

A Dissolution of Borderlines in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Abstract

The paper focuses on Toni Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015). By presenting a skillful though somewhat perverse merger of binary oppositions at different levels (racial, social, moral, and psychological), the writer makes borderlines of all sorts appear artificial and therefore invalidates them. Thus, childhood merges with adulthood through sexual traumas that live on; touch with no touch as the evil touch of a parent equals an abhorrence of touching the child Other; truth with a lie as it proves as destructive as lying in good faith; passing blackness with blue blackness as the former conceives the latter; and appearances with reality in the ironic title of the book, where it is both the mother and the child that in fact need God's help. Thus, as Toni Morrison demonstrates, a thoroughly surreptitious, because natural, process of dissolution of all barriers makes them appear to be arbitrary constructs responsible for the equally arbitrary notion of the Other. Taking an utterly holistic view of the nature of things, Morrison seems to suggest that borderlines are a consequence and a manifestation of a lack of balance, which therefore needs to be redressed through love, mutual understanding, and maturation.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child*, sexual traumas, dissolution of borderlines, the Other

Toni Morrison's latest novel, published in 2015 under an ominously up-to-date title *God Help the Child*, has been received with mixed feelings, chiefly on account of its simple plot (Robson 2015), laconic style, alleged lack of the usual Morrison magic (Ulin 2015), and understated presentation of characters (Charles 2015) and plot (Walker 2015). On the other hand, the reviewers emphasize that it is the only Morrison book, whose action takes place exclusively in our times. In saying so, however, they fail to recognize the fact that it is exactly the novel's asset that precludes its alleged shortcomings, for, in its perfect unison of form and content, *God Help the Child* can only be matched by Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Just as the latter's terse behaviouristic style reflects post-WWI ennui and nihilism, so does Morrison's litotes that serve to

render the pace, superficiality, consumerism, and relativism of the era of "post-truth".

The book's construction revolves around a dissolution of borderlines, though somewhat perversely at times, which should, however, come as no surprise in a novel about child abuse whose form reflects the content. By presenting a dexterous merger of binary oppositions—even to the point of absurdity—Morrison makes the concept of "a borderline" appear artificial and inadequate, thus invalidating the very notion.

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Hence, she shows childhood merging with adulthood through sexual traumas that live on; the abhorrence of touching the child Other appearing no better than the evil touch; a lie parading under the guise of truth for the sake of mother love; passing mother blackness conceiving and then renouncing blue blackness in a child; traumas and self-absorption turning love into not love; and appearances belying reality, as reflected, among others, in the ironic title of the book, where it is from its own kin that “the child” needs to be protected, for it is either abused by the father, or sent off by the mother who refuses to hear.

The basic story behind Morrison’s book is that of Lula Ann—a young lady financially successful in cosmetic business and staggeringly beautiful, who dresses her dazzling blue blackness in the equally dazzling white and reinvents herself as Bride in consequence of a traumatic childhood in the company of her passing mother, perversely called Sweetness, who, because she has no way of accounting for the colour of skin of her newly born daughter, refuses to ever touch her since. Instead, she constantly exposes the child to what she thinks, and awaits her in the real world, which abhors the coloured Other. On the other hand, Bride’s visage consultant Jeri insists that “(b)lack sells. It’s the hottest commodity in the civilized world. White girls, even brown girls have to strip naked to get that kind of attention” (Morrison 2016: 36), the idea which Sweetness must have found welcome if she states at one point: “she looked so good, that I forgot about her color” (Morrison 2016: 177). Freed from her toxic mother, totally enveloped in herself and her success in the dream land of Hollywood, Bride meets Booker, an insightful, nonconformist, and sensitive black student who is equally traumatized over a loss, to a sexually motivated murder, of his eldest twin-like brother Adam.

The plot of the book focuses mostly on what happens after Booker suddenly walks out on Bride after their six perfectly blissful months together,

utterly disgusted by her confession of having tried to “make it up” to a freshly released convict, a former kindergarten teacher Sophia, accused of child molestation, whom Bride herself, as still Lula Ann, landed in prison by testifying against. What Bride fails to tell Booker though is that her rectification effort was motivated by her false testimony against the convict, which had been calculated to earn her the desired mother touch. Devastated by Booker’s desertion, Bride leaves the management of her business temporarily to her devoted friend (or so she thinks) and ally, a white girl Brooklyn, who perversely suspects Booker of falsehood towards Bride when he ignores her sexual provocation in stripping herself naked in front of him—just so—and keeps his gaze fixed solely on her face.

