumsy dark-gray bird, ugly and hateful to look at, but a—swan.

Hans Christian Andersen, “The Ugly Duckling”

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1. Introduction: Mental Colonization, Fairy Tales and the White Ideal of Beauty

In the tradition of postcolonial writing, Toni Morrison's novels counter and challenge dominant ideologies and representations. As a writer, she fits into Helen Tiffin's definition of the postcolonial literatures and their decolonizing endeavors: "dis/mantling, de/mystification and unmasking of European authority" as well as defining "a denied or outlawed self" (1988: 171). Morrison addresses the collective trauma of colonialism that black people still undergo and their process of decolonization. In her novels, Morrison critiques the American system of patriarchal racism, sexism and classism, which is currently in place, exposing issues of race and how this society has denied African Americans' racial identity. Her fiction seeks to shape a new literary aesthetics that opposes racial ideologies. Morrison's social and cultural critiques are performed, at least partially, by means of her fairytales, folklore and mythic intertexts.

Morrison draws on orally transmitted folklore and fairy tales, through which, she tries "to incorporate into [her] fiction [...] the major characteristics of Black art", combining both print and oral literature, a trait of postmodern intertextuality, and thus she encourages the readers' participation "in the same way that a Black preacher requires his congregation to speak, to join in the sermon" (Morrison 1984: 341). *God Help the Child*, Morrison's latest novel, interweaves profusely fairy-tale intertexts, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears", "Alice in Wonderland", "Sleeping Beauty" and "Hansel and Gretel".

Notwithstanding, as a whole, *God Help the Child* can be seen as a modern-day fairy tale, a re-interpretation of one of Danish storyteller Hans Christian Andersen's most famous tales from 1843, "The Ugly Duckling". This story, which has a powerful message of self-image and -acceptance, has been considered autobiographical. It depicts the hardships of Christian Andersen's life, how he experienced rejection and ostracism because of his gawky and awkward physical appearance. Like Andersen, whose didactic tales express empathy with outcasts and those most unfortunate, Morrison, from a postcolonial perspective, portrays black individuals, especially women, marginalized and disenfranchised by the white male-dominated societies in which they live.

In her fiction, Morrison questions gender roles and stereotypes, which Jack Zipes suggests is characteristic of feminist fairy tales

[that] challenge conventional views of gender, socialization [sic], and sex roles [...]. Created out of dissatisfaction with the dominant male discourse of traditional fairy tales and with those social values and institutions which have provided the framework for sexist prescriptions, the feminist fairy tale conceives a different view of the world and speaks in a voice that has been customarily silenced. (1986: xi)

Morrison also uses another technique, magical realism, which is also connected with postcolonial concerns, as it "has become a common narrative mode for fictions written from the perspective of the politically and culturally disempowered [...] those whose lives incorporate different cultural beliefs and practices from those dominant in their country of residence" (Bowers 2004: 33). As Stephen Hart

has claimed, magical realism is an international phenomenon that is associated with the trauma of colonial dispossession (2005: 6), and which Homi Bhabha has defined as the “literary language of the emergent postcolonial world” (1995: 7).

God Help the Child echoes her first work. Lula Ann Bridewell, its protagonist, is indeed “a Millennial Pecola Breedlove, the tragic figure from Morrison’s 1970 debut novel, *The Bluest Eye*” (Philyaw 2015). With her recent book, as Bernardine Evaristo points out, we have the sense of a circle being completed, as these two novels share their “two main thematic preoccupations of child abuse and shadism, the inter-black prejudice against darker skin tones that is rarely given a public airing” (2015). They both are revisions of the fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling”, whose concept of beauty can be linked to racialized aesthetic values. Pecola and Lula Ann suffer constant verbal and physical abuse because they are ‘ugly.’ Moreover, like the ugly duckling, Lula Ann finally undergoes a radical transformation.

In both novels, Morrison uses fairy-tale intertexts to unfold the connection between white aesthetics, internalized racism and self-affirming image. She focuses on the external and internal sources that impose white beauty standards on blacks, emphasizing their superficiality and perniciousness. “The Ugly Duckling”, like *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*, describes the search of identity in contrast to assimilation. Both the Cat and the Hen play the role of those who criticize and mock Duckling for his physical appearance and because he does not fit in. They tell him that he must conform and behave in certain way if he wants to be accepted. However, the ugly duckling, who is determined to find someone like him, leaves the farm. He perseveres pursuing his love for swimming. Like Lula Ann, the dark-skinned baby rejected by her parents, Duckling continues his self-discovery journey seeking his own heritage. The positive moral of “The Ugly Duckling” and *God Help the Child* is that you should never give up trying to find where you belong and accept who you truly are.

