

A Brief Analysis of *God Help the Child* from the Perspective of Feminist criticism

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Abstract:

This essay is going to interpret Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the perspective of Feminist criticism by pointing out the appearance anxiety under the male gaze and discussing the traditional gender roles in the patriarchal ideology.

Key words: *God Help the Child*; feminist criticism; the male gaze; traditional gender roles

1. Introduction

God Help the Child, published at Toni Morrison's eighties, is her first try to focus on American contemporary life. It mainly narrates the story of the dark-skin daughter Bride's quest for her lover Booker, involving the lack of maternal love, racism and childhood trauma. Compared to *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*, which share much common in plots, this novel doesn't stir much researcher's attention[1]. Critics hold divergent points of view toward the book. Some deem that it's another masterpiece of Morrison. Much more critics have to admit that they would like to turn to study *Beloved*.

Currently, critics choose to use post-racial perspective to interpret the novel at most. Trauma theory, narratology, feminism and ethical literary criticism are as subsequent as follows. A few researchers argued that the reconstruction of Bride's subjectivity as a female[2]. But not a few researchers paid attention to the patriarchal implications in Morrison's feminine writing. I will illustrate my interpretations on a feminist reading of *God Help the Child*. On the one hand, Toni Morrison offers us a unique perspective to represent the contemporary American women's life with her feminine writing. On the other hand, patriarchal ideology is so pervasive that even the feminine writing cannot completely get beyond the patriarchal thinking. I will interpret some achievements Morrison brought us in recovering from patriarchal ideology and point out some patriarchal thinking without our knowledge and consent.

2. The Male Gaze in *God Help the Child*

"The male gaze: the man looks; the woman is looked at. And it is the one who looks who is in control, who holds the power to name things, the power to explain the world and so to rule the world. The one looked at—the woman—is merely an object to be seen[3]." In the novel, Morrison sets two young girls working in a cosmetics company, which is inevitably related to how to ingratiate the male-dominated aesthetic standard. In the patriarchal world, it's no doubt that the standard of beauty works for the taste of men. If a woman fails to match the patriarchal aesthetic standard, she will probably suffer from appearance anxiety under the male gaze. We'll check this in Bride's and Brooklyn's appearance anxiety.

2.1 Bride's Appearance Anxiety

First, from what I see, even a beauty suffering from appearance anxiety discomforts me. Bride, her skin midnight black though, has the "sheer beauty...according to everybody with two eyes." When Booker runs out on her, she then goes to visit Sofia, the so-called child molester, who is just out of jail. And the result is that Bride hardly ruins her face. When the plastic surgery's done, she deliberately selects to wear a sleeveless white shift to impress Brooklyn with her almost perfect appearance recovery progress. Whereas Brooklyn is a white pretty girl as Bride's best friend, we still can get that Bride is desperately competitive on how she looks like. Furthermore, we can see the importance of appearance not only from the protagonist's self-narration but also from other narrative perspective. As Brooklyn said, "...How can she (Bride) persuade women to improve their looks with products that can't improve her own[4]." As the regional manager of Sylcia, Inc., Bride's appearance was a part of commodity of her brand YOU, GIRL. She must keep her pretty appearance, whatever emergency happens. Because her appearance represents the image of YOU, GIRL. According to Jeri, her fashion designer's advice, she only wears different shades of white clothes to stun everybody. The extreme of pursuing a perfect appearance indicates that the female always suffer from appearance anxiety under the male gaze. The world is surrounded by the aesthetic standard dominated by the male. It is implying that girls should be pretty enough to easily get a job or promotion. Nowadays, women from different cultures still suffer appearance anxiety from various extents, because the world is still under the male gaze.

Second, some descriptions on Bride's breasts can also manifest the world is under the male gaze. At the beginning of looking for Booker, Bride once reckoned that "...A woman could be cobra-thin and starving, but if she had grapefruit boobs and raccoon eyes, she was deliriously happy[4]." Then, when she gets a car accident and has the chance to bathe herself, "...It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back[4]..." Finally, when Bride found the magical return of her flawless breasts, "They were focused, wide-eyed, on Bride's lovely, plump breasts[4]." Bride cares how people judge her, especially about her appearance, and the alterations of her chests definitely worried and delighted her. Bride internalizes the patriarchy aesthetic standard of "a beautiful woman". Because plump breasts can be seen as the sign of maturity, seductiveness and reproductivity in the patriarchy ideology.