Bride’s journey in search of Booker and her lost love features a dissolution of the borderline between past and present, progress and regression, when her mental and psychological maturation in effect of the journey is accompanied by a physical regression of her body to a state of childhood, Morrison’s magic realist trick of a symbolic rebirth. Bride’s spiritual development is followed by the ensuing maturation of Booker, who has yet to shed his “sacred” moral superiority over others, Bride including, and rid himself of his envelopment in the idealization of his dead brother, a victim of the SSS murder. The outcome of the journey for both characters is admission of mutual love and a joyful acceptance of the newly conceived life, for Bride is pregnant. Hence, the ending of the novel marks another case of borderline disappearance, in bridging the gap between a fable and a document, despair and bliss, for, this otherwise shattering novel, where no child is spared, except the one as yet to be born, i.e., Bride’s and Booker’s baby, ultimately turns out to be far more affirmative than any other book of our times that one could think of, with a staggeringly simple and beautiful but entirely convincing message of a possibility of rebirth even after a most devastating

trauma thanks to love, truth, authentic communication, and, as asserted by Robson, overcoming the ego (Robson 2015).

Toni Morrison's trail of collapsing borderlines paradoxically begins with Lula Ann's fatal birth, which chases away her father and leaves the mother flabbergasted as to the reasons for her daughter's Otherness. Those inevitably evoke Shreve's famous prophecy from *Absalom, Absalom!* that "Jim Bonds are going to conquer the western hemisphere. (...) and (...) as they spread towards the poles they will bleach out (...). But it will still be Jim Bond; and in a few thousand years" white North Americans "will also have sprung from the loins of African kings" (Faulkner 1964: 378). Curiously enough, Quentin's vehement and passionate denial of his hatred of the South in reaction to the words of his Canadian roommate: "I dont. I dont! I dont hate it! I dont hate it!" (Faulkner 1964: 378) exactly mirrors the way Sweetness, who passes for a white, reacts to the sight of her blue black baby daughter: "But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not" (Morrison 2016: 7). Racially, this analogy puts Sweetness on an equal footing with Quentin, and indeed, taking advantage of her passing skin colour, she keeps apart from the other members of her family, who cannot boast that sort of "asset". On the other hand, Morrison's signification on Faulkner in the above quoted passage, as in many of her other novels, such as *Song of Solomon*, *Beloved*, *Paradise and Love* (cf. Branny 2008; 2007a; 2013; 2006), reflects back on Quentin's own racial identity, suggesting the case of passing, which Faulkner himself hints at on numerous occasions (cf. Branny 2007b), and Quentin's "panting and sweating" (Faulkner 1964: 378) upon uttering his denial of the hatred of the South confirms.

The Sweetness-Quentin mirroring is echoed in another analogy between the two characters, involving the latter's belief expressed in *The Sound and the Fury* that "Southerners had to be always conscious" of the black presence, this "obverse reflection" of the white

man (Faulkner 1956: 106). However, it is exactly Sweetness's constant awareness of and yearning for the white presence in her life that overshadows her mentality and ruins Bride's childhood. The fear close to panic at the realization of the genetic presence of the Other that both characters reveal in their vehement denials ironically points out to the inevitability of the shared experience and the common plight of both races, and therefore the absurdity of any sort of racial or other divide as regards humanity at large.

This issue is overtly raised twice in Morrison's book, and in a way that leaves no doubt as to the soundness of the response it elicits from the two speakers—a white woman and a black man—Elwira and Booker. When asked by her little warden nicknamed Rain why Bride's skin is so black, Elwira, the child's adopted caretaker answers curtly: "For the same reason yours is so white". (...) "Born that way" (Morrison 2016: 85), while for Booker, blackness is

Just a color, (...). A genetic trait—not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing, nor a sin. (...) Scientifically there's no such thing as race, (...) so racism without race is a choice. Taught, of course, by those who need it, (...). Folks who practice it would be nothing without it. (Morrison 2016: 143)

The arbitrariness of skin colour and the very notion of race are also pointedly stated through Bride's white outfits, which her mother treats as a welcome alternative to Bride's outrageous blackness but Bride herself perceives, after Jeri, and in defiance of her mother, as a way of exposing it to attract the world's attention.

Hence, the mother's racism matches the daughter's vanity until the latter calls it by name upon discovering "real life" (Morrison 2016: 91) and the value of commitment to the detriment of her own safety while defending Rain, a little white girl, against sexual assault: "What did she know anyway about good for its own sake, or love without things?" (Morrison 2016: 92), she concludes after the incident. Thanks to a hippie-like white couple, Elwira and

Steve, who first took on Rain to save her from her abusive family and later tended to Bride after her car accident, no questions asked, Bride discovers that the borderline of race is like her white outfits—disposable; what is indispensable though is a disinterested commitment to another human being (cf. Branny 1997), a conclusion which places Toni Morrison, who belongs to postmodernism and wrote her novel in the era of “post-truth”, on a par with two modernists William Faulkner and Joseph Conrad, who, unlike other modernists, recognized the healing nature of, respectively, “the old verities” (Faulkner 1956: 120), or “*les valeurs idéales*” (Conrad 1965: 11-12): “love (...) and pity and compassion and sacrifice” (Faulkner 1956: 120). Incidentally, in doing so, Morrison crosses the borderline between disparate literary trends.