In *God Help the Child* Morrison wants to show “Beauty—and its worth in the world. And what does that do” (Hoby 2015). She addresses again the phrase “Black is beautiful”, and how intra-racism, institutional racism and internalized racism are still alive in our society. Morrison discloses the danger of the myth of beauty through a woman who, due to her traumatic childhood, “tries to shield herself from her own past with surface beautification” (Hoby 2015). Despite the fact that Black may be commodified and may become a sign of success, racism is not yet over as the concept of beauty is still connected to Western definitions. Hence, as Hermione Hoby argues, “the novel intimates that fetishising blackness, both for the observer and observed, might be just as insidious as outright prejudice” (2015).

Racial minorities have suffered a process of mental colonization, internalizing the prevailing cultural system:

The white colonialist strategy is to get the colonized Black (or native) to undergo a process of epistemic violence, a process whereby the Black begins to internalize all of the colonizer’s myths, to begin to see his/her identity through the paradigm of white supremacy/Eurocentricity. (Yancy 2005: 257)

Cultural colonization “fragments both individual psyches and the community as a whole” (Pérez-Torres 1997: 21-22). The first long phase African Americans withstand, Elaine Showalter thinks, consists of the “imitation of the prevalent modes of the dominant tradition, and internalization of the standards of art and its view on social roles” (Myles 2006: 7). Thus, the dominant white race has dictated beauty, with its prejudices and stereotypes, which have pervaded American culture until the present. Morrison interrogates “the imperial gaze” of the black image, “the look that seeks to dominate, subjugate, and colonize” (hooks 1992: 7).

In her oeuvre, Morrison has delved into the huge influence of racist standards of white beauty on the black female’s selfhood. She has questioned them and shown how the predominant concept of beauty is socially constructed. Femininity, an active process of creating gender, is founded on beauty, “a very powerful myth” (Wolf 1990) “heavily rooted in women’s physical body, what is defined as a beautiful body becomes the mark of femininity, and that beautiful body is rooted in a white woman norm” (Slatton 2016: 44). Black females suffer through the construction of an imposed femininity, “by no means race- or class-specific. There is little evidence that women of color or working-class women are in general less committed to the incarnation of an ideal femininity than their more privileged sisters” (Bartky 1988: 72). And yet, as Black features do not conform to Western standards, black women are locked “outside of the definition of beauty, and thus outside of the confines of the hegemonic femininity” (Slatton 2016: 44).

According to K. Sumana, Morrison believes that “the concept of physical beauty as a virtue”, notion deeply embedded in many fairy tales, “is one of the most pernicious and destructive” (1998: 7). In addition, the acceptance of the white ideal of beauty results in the worthlessness and “physical ugliness of blackness”, which mirror, society makes us believe, “a deeper ugliness and depravity” (Taylor 1999: 16). The notion of black ‘ugliness’ parallels the formation of an oppressed identity: African Americans’ learned self-hatred, low self-esteem and contempt for their own race. Morrison unveils the destructiveness of the hegemonic standards of white female beauty. She subverts racialized beauty and its repercussions by portraying positive images of blackness, and fostering African Americans’ pride.

Only those females that are beautiful can be recognized and valued and, consequently, be happy. Our society sends the message that “unless you are physically flawless, you are deficient as a human being” (Higgins 2000: 96). White women, even if they are not able to reach the ideal white norm of beauty, are not ‘deficient’ the way black females are: “[I]f Irigaray’s feminine subject (a universal feminine subject) is defined as lack, as absence, then the black woman is doubly lacking, for she must simulate or feign her femininity as she dissimulates or conceals her blackness” (Grewal 1998: 26). No matter if the black female is “brilliant, accomplished, and rich, she must still deal with a relentless standard, almost always internalized, which tells her she is inferior” (Halprin 1995: 158):

One of the cornerstones of the modern West has been the hierarchical valuation of human types along racial lines [...]. The most prominent type of racialised ranking represents blackness as a condition to be despised, and most tokens of this type extend this attitude to cover the physical features that are central to the description of black identity. (Taylor 1999: 16)

Black women are pressured to conform to a dictated idealized femininity through the imagery presented to them in advertising and popular culture. They try to meet Western standards by means of beauty practices, such as makeup, hairstyles, cosmetics, surgery, etc. As Sara Halprin contends, “the myth of white beauty denies the value of black beauty”, and only by simulating whiteness can black women escape the self-destructive cycle they are caught in (1995: 87). Acquiring beauty becomes an unattainable and life-denying process inasmuch as the black woman is “‘the antithesis of American beauty’ [...]. Defined as the Other [she] can never satisfy the gaze of society” (Davis 1990: 12). Hence, in the white society, the construction of a healthy black female self-image is unreachable.