Meanwhile, Bride's typecast ex-boyfriends show a patriarchal man who feels he must have a beautiful woman on his arm in order to impress other men his "prowess". In other words, Bride is regarded as an expensive commodity under the male gaze. As Wang lili states, "Bride was restricted by the dress code of white is beautiful and internalized the value of ingratiating the male, being completely reduced to a commodity of the male[5]." But Morrison holds negative attitude on these patriarchal men in her feminine writing by saying "not one of them giving, helpful...", which also reflects her feminine writing getting beyond patriarchal ideology.

2.2 Brooklyn's Appearance Anxiety

Not only Bride suffers from the male gaze, regardless of race, white girl Brooklyn also tends to cater to her black boyfriends' favor. "She loves showing off around men...she twisted her blond hair into dreadlocks and, pretty as she is, the locks add an allure she wouldn't otherwise have. At least the black guys she dates think so[4]." Brooklyn is dressed like a black girl with dreadlocks long ago before Bride met her. But Brooklyn remains her black girl hairstyle even when Bride finishes the plastic surgery. As the writer adds, "... (Brooklyn) pulls her locks behind her ears and fixes me with an intense glare[4]." The detail tells us Brooklyn probably has a relationship with a black guy at that time. She is afraid that her blonde hair can't match the aesthetic standard of black male.

Meanwhile, Brooklyn once seduced Booker when Bride's not at home. Booker's skin color is not clearly indicated in the novel. But Bride's narration once mentioned Booker's "golden skin". So we can infer that Booker is light-skinned like Brooklyn's other boyfriends. When Brooklyn strips all her clothes and joins Booker in bed, she finds out her feminine charm doesn't work, her reaction is like getting humiliated. It's a strong clue that suggests Brooklyn is good at taking advantage of her female identity in the patriarchy world. In other words, she takes her own body as a commodity to exchange what she wants. She is an typical patriarchal woman. Not only she objectifies herself as commodity, but also regards other women as men's playthings. She intends to take place of Bride's job and steal her lover. The former one is successful, but the latter one failed. Brooklyn's behavior tells us how to use the male gaze to ingratiate men and content her own vanity. And Morrison holds a negative narration attitude on her by creating strong contrasts between Brooklyn and Bride. Bride sincerely takes Brooklyn as her only true friend. While, Brooklyn often calls Bride "beautiful dumb bitch"

privately, and pretends to care about Bride.

3. The Traditional Gender Roles in *God Help the Child*

“Traditional gender roles cast men as rational, strong, protective, and decisive; they cast women as emotional(irrational), weak, nurturing, and submissive[3].” In this novel, Morrison arranges a rather ambivalent gender roles among the main characters, which also shows that it’s a struggle to completely get beyond the patriarchal thinking. But we must continue to move forward—to understand and resist patriarchal ideology wherever and whenever we can.

3.1 “Good girl” or “Bad girl”

How Queen Olive was judged by people reflected the “good girl” and “bad girl” division from patriarchal ideology. “Patriarchal ideology suggests that there are only two identities as a woman can have. If she accepts her traditional gender role and obeys the patriarchal rules, she’s a ‘good girl’; if she doesn’t, she’s a ‘bad girl’[3].” Aunt Queen was rumored to have had many husbands that even her family showed resentment to her because she violated the traditional gender roles.

While in Booker’s eyes, only aunt Queen told him to keep close to Adam, therefore he likes aunt Queen. Booker has been keeping in touch with Queen and writing to her all the time since he broke off with his family. In Bride’s eyes, aunt Queen invites her to have a meal with the flavor of maternal love and encourages her to confront Booker. And from Bride’s narration, aunt Queen sets everything in order and puts up many pictures of her offspring on the wall. Queen is loving, caring but lonely. From our two main character’s view, Queen is a nice person which also shows the writer’s attitude. Morrison tried to redefine Queen Olive’s quality by the interactions with both Booker and Bride. Queen may not get her relative’s (or say, most people’s) understanding in terms of her complicated marriage experiences. But a woman should not be simply defined as a good girl or good mother in a patriarchal sense. A woman not only can choose to get married, but also can divorce at her will. How many times a woman gets married doesn’t mean she is a slut or anything awful. And whether she chooses to raise a child doesn’t account for her motherhood. “Nurturing is not a role biologically linked to sex although many people long have believed it to be[3].” It is the point that Morrison wants to tell us from her feminine writing.