Paradoxically enough, Elwira and Steve, whose life celebrates these values, move to California, the dream land of Hollywood, “to live a real life”, which Bride, somewhat derisively, perceives as “poor”, to which Steve replies:

“What does ‘poor’ mean? No television?” Steve raised his eyebrows.

“It means no money”, said Bride.

“Same thing”, he answered. “No money, no television”.

“Means no washing machine, no fridge, no bathroom, no money”!

“Money get you out of that Jaguar? Money save your ass”? (Morrison 2016: 91)

As his words and the hippie lifestyle demonstrate, Steve believes in Transcendental “simplicity”. Interestingly enough, *God Help the Child* echoes Transcendentalism also where it reverts to magic realism. Bride’s sudden loss of breasts, pubic hair, weight, and the piercing in her earlobes upon her quest for Booker, and thus her evident regression into childhood, seem to follow the Emersonian pattern of a snake casting its slough: “In the woods, too, a man casts off his years, as the snake his slough, and at what

period soever of life is always a child” (Emerson 1836: 24). Although it is not exactly “the woods” that Bride travels to in intensely Hemingwayan passages, Morrison often remarks on the relative wildness of the area that her protagonist is driving through and where her accident happens:

The highway became less and less crowded as she drove east and then north. Soon, she imagined, forests would edge the road, watching her, as trees always did. In a few hours she would be in north valley country: logging camps, hamlets no older than she was, dirt roads as old as the Tribes. (Morrison 2016: 80)

Thus, through a dissolution of the borderlines of space, time, culture, and history, Bride’s maturation journey involves recapturing the primordial, primeval, and innocent.

Prior to her journey of maturation, Bride experiences a fairy-tale like threefold rejection, each on the same grounds of not being the kind of person someone else would want her to be. Apart from her mother, it is also Sophia and Booker that dismiss or “erase” her on these grounds, as she says (Morrison 2016: 38). Although the basic reasons for Bride’s rejection by Sophia Huxley and Booker are her lies, with Bride’s mother, it is exactly a lie that works and wonders, bringing back to Bride what she hankers after the most, i.e., her mother’s acceptance and touch. This perverse equation in *God Help the Child* of truth and lie comes as no surprise in a novel which questions the very foundations of the era of “post-truth”, in which truth and lying have become an exchangeable commodity to manipulate and trade in.

What further contributes to the novel’s theme of the actual and the virtual realities merging together to the point of no distinction is Morrison’s technique of magic realism, coupled with the elements of a fairy tale. After Bride is bruised and battered by Sophia, Brooklyn, her best friend, “keeps nagging” her to “live life like it really is life” (Morrison 2016: 38) for Bride’s life is full of glamour but empty otherwise. It

is only about “ivory, oyster, alabaster, (...) ecru, Champagne, (...)” tints (Morrison 2016: 33) for her outfits, her Jaguar with a vanity license plate and the launch of her new line of cosmetics YOU, GIRL. Even the way she goes about her compensating for her childhood lie to Sophia Huxley seems totally out of this world, what with “five thousand dollars in cash (...), a three-thousand-dollar Continental Airlines gift certificate. (...) a promotional box of YOU, Girl” in “a brand-new Louis Vuitton shopping bag” (Morrison 2016: 12), which ironically lands her in the very real world of an emergency clinic, with a temporarily disfigured face and a broken arm. Nevertheless, this sordid reality is topped for Bride with an otherwise promising Cinderella-like loss of her “black stiletto-heeled shoe” (Morrison 2016: 21), which gets thrown back after her by the infuriated Sophia. The reward in the form of the Prince comes much later, after a series of trials and tribulations that Bride has to go through on her symbolic quest for her lost love.

The merger of a fairy-tale and magic realism, on the one hand, and a dispassionate, matter-of-fact documentary style in which the novel is written, i.e., the form, finds a perfect match in the book’s content, when Booker’s beloved aunt Queen is envisaged by the distrustful Bride as a witch, who, nevertheless, saves Bride’s and Booker’s relationship by telling the girl the exact truth about her boyfriend and her own self. When she wonders “for a second if she (is) being seduced into a witch’s den”, for whatever she lay her eyes on seemed “cleverly mismatched” or “oddly placed” (Morrison 2016: 145), Bride discovers real life rather than a fairy tale, in learning about Queen’s sin of a mother who “refused to hear” about a molestation of one of her daughters by one of her numerous husbands. Thus, the fire that consumes Queen’s dwelling and eventually kills her is both destructive and chastising, death conditioning rebirth, the borderline between the two disappearing thereby.