Morrison approaches cultural colonization from a complex point of view in which African Americans, both victimizers and victims, share the blame. She explores the pervasive traumatic consequences of Lula Ann’s constructions of beauty. Western beauty ideals are at the core of her traumatized sense of self, her feelings of inferiority and self-disgust. Being, as a child, the anti-thesis of what the white race regards as beautiful prevents her from developing ethnic pride and racial love. This paper will analyze the impact of white aesthetics on black women in *God Help the Child* with a focus on key notions such as the powerful socially-sanctioned notion of beauty, low self-esteem, the intergenerational transfer of racial self-loathing, marginalization, social victimization and materialistic values.

2. Dysfunctional Family, Failing Community and Scapegoating

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison emphasizes how important family nurture and the community are for young black girls, who are just defining their own selves, to overcome racist normative beauty. The adolescent’s sense of self, Ronald Laing argues, heightens “both as an object of one’s own awareness and of the awareness of others” (1990: 106). Female teenagers are especially vulnerable to the family and society’s gaze. Their exposure to racism and long-standing victimization, both domestic and communal, produces “psychic erosion”, Kai Erikson’s term, which results from a “continuing pattern of abuse” (1995: 185-186, 185).

Colonized adults pass feelings of self-hatred and self-disparagement down to future generations, setting in motion a vicious cycle of negativity and self-annihilation, as well as bringing about what Erikson defines as “collective trauma”:

[a] blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality [...] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared [...] ‘we’ no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body. (1976: 153-154).

Thus colonized African American “individuals collude in their own oppression by internalizing [the] dominant values in the face of great material contradictions” (Grewal 1998: 21), while leaving behind their own black communal values.

God Help the Child, in its revision of the “Ugly Duckling”, includes a conventional fairy-tale theme, unhappy childhood and abuse. From the very beginning, the gray duckling is rejected by everyone around him because he is

different, too ‘ugly,’ which goes hand in hand with the abuse that he experiences from all of them. As Margaret F. Brinig and F. H. Buckley claim,

The story of the Ugly Duckling [...] masks the tragedy of children who suffer abuse [...]. More troubling is the evidence that ‘different’ children are more likely to be subjected to repeated abuse by parents or guardians [...] [Duckling] is rejected by his mother, rebuffed by his brothers and sisters, picked on by the other ducks in the barnyard, and scorned by other animals. (1999: 41)

Likewise, Lula Ann embodies the black individual’s history of oppression and exclusion as a result of African Americans’ conformity to Western standards of beauty. She is despised and ostracized by family and community. Like the cruelly teased fairy-tale ugly duckling who is mercilessly spurned, “bitten and pushed and jeered”, Lula Ann undergoes inter- and intra-racial discrimination based on her skin color. She endures rejection from her family (because she does not look like them), and community—identity strongholds at the root of subjectivity formation and individuation—, whose social fabric has been ravished by racial contempt. Lula Ann falls victim to constant criticism and badgering. In a colonized community, marginal subjects are condemned to despairing ostracism, which drives those acutely sensitive, like Pecola, to the brink of madness or, like Lula Ann, to unethical acts (telling a lie that sends an innocent woman to prison), which she will regret her whole life.

Lula Ann is an easy victim of her neighbors’ racist views. Mr. Leigh calls her “nigger” and “cunt” when she is only a six-year-old girl, after she sees him molesting a boy. She feels the poignant hate and revulsion of his words. Later at school, she also suffers racial prejudice and marginalization when bad names, ape sounds or monkey mimicry are whispered or shouted at her. Like Duckling and Pecola, Lula Ann is teased and abused by other children. Being trained to avoid confrontation, she is passive in the face of the humiliation and ill-treatment she undergoes. The black girl does not know how to defend or assert herself. Lula Ann does not fight back, she just “let[s] the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through [her] veins, with no antibiotic available [...] buil[ding] up immunity so tough that not being a ‘nigger girl’ was all [she] needed to win” (*God*: 57).

Colonized members of minority groups, victims themselves of racism and bigotry, turn themselves into victimizers, embracing and reproducing the dominant cultural paradigms, which causes “[t]he breakdown of the bonds of human caring in the novel [which] reflects the general absence of ethics and morality” (Harris 1991: 38). This situation limits black individuals’ opportunities to acknowledge and change the oppression and repression imposed by the dominant culture, as well as legitimizes it. The whole community share responsibility for Lula Ann’s ordeal. The community uses their members’ ‘ugliness’ to overcome their own self-hatred. They reinforce and promote their identities by inflicting suffering, exacerbating social exclusion and refusing to interfere when those more vulnerable are picked on and persecuted. And yet, by victimizing them, they do not only victimize themselves, but also disavow their race. In his essay about *The Bluest Eye*, Michael Awkward characterizes this process “as a ritual of purgation” (1989: 189). ‘Ugly’ blacks cannot hope to be accepted by their own communities.

