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du Département d'Anglais adossée au **Groupe de recherches
en Littérature et Linguistique anglaise (GRELLA)**

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INTER-TEXTUAL

THE NEW NEGRO IN TONI MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD* : BLACK FEMALE EXCEPTIONALISM IN BUSINESS

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Abstract

This analysis of Toni Morrison's latest novel, *God Help the Child* describes the features of the Black female protagonist who overcomes obstacles from her birth to adulthood. These obstacles are linked to her skin color, which is considered ugly and unworthy. However, she manages to embody the values of the New Negro, whose talents are manifested particularly through her skills in entrepreneurship. Resorting to the concept of the New Negro, this contribution aims to show that success in business helps the Black female character to gain her status as a citizen. The result of this reflection is that the novel *God Help the Child* exemplifies the concept of the New Negro, which implies defining the way Black people can acquire their own identity and citizenship in a world dominated by white ideology.

Keywords : Black, business, challenge, color, construct, exceptionalism, identity New Negro, race, slavery,

Résumé

Cette analyse du dernier roman de Toni Morrison *God Help the Child* propose une description des caractéristiques du personnage féminin de race noire qui surmontent des obstacles dès sa naissance jusqu'à l'âge adulte. Ces obstacles sont liés à sa couleur de peau particulière jugée laide et non valorisante. Cependant, elle arrive à incarner les valeurs du New Negro ou Nouveau Noir dont les talents se manifestent de façon particulière par l'esprit d'entreprise. Ayant recours au concept de New Negro, la contribution vise à montrer que le succès dans le domaine des affaires permet au personnage noir d'affirmer sa qualité de citoyen. Le résultat de cette réflexion réside dans le fait que le roman *God Help the Child* est une illustration du concept de New Negro qui invite à définir la trajectoire par laquelle le Noir acquiert sa propre identité et une citoyenneté dans un monde dominé par l'idéologie de la race blanche.

Mots-clés : Noir, business, challenge, couleur, construction, exceptionnalisme, identité, New Negro, race, esclavage

Introduction

In reaction to the myth of America's "exceptionalism", Jeffrey C. Stewart ironically holds that the "Negro...was the most important exception to American citizenship" ("The New Negro as Citizen", 2007 : 13). By this irony, he means that the Negro did not "enter into an American notion of citizenship", just because black race was excluded from the norm of citizenship defined by the white (ibid). In reference to Alain Locke, Stewart evokes the revolution in Black citizenship favored by the migration of black populations to the North. While the critic insists on what he calls "New Negro cultural citizenship", this study of Toni Morrison's last novel *God Help the Child* (2015) defines the New Negro through the description of a black female

character, named Lula Ann or Bride. Incarnating the figure of black renaissance, she builds black citizenship through a process of self-transformation from a victimized fragile girl to the rise of a Black woman who sets up and runs a thriving business. In other words, the essay seeks to articulate a description of the black female protagonist whose life extends the definition of the New Negro to the black woman's capacities to achieve her social integration and citizenship through entrepreneurship.

Significantly enough in the foreword of the book *The New Negro : An Interpretation* Alain Locke poses the premises of the concept of New Negro. The publication, he explains, "aims to document" "the New Negro culturally and socially, – to register the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America" (Locke, 1925 : ix). In a more eloquent way, Locke adds that the New Negro, who embodies the concept of "new generation", implies the rise of "new psychology" and "new spirit" (Locke, 3) among black populations. In this sense, one can guess the significance of *The New Negro* as a book for the education of the Black in the period of World War I. Likewise, the singular trajectory of the black female character Lula Ann, who becomes later Bride, in *God Help the Child* is one of the most instructive for the black community in the fiction.

Nonetheless, life for the black female protagonist has not been that easy. She is born with an exceptional skin color that causes her to be rejected both by her own parents, including her father and mother, and the community whose model is the white skin standard. The obstacles she faces originate from that social construct of the individual's skin color. Her exclusion from the society is said to be embedded not only in white-based construct of stereotypes about blackness, but also in Blacks' opinions about their race.

Most readings of the novel *God Help the Child* prioritize such aspect concerning the exceptionalism of the protagonist's skin color. For instance, Yan MA and Liu Li-hui notes in their essay the body and the skin color that causes Bride, the main female character, to be the embodiment of exceptionalism in the negative way. The two critics posit that Lula Ann's "life is ravaged by racism owing to her color" ("Making of the Body : Childhood Trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*" 2017 : 18). Another correlated argument is pinpointed by Paula Martin-Salvan raises the issue of the protagonist's body and her quest for an identity different from the one she is attributed by the community in which she lives. In Bride's "personal search for identity", the critic observes, the girl's "body is textually foregrounded as the privileged site for the construction of her identity, and it will also be through her body that the signs of an

identity crisis will appear as symptoms of a past trauma. ” (“The secret of Bride’s body in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” 2018 :1).

While Paula Martin-Salvan associates Bride’s body with the trauma of her parents who instill in their daughter their own frustrations, fears and anxieties, critics Delphine Gras, and Mar Gallego draw attention to the novel’s picture of racial categorization. Gras insists on Bride’s singular body in that the story in *God Help the Child* “disarticulates racial categories, exposing them as detrimental social constructs that still dictate the ways Black female bodies are perceived and treated” (Gras 2016 :2). Like Gras, Gallego views the girl’s body that causes her to be victim of the “racist dominant ideology” that “codifies black bodies as the nonhuman ‘Other’” (Gallego 2019 : 307). In a perspective similar to the readings suggested by Gras, Gallego, Paula Martin-Salvan, Yan MA and Liu Li-hui, Manuela López Ramirez advocates that the story about Bride poses the problem of “motherhood”, to the extent that some mothers, like the female character’s mother, are “toxic” (“What You Do to Children Matters: Toxic Motherhood in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” 2015 : 107 ; 110).