However, this fire assumes still another dimension in Morrison’s book for its magic realist description,

especially if considered in the context of the rekindling of the love between Booker and Bride, unequivocally marks it as “flames of love” rather than real flames: “It began slowly, gently, as it often does: shy, unsure of how to proceed, fingering its way, slithering tentatively at first because who knows how it might turn out, then gaining confidence, in the ecstasy of air, of sunlight, for there was neither in the weeds where it curled” (Morrison 2016: 164). So the fire both consumes and restores to life, and both physically (Bride’s and Booker’s baby) and spiritually (their love). Incidentally, Bride’s rebirth is also accomplished within the magic realist and fairy-tale formula, for the deep and long sleep she falls into after battering Booker, brings about a miraculous restoration of her flawless female body, complete with her ample breasts and pierced earlobes.

Hence, in order to unite in real selfless love, Bride and Booker first have to wrestle with their childhood ghosts, for no childhood trauma, as Morrison demonstrates time and again, is “just” forgotten and passed over because, as Bride says: “Memory is the worst thing about healing” (Morrison 2016: 29), and as Sweetness concludes: “What you do to children matters. And they might never forget” (Morrison 2016: 43). However, “the smarts (knowledge) came too late for (Queen’s) children. (...) She knew from personal experience how hard loving was, how selfish and how easily sundered. Withholding sex or relying on it, ignoring children or devouring them, rerouting true feelings or locking them” (Morrison 2016: 158). Therefore, in a vicarious gesture of reconciliation with her wronged daughter, she advises her nephew to open his eyes to the fact that “Adam’s death became his own life” (Morrison 2016: 147), the remark which makes him reflect upon his own inability to love like Bride does when he finally admits: “Except for Adam I don’t know anything about love. (...) What kind of love is it that requires an angel and only angel for its commitment. (...) I sit on a throne and identify signs of imperfection in others” (Morrison 2016: 160).

This self-realization has a healing effect on Booker, who is now determined not to lose another loving soul as he did in Adam and Queen, “(o)ne by fire, one by water” (Morrison 2016: 174). So “he offered 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—a combination that some call natural love” (Morrison 2016: 175). This gesture completes Bride’s healing and recovery from her childhood wounds, thus closing her maturation process, which is the necessary condition for her to raise her own family, give love to Booker and to others rather than just offering them a commodity, i.e., her YOU, GIRL cosmetics and her “whipped cream and chocolate soufflé” (Morrison 2016: 33) body. Through her act of embracing “real life”, she sheds her old self, i.e., “casts off” the white “slough” of her garb, shakes off her make-believe existence, and decides to “help (her own) child” in the manner of the Salingerian “catcher in the rye” rather than leaving its protection entirely to God.

In her book, Toni Morrison takes a holistic view of things to drive home the point about the necessity of dissolving borderlines. Thus, Lula Ann throws her false accusations against Sophia Huxley to subconsciously make up for her silence, enforced by her mother, in not telling on their landlord, whose act of abuse of a little boy the girl witnessed. Then, by giving Sophia a chance to batter her by coming to compensate for her childhood lie, Bride unwittingly frees the convict from the burden of the years in prison and from her own righteous Puritanical childhood: “that black girl did do me a favor. (...) the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able” (Morrison 2016: 70). On the other hand, trying to return Bride’s favor through a most tender care that she renders her disabled patients, Sophia Huxley is “putting the black girl back together, healing her, thanking her. For the release” (Morrison 2016: 77). And finally, Booker, whose elder brother Adam falls

victim to a SSS murder and debauchery, does not stop short of getting himself arrested for snatching little boys from the hands of a gang of rapists.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, in Morrison’s recent novel, a dissolution of borderlines is either possible through love or, perversely, happens in consequence of the relativism of the era of “post-truth”. As the former, it is a positive phenomenon, but as the latter one, it brings destruction. Morrison emphasizes a holistic nature of human life, human psychology, and ethics, demonstrating the consequences of ignoring the fact. Thus she mocks fragmentation of the human story into past and present, of human life into childhood and adulthood, of humankind into races and shades of colour. At the same time, she warns against equating appearances with reality, kindness with abuse, a lie with the truth, actual reality with the virtual one, diagnosing the phenomena as a perverse dissolution of borderlines, a mark of the age of post-truth, which, ironically, manifests itself in massive occurrence of child abuse. An affirmative ending to this otherwise bleak story of Bride and Booker, seems to imply that the only road to redressing the balance of things leads through chastising the ego, sacrifice and commitment, rebirth and love.

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