Systemic racism and discrimination engender dysfunctional families: parents who do not respect one another and neglect or even abuse their children, as in Pecola's or Lula Ann's parents. Their names, Breedloves or Sweetness (Lula Ann's mother), are ironic, since they are neither loving nor sweet. In these narratives, as Awkward asserts, Morrison deconstructs "the bourgeois myths of ideal family life", unveiling "her refusal to allow white standards to arbitrate the success or failure of the black experience" (1988: 59). The tragedy of these two families is that, as "the very antithesis of the standardized, ideal (white) American family", they can only be seen by the others, both whites and blacks, and themselves as utterly failing "to conform to the standards by which the beauty and happiness of [...] American families [...] are measured" (1988: 58).

In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness feels embarrassed and scared of her "midnight black, Sudanese black" baby daughter, and nursing her is "like having a pickaninny sucking [her] teat" (*God*: 3, 5). She even contemplates infanticide. Lula Ann grows up bereft of affection and love. She remembers that "[d]istaste was all over her [mother's] face" (*God*: 31) when she bathed her. Lula Ann misbehaved deliberately so Sweetness would slap or spank her so she could feel the touch of a mother who "avoided physical contact whenever possible" (*God*: 79). Nevertheless, Sweetness found ways to punish her daughter without touching her hateful skin. Many psychologists state the strong impact the mother's Look has on the child's subjectivity development, as the "failure of responsiveness on the mother's part to one or other aspect of the infant's being will have important consequences" (Laing 1990: 116). Sadly, Lula Ann is exposed, from birth, to Sweetness's shaming gaze. As Doris Brothers contends, "psychic trauma can only be fully understood as the betrayal of trust in the self-object relationships on which selfhood depends" (qtd. in Hwangbo 2004: 66).

Lula Ann even falsely accuses a teacher, Sofia Huxley, of being a child molester "to get the attention of her mother, whose 'abuse' takes the form of a far more insidious lovelessness" (Pistelli 2015). Sweetness, "kind of motherlike" (*God*: 31), holds her hand proudly after her testimony in court, which she had never done before. On the other hand, Lula Ann's father, Louis, blames Sweetness for their daughter's dark skin. He is convinced that he is not the real father, ergo, he treats her as if "she was a stranger—more than that, an enemy. He never touched her" (*God*: 5). Louis cannot bring himself to love a child as black as Lula Ann, and abandons his family. Both Pecola's and Lula Ann's parents pass on their internalized racism to their daughters, which Awkward identifies with a shadow whose projection "can lead to the sacrifice of black offspring, to parental detachment from the child, and to complete adoption of white standards" (1989: 193). Lula Ann inherits a feeling of inferiority from her parents and community that lead her to a life marked by white definitions.

3. Colorism and the Socially-Constructed Concept of Beauty

The black woman's identity crisis results from her 'ugly' reflection in the white eye (as in the Lacanian mirror stage), "dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes" (Fanon 2008: 87). Black feminine desire "takes the white woman as its objects" (Dubey 1994: 39-40). Black females have incorporated the racist message that light skin is superior to dark skin, phenomenon called colorism or shadism, systematic preference for light-skinned African Americans over dark-skinned ones (Hunter 2005: 89). Their internalization of negative racial stereotypes and images generates micro-aggressions, whose result is African Americans' "insidious trauma", Maria Root's term adopted by Laura Brown to describe the continuous endurance of abuse or neglect—especially dramatic in childhood: the "traumatogenic effects of oppression that are not necessarily overtly violent or threatening to bodily well-being at the given moment but that do violence to the soul and spirit" (1995: 107).

Lula Ann's light-skinned parents have enjoyed the privileges that their skin has provided them with. Since her birth, Sweetness has exhibited her deeply ingrained shadism, disclosing the "fear of producing a dark black baby, [which] muses on the 20 per cent of white folk [...] [that] have 'Negro' blood running in their veins, the legacy of slavery" (Iqbal 2015). Lula Ann is led to believe "much like Pecola [...] that her dark skin was a sign of inherent wickedness, akin not to a temporary ailment but an irremovable curse" (Willoughby 2015). At sixteen, she drops out of school and, like the harassed hatchling—who flees from the woodsman's house—, Lula Ann cannot bear it any longer and runs away in search of a better life. She changes her "dumb countrified name" (*God*: 11) and renames herself Bride. She tries to reinvent herself and escape from her mother and society's definitions.