The writer arranges Bride one night stand on the night of prelaunch party of YOU,GIRL, after she breaks up with Booker. Bride’s reaction to this one night stand appears a little bit dislike but soon she shakes it off. It reflects that women have the right to change the sex partner when they are not in a relationship. Apparently, Morrison doesn’t describe Bride as a “bad girl”, although Bride has a long list of ex-lovers and one night stand. We can also see the writer’s attitude from divergent narrative perspectives, such as Sweetness’s, Rain’s, Sofia’s and etc. Bride sends her Sweetness money every now and then to quiet down the little bit of conscience, although Sweetness was tough on her. Rain misses her “black lady” because Bride is the first person to put herself in danger to save her. And Sofia, the so-called child molester, wonders why Bride doesn’t sue her after the fight. All these reactions reflect Bride is a conscientious, warm-hearted and trust-worthy girl. And in the end, Bride doesn’t get a bad ending which a “bad girl” would do in the patriarchal writing. That is to say, Bride, our

protagonist, who breaks the traditional gender role, doesn't get punished but even gets a happy ending like a fairy tale.

3.2 Naming Implication

Morrison sets the naming of characters in *God Help the Child* deliberately. The most persuasive examples lie in Bride, Booker and Queen.

First, our protagonist's name, Bride, whose meaning is related to a wedding girl with white gown, suggests her purity and felicity in the traditional cognitive sense. At the same time, the naming of our protagonist suggests that she will always wear white clothes in sharp contrast with her skin color. It's a clear evidence to show how a sexually-pure name works in a male-dominated world. Because when our protagonist shortens her name from Lula Ann Bridewell to Bride, her fashion name leaves more emphasis on her pure beauty, which caters for the male-dominated world. Other names of Bride come from her lover Booker. "He called me 'baby' most of the time... And sometimes 'You my girl,' accent on the my[4]." Booker's naming suggests that Bride is an object of his belonging in a patriarchal thinking way. Bride is objectified by her lover to some extent.

Second, Booker, who sounds like a person who likes reading books, does really grow up in a book-reading family with only radio and newspapers. In his undergraduate years, "he'd nibbled courses in several curricula, psychology, political science, humanities, and he'd taken multiple courses in African-American Studies[4]..." All these information give us a hint that Booker is a rational and well-educated man which is exactly what the traditional gender role endowed the male. And with the process of the plot, we still can find some other merits on Booker endowed by traditional gender roles. Booker is strong and decisive, as a male should be in the traditional gender role. "Booker's fist was in the man's mouth before thinking about it[4]." With strong contrast to the fight between Bride and Sofia, Bride was beaten up without any strength to stand up. So the traditional gender roles give the writer a stereotype way to build our two main characters' quality. Booker is rational, strong and decisive, representing the masculinity of manhood. While, Bride is emotional, fragile and timid, which is totally the patriarch concept of femininity.

Third, Aunt Queen, as we already mentioned above, is not so favorable among most people's opinion because of her complicated marriage experiences. The traditional gender role doesn't allow a woman to have so many husbands. But her name reminds us of queen's power and elegance. She knows most of her children send her money so they don't have to see her. So every year, she visits her sons and daughters like a freedom-loving traveller. And the conversation between Bride and her indicates Queen doesn't care about her marriage condition or children's resentment. "She was laughing, her shoulders rocking. 'So many men and all of them that same where it counts.'...ownership[4]." She takes marriage as a kind of contract, which suggests that her attitude about men is negative. She can live well on her own without depending on a man. And from Bride's description about Queen's home, we can also see "the room's orderliness, comfort and charm...Curtains, slipcovers, cushions, embroidered napkins were elegantly handmade." Queen is elegant, open-minded and freedom-loving, as her name manifests. Unfortunately, at the end of story, Queen didn't get through a sudden fire.

Ironically, Morrison gives Queen a powerful name but still leave her a regretful ending. The woman who violates the patriarchal rules most gets punishment most. So does feminine writing get rid of patriarchal thinking completely? My answer is no. Even a female writer couldn't resist the strong programming of patriarchal ideology, how could a male writer stand on the female side?

4. Conclusion

As a consequence, we learn that What Toni Morrison is trying to say from her feminine writing is to reveal women have the right to dominate their own body. In this novel, Morrison challenges traditional gender roles which press women into submissive status and doubts being a "good girl" or mother should withstand her own will and desire. Nevertheless, Even feminine writing couldn't completely get rid of patriarchal thinking. Appearance anxiety shows us patriarchal culture is penetrating into every intuition and move of women. Queen's ending doesn't break the patriarchal writing rule. It's hard to completely get rid of patriarchal thinking patterns.

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