One of universal themes in "The Ugly Duckling", as in other fairy tales, is transformation:

The theme is moral in that it inspires children and adults alike to realize that life, with all its setbacks, can be transformed from despair to hope, from self-pity to self-respect, and from woe to joy [...]. "The Ugly Duckling" underlines the point that transformation is internal, that is, something that could happen in one's inner self. It has to be an internal transformation first before it can help bring about the transformation of the outside world. (Song 2012: 126)

The cygnet, who is mistaken for a common duck and rejected due to its brown color, emerges to become a magnificent swan admired by everyone who comes near the pond. In the same way, Bride finally turns out to be the "blue-black beautiful [woman], the kind of woman who turns heads wherever she goes" (Gay 2015). She is transmuted into an elegant woman who, like the dazzling white fairy-tale swan, "dresses only in *white*, the better to reflect her beauty" (italics added; Gay, 2015). Jeri, a designer, had advised her to wear "[o]nly white and all white all the time" (*God*: 33) so that the people who saw her would think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé. Thus Bride's skin color apparently comes to be a blessing instead of a curse because, as Jery tells her, "Black sells [...] [it] is the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls, even Brown girls have to strip naked to get that kind of attention" (*God*: 36). The color white of Bride's dresses may also stand for her submissiveness to Western white beauty standards and materialist values.

Sweetness is a role model for Bride's acceptance of the Western ideal of beauty. She recalls how her mother's bedroom always seemed unlit and her dresser was full of "grown-up-woman stuff [tweezers, cologne, hairpins]" (*God*: 53). Bride is actually a successful executive at a prosperous cosmetic business, who "stitch[e] together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protect[s] her from any overly intense feeling" (*God*: 79). Bride's profession is associated with her obsession with beauty, and with the shallowness and materialism of her life.

Like Sweetness, Bride becomes greatly fixated on her physical appearance. She reminds us of Hagar's craze, in *Song of Solomon*, when she goes on a frantic shopping spree and makeover. Hagar believes that Milkman does not like her hair, that "[he prefers] silky hair the color of a penny" (Morrison 1977: 315). Like many other black females, she experiences how the dominant society undermines black beauty. Hagar tries unsuccessfully to turn into the light-skinned and straight-haired woman she thinks Milkman desires, which eventually leads to her death: In "Hagar's demise [Morrison] illustrates the potentially destructive effects of marginalized African-American women's attempts to live up to beauty standards established and sanctioned by privileged African American and white society" (Jensen 2013: 25).

Cosmetic philosophy has been regarded in the Judeo-Christian world as a sign of worldly vanity, linked to sexual promiscuity and devoid of any kind of positive spiritual value. It has been used as the easy way to reach the standards of beauty enforced by society, thus boosting women's self-confidence and self-image. The beauty industry has focused and sold for a long time cosmetic products that make black females look 'whiter,' and consequently more 'beautiful,' as for example, by straightening their hair. In Hagar's shopping spree and makeover, Morrison criticizes the racialized beauty industry, the role of beauty products and advertisements in black women's lives.

In *Song of Solomon*, the connection between beauty products and sex is manifest in the cosmetic department episode through Morrison's sexually charged language. Hagar is enticed into buying beauty products, which promise her attractiveness and the power of seduction. The cosmetic department "enfold[s] her in perfume, and she [reads] hungrily the labels and the promise" (Morrison 1977: 311). Her shopping spree "demonstrates the extent to which the white culture propagates the values of success based on materialism and a certain fixed concept of beauty" (Ahmad 2008: 64). In *God Help the Child* as in *Song of Solomon*, "Morrison's critical depiction of materialism and consumerism reveals the crucial role the product manufacturers and advertisers in a consumer society play as creators and enforcers of dominant beauty standards" (Jensen 2013: 4). Unlike Hagar, Bride manages to achieve beauty according to the industry standards, but to fit into this ideal also proves to be highly harmful for her.

By showing off her lucrative blackness, Bride seeks vengeance against her tormenting childhood ghosts. Nonetheless, even if Black has become the new commodity, it does not mean that racism is over:

Years and a cultural shift later, Bride discovers that men find her extremely attractive. Her obsession with beauty and its power is a throwback to the days when the civil rights movement morphed into black power and the slogan, 'black

is beautiful’ was bandied around. Morrison is clear on the hollowness of the comfort this slogan provided—that it was a slogan which exposed the fact that white definitions were important to black people. (Iqbal 2015)

Racialized beauty, as Gurleen Grewal states, is only a part of a deeper problem and “a mere reversing of terms (from the *ugliness* to the *beauty* of blackness) is not enough, for such counter-rhetoric does not touch the heart of the matter: the race-based class structure upheld by dominant norms and stereotypes” (1998: 21). Actually, Bride’s black beauty is overly racialized when one of her dates, a medical student, uses her to play a “racist joke” on his parents. He takes her home just to exhibit her as a trophy, and hence “terrorize his family, a means of threat to this nice old white couple” (*God*: 37).

Unlike Bride, Duckling finds in his transformation into a swan his true identity. He finally succeeds and is accepted among other animals and humans. Bride’s triumph, however, is just connected to her physical appearance and material values, to the most superficial part of her self. Bride is a reflection of the increasing shallowness of our materialist and consumerist society. Morrison stresses how she is remade to be commodified and sold as another beauty product. Bride, whose “self-love [is] consistent with her cosmetic company milieu” (*God*: 133), indeed leads an empty, watered-down, self-centered life. She drives a jaguar and goes out with rappers, professional athletes, etc., who are only interested in her looks, crotch or paycheck, or treat her like a prize to their prowess (*God*: 36-37). Bride’s lovers just joke or baby-talk her, as neither of them is really interested in her true identity. She is reduced to a sexual toy and her sex life is a sort of “Diet Coke”. Her initial relationship with Booker, her boyfriend, is also mostly about making love and having fun.

Even Bride’s ‘best’ friend, Brooklyn—a duplicitous white woman with *dreadlocks*—, ‘helps’ her predominantly by taking over her job. She plays the part of the good friend, but she does not really care about Bride. Like Goldilocks in the fairy tale, she is motivated by selfishness, taking what does not belong to her. When Brooklyn learns that Bride will not go back to work for a long time, she sees her opportunity to replace her. Brooklyn embodies the beauty industry in her eagerness to climb the ladder of success and when she highlights the importance of youth in her commentary about the twenty-three-year-old Bride not being so young any more (*God*: 27). In Bride’s blind belief in Brooklyn’s friendship, we can see her infatuation with whiteness.

In *Tar Baby*, Jadine, even being a model, is not as appearance-obsessed as Bride, who is “shallow, emotionally stunted, and enamored of the glitzy professional world she lives and works in” (Umrigar 2015). Regarding her frivolity and materialism, Morrison claims that beauty

can destabilize you if that’s all you have and that’s all you care about and that’s where your success comes from. There’s a three-dimensional person somewhere outside the clothes and the makeup and the nudity as they call it, since everybody beautiful is buck naked now. (Hoby 2015)

4. Bildungsroman: Bride’s Identity Quest

Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, Bride's story is a bildungsroman. In her childhood, Bride, like Pecola or Duckling, is subjected to derogatory and hurtful racist treatment. As Razia Iqbal writes, "The fault lines of contemporary racism are ever-present, but the complexity of the racism internalized by African Americans is also there. The impact of that secondary hierarchy of racism is the backbone of Lula Ann's story" (2015). As a grown-up, though, Bride, who turns out to be a flashing ebony-black beauty, has to look beyond the snare of beauty since she cannot acquire complete self-fulfillment in her materially thriving, but frivolous life. She has "counted on her looks for so long—how well beauty worked. She ha[s] not known its shallowness or her own cowardice—the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it" (*God*: 151). Bride seeks for approval and recognition in a 'colonized' community. Her successful career in the cosmetic industry epitomizes her internalized racial self-disparagement.

In *God Help the Child*, Bride's traumatic experiences in infancy keep surfacing, thus manifesting how "pain inflicted in childhood ensnares and hobbles the adult" (Scrivener 2015). While talking to Booker "certain things [she] had buried came up fresh as though [she] was seeing them for the first time" (*God*: 53). Her psychological scars, symbolic of the traumas of black American history, have "festered and never scabbed over" (*God*: 134). Her self-confidence and boldness are just the "thrillingly successful corporate woman façade of complete control" (*God*: 134), while, like poor Duckling, she really craves love and acceptance. When Bride confronts the ghosts of her childhood visiting a 'child molester' (Sofia Huxley, the teacher she falsely accused of abusing children) in prison, Booker rebuffs her, "You not the woman I want" (*God*: 10), and leaves her. Besides, Bride's long planned attempt to make peace with Sofia—an act that lacks genuine kindness and sympathy—fails, and she is brutally beaten. Bride feels "too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley" (*God*: 79). She cannot pretend to be a self-reliant new woman anymore. Bride's life is falling apart, and she looks for solace in drugs, alcohol and sex.

Booker's spiteful words haunt her and she sinks into an identity crisis, feeling "Dismissed" and "Erased" (*God*: 38), which Morrison represents by dabbling in magical realism. Bride 'experiences' a physical regression "back into a scared little black girl" (*God*: 142), 'losing' her womanhood. Her transformation is depicted through supernatural elements: the disappearance of her pubic and underarm hair, her ear piercings and her breasts. Her period stops and she even shrinks to the size of a child. And yet, "No one else appears to notice these alterations. Whether they are real or simply the product of Bride's own imagination, it's impossible to tell; but the symbolism is clear: she can't escape her past and she can't escape her body" (Scholes 2015). The deconstruction of her femininity parallels Bride's journey of self-discovery, which leads to the eventual construction of her true womanhood through love and pregnancy.

Like Macon Dead Jr. in *Song of Solomon*, Bride is a lost black soul as a result of the influence of the heavily materialist white dominant society. She has succeeded in the glamorous world of cosmetics, however, she has lost her self in the process of merging into that society. In the search of material accomplishment, she has renounced her true identity and heritage. As Jin-lian Wu contends about *Song of Solomon*, "Morrison's proposition [...] is [that it] is essential for one to return to pure traditional culture, nature and one's true self, thereby owning a sense

of belonging” (2012: 39). Bride’s voyage of self-definition becomes a quest “for love, for valid sexual encounters, and, above all, for a sense that they [black women] are worthy” (Bakerman 1981: 541), self-worth disconnected from material values.

In *God Help the Child*, Brooklyn’s story contrasts with Bride’s. Brooklyn also runs away from the abuses she suffers from her uncle and drunken mother, and reinvents herself. Nevertheless, while nothing can stop Brooklyn from achieving her material life goals, Bride does not hesitate to leave everything behind. She sets out on an identity journey to rural California in search of her boyfriend to face him regarding his rejection and abrupt departure, “which was the same as confronting herself, standing up for herself” (*God*: 98). Her quest for self-realization and self-forgiveness, “both literal and metaphorical [...] involves the laying of old ghosts to rest for both of them” (Scholes 2015). Her first stop in a diner, when a waitress gives her the look she got on the first days of school—“Shock, as though she had three eyes” (*God*: 81)—, takes her back to her unhappy infancy.

Later, Bride starts losing all those things that still keep her attached to her materialistic life: her car, her mobile phone, her clothes, etc. As Namwali Serpell writes, Bride “confronts her mortality [and] loses her material and emotional comforts” (2015). Hence, this trip symbolizes her return to what is essential in life. After her accident, in the forest and in the middle of the scary night, Bride feels “world-hurt—an awareness of malign forces changing her from a courageous adventurer into a fugitive” (*God*: 83). During her recovery from the car wreck, she receives selfless free care without judgment or special interest from a white hippy couple, Evelyn and Steve. Shallow and spoiled, Bride is faced with people who live, she believes, “the barest life”, but they consider as the ‘real life.’

In *God Help the Child*, Bride’s materialism is set against the hippy couple’s idealism: Bride’s concocted “Hollywoody, teenagery” name, reflection of her vanity, and glamorous life are in stark contrast with those of Evelyn, a true Eve. She reminds Bride of the forties or fifties film stars who had distinguishing faces “unlike now, when hairstyles alone separated one star from another” (*God*: 86). In Evelyn and Steve’s house, Bride becomes aware that everybody had scorned and rejected her her entire life, and wonders: “What did she know anyway about good for its own sake, or love without things?” (*God*: 92). In her epiphany, Bride, away from her sophisticated life, realizes how materialism cannot make up for her traumatic childhood.

When Cat and Hen tell Duckling what to do to fit in, he decides to go away. He survives a long and cold winter on his own, being finally rescued by a peasant. Likewise, Bride’s self-fulfillment trip takes her deep into the forest, her inner self. There, in Morrison’s version of “Hansel and Gretel”, Bride follows “a breadcrumb trail to the home of—‘a witch’s den’ (*God*: 145)” (Scholes 2015) and encounters Queen, Booker’s aunt—the red-haired ‘witch’ who finally dies burned. Queen makes Bride feel again as if “she was the ugly, too-black little girl in her mother’s house” (*God*: 144), stripped of her beauty and glamour. She remembers Booker’s words about racism: “Scientifically there’s no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it” (*God*: 143). Like Bride, Queen had also been very pretty and thought that was enough—that is how the old woman had lost her children—, until she understood that she “had to be a real person,

meaning a thinking one” (*God*: 158).

In rural California, Bride also meets Rain—a semi-feral girl who had been prostituted and abandoned by her mother and, later, rescued and taken in by the old couple—, a rendezvous that “conjures her [Bride’s] repressed feelings of racial rejection” (Sturgeon 2015). It is not by chance that Rain is the one who finds Bride after her accident. Her encounter with the little girl is reminiscent of “Alice in Wonderland”. When Rain, the emerald-eyed girl, stumbles on the black woman after her car wreck, she is carrying a black kitten the hippy couple had got her. Rain stares at Bride “with the greenest eyes [she] had ever seen” (*God*: 83). Like Lewis Carroll’s constantly grinning cat, Rain watches how Steve rescues Bride with her mouth open. The dreamy girl also appears and disappears as in a magical world. The Cheshire Cat is the only character in Wonderland who truly understands Alice (Bride). Rain tells the blue-black woman about her traumatic experiences at the hands of her mother. Her story reflects how in the real world, as in Wonderland, nonsense reigns (as childhood abuses demonstrate), while the curious Alice/Bride tries to figure out what a more fulfilling life is about.

In contrast to Bride’s fake friendship with Brooklyn, her short true companionship with Rain and her genuine endeavor to save the child are a healing experience for Bride, a true act of restitution. Eventually, she confronts Booker and her confession to him makes her feel reborn: “No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father” (*God*: 162). Bride discloses 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” (*God*: 175).

5. Conclusion: Hopeful Ending

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison shows how by conforming to white aesthetics, African Americans deny and renounce their own culture and their own selves, while cooperating in their victimization and in keeping white supremacy. Popular culture has a lot to do in creating and promoting the racism that is so prevalent in the society. Minority groups, such as blacks, are vulnerable to internal forces, family and community, and external forces, which harbor “the ontological structures and mythological thought systems that black develop to define and reinforce their definitions of self and existence” (Samuels & Clenora 1999: 78). Only when parents and community teach children about their own culture and ethnicity, instead of trying to adapt to the white ideal, can they truly embrace themselves, fight against the imposed standards and reach their fullest potential.

God Help the Child becomes “a late-life reimagining of Morrison’s first novel, a more hopeful, valedictory book” (LeClair 2015). In these two novels, Morrison reveals the appalling damages black women suffer through the construction of femininity in a racialized society. Through Bride, Morrison interrogates again the dominant value system, deconstructing the prevailing notions of beauty and materialist values. She epitomizes the process of decolonization of the black female’s psyche and, on the whole, African Americans’ resistance to oppression. Pecola, “the child deemed ‘ugly’ due to the darkness of her skin and raped by her father in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s first novel”, is surely “the precursor to the ill-

fated baby born on the opening page of her latest book” (Scholes 2015). And yet, unlike her female predecessors, Pecola or Hagar, Bride achieves the normative beauty standards to realize that she needs to find her own self-worth definitions. Furthermore, while unloved and forlorn Pecola succumbs to insanity, Bride emerges quite victorious from her racial conflict and materialism, as well as from the search for her true self.

The ending of *God Help the Child* seems to show “redemption from both twentieth-century hate and twenty-first century commodification of Bride’s dark skin” (Pistelli 2015). On her journey to self-acceptance, Bride faces the fake world she has lived in and, apparently, escapes from the hollowness and emptiness to which dictated white standards of beauty had led her. Bride’s stay with the hippies and her disinterested actions in saving Rain and looking after Queen help her find other values in life. Bride learns what to love others truly mean and thus she seems to escape her self-centered life. Then her womanhood ‘comes back.’ When she takes her T-shirt off to smother Queen’s burning hair, Bride exposes her lovely, plump breasts, to her delight. Later, she discovers that her ear holes have also returned so she can wear and relish Queen’s gold earrings, symbol of her majesty, true self and old age wisdom. Bride has definitely walked away from her sophisticated and frivolous life, as Booker says, she has changed from “one dimension into three—demanding, perceptive, daring” (*God*: 173).

Bride’s true transformation, her rebirth, occurs in the forest where she faces death—symbolized by her accident and her stay in the hippies’ house, “a coffin”, (*God*: 92). While in the forest, she metamorphoses into Sleeping Beauty. Bride spends most of the time sleeping, the maiden’s hundred-year sleep (while Evelyn, the ‘uninvited evil witch,’ uses her loom), exemplifying “the time when a girl is depicted as turning inward in her struggle to become herself”, which Bruno Bettelheim associates with puberty, the transition from childhood to adulthood, a period of “quiet concentration” (1975: 225). Bride has regressed to her infancy to turn into a real woman. Hence, Bride’s sojourn in the woods, a period of dormancy and ‘solitude,’ represents her awakening to selfhood. As in “Sleeping Beauty”, the moral of *God Help the Child* is that true love succeeds. Bride will be eventually ‘awaken’ by/with the ‘prince,’ Booker.

Bride appears to have achieved the sense of self required to mother her baby, without abuse or transmission of racial contempt, despite Sweetness’s ironic remark in the novel’s final line: “A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment [...]. So they [Bride and Booker] believe” (*God*: 175). However, Morrison’s is not a simplistic ending. Through Sweetness, she expresses how difficult things can be for parents in a racist society: “Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent” (*God*: 178).

Morrison’s latest novel devaluates the myth of beauty, underscoring that being beautiful is not enough, and that adhering to materialist values is unhealthy and self-destructive: “It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen. In this process, we seek to create a world where everyone can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes” (hooks 1992: 6). Bride’s search brings her closer to a more meaningful life in a world full of materialism. Growing up has been painful for

her, as it is for the ugly duckling, but she has matured and learnt to validate herself.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison unveils how decolonization from the imposed white standards is related to the acceptance of your personal and racial identity and self-worth. She deconstructs and transgresses the intertexts and fairy tales she uses to depict decolonization and to express the postcolonial condition. There is optimism in the denouement of Morrison's modern-day fairy tale, as in the optimistic belief in the triumph of good of Andersen's tales. Like the ugly duckling, Bride can finally accept herself for who she truly is and, in her love for Booker, she has an opportunity to be fulfilled. And yet, Morrison highlights how there can be no instant fairy-tale transformation and the quest for full postcolonial identity is a long and arduous one.

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