The present contribution claims to be the sum of all these descriptions of the black female protagonist in *God Help the Child*. Drawn on the concept of New Negro, the essay does not consist in insisting so much on her victimization, but on the way she meets the challenges on permeating her life. Thus, the argument is to define the context of the life of the protagonist Bride as various obstacles that shape her character. The qualities she gains give rise to her transformation in a business woman who designs a singular black citizenship. To this end, she experiments, first, the vestiges of slavery under her blackness. When she successfully challenges the race constructs, she gives form to the concept of New Negro in terms of business-based black citizenship.

1. The Vestiges of Slavery under Blackness

The beginning of the story in *God Help the Child* is the chronicle of the birth of the main female character whose dark skin is considered to be something of the abnormal. The father looks at the mother as if the latter has become a madwoman whose mental trouble leads to the birth of a disgusting-looking skin color. When he turns to the baby girl, he believes she comes from some strange and remote planet. In the two cases, his view yields the same result concerning his wife and the baby girl as well : no longer can he accept to be the husband to a woman who gives birth to a nonconventional baby, and he refuses to be the father to the strange creature.

On the one hand, the man refuses to be the father of a baby he views as a trouble that adds to his own difficulties in being black. He believes that his wife has given birth to an alien skin color, one that the history of slavery has associated with curse. He quite accuses his wife of having a womb that causes them to return back to that period of humiliations. That is why, the mother repeatedly replies: “But it’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not”(7). Thus, on the other hand, the man has the feeling that the baby girl is an enemy who prevents him from any social acceptance. Indeed, when the husband Louis sees the baby girl, he looks at his wife like she really is “crazy”. He also looks at the baby like she is “from the planet Jupiter” (4). In effect, the woman’s desperate condition is transparent through her description of the man : “...when she [the baby girl] was born he blamed and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger – more than that, an enemy” (GHC, 5).

The woman accuses her grandmother who has never accepted to be categorized as black. But her reaction is similar in meanings to that of the old woman who has rejected her own mother and aunts : “You should’ve seen my grandmother, she passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or my aunts she sent right back, unopened. Finally, they got the message of no message and let her be” (3). The allusion to her grandmother is eloquent enough : the woman confesses her repulsion of her own black race. Like the baby girl’s parents and the grandmother in the past, Black people likely participate in the constructs of race, even after Emancipation.

Like the grandmother’s attitude in the past, the husband and his wife unwillingly tend to perpetuate the history of black bondage. They give the impression of being shaped in the mold of slavery, the vestiges of which marked and still mark their existence. The birth of their baby with a “terrible color” (5), according to the father’s opinion, suggests that lighter blackness tends to be accepted, because of its resemblance with the white norm. According to Delphine Gras who reads the novel *God Help the Child* that often suggests references to the history of slavery, “The maimed bodies of African American males and females that fill the pages of Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* remind us that the legacy of slavery still affects African American bodies” (“Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*,” 2016 : 1). Gras’ argument concentrates on the baby girl’s body that helps “shatter the myth of a post-racial America” (ibid). In other words, the parents’ depictions of the “terrible color” and reaction to their new born baby are evidence that the community in the fiction has not crossed the colorline built during the period of slavery.

It can be inferred from the story of the birth of Bride or Lula Ann that the memory of slavery still lays under the black skin color. The attitudes of her parents who reject her resonate as unspeakable desires of passing, just like the woman's own mother in the past: "My own mother, Lula Mae, could have passed easy, but she chose not to. She told me the price she paid for that decision" (3 - 4). The past, indeed, comes out on the surface and dives these parents into the painful memory of slavery. If Bride's "color is a cross she will always carry" (7), the husband and his wife also carry the cross of slavery, when they abandon their offspring. The woman remembers that at slavery time, there were two Bibles in the courthouse where wedding was celebrated. Black people put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes. The other one was for the white people's hands" (4). Bride's parents interpret the blackness of their daughter as one that causes them to return to that past, hence their hateful attitude to the baby girl. They quite blame their daughter whose skin cannot hide the black color in her veins, while some "white folks have Negro blood running and hiding in their veins"(3). The father's observation means that he wishes his daughter could hide the shameful color. In turn, he notes that his daughter Bride shows to a higher degree the racial categorization that causes them to step backward in the past during bondage.

The analysis of the girl's outstanding blackness proposed by Yan Ma and Liu Li-hui in their critical essay sounds quite pertinent, when they write that "The pain of being black is right under the skin" (Yan Ma & Liu Li-hui, 18). Also relevant is the reading suggested by Mar Gallego who writes that "Bride's narration discloses the complexities that emerge in the struggle to come to terms with the past in the context of a racialized and gendered identity and, ultimately, to envision a better future"(Gallego, 313). On the one hand, Bride's skin color is analyzed as a dramatic situation for the parents and the girl. On the other hand, it concentrates on the parents who dream of another social condition when they believe they can successfully merge into the citizenship designed by the white. Although different in their perspectives of blackness, the two readings envisage blackness as a vestige of slavery they try to forget, and a past they dislike being connected with. Nonetheless, the story in the novel emphasizes another attitude of the girl : when gets adulthood, she challenges the race constructs erected by white people, and are still dormant in his parents's veins.

2. The Black American Woman Challenging Race Constructs

The story in Morrison's *God Help the Child* discloses two types of challenges. The first type is the one the parents face at the birth of their baby girl Bride. The nuclear family in which

she was born, that is, her father and mother, reflects the black community. On the model of Harlem that hosted in the twentieth century black populations who fought for the birth of the New Negro, the Blacks in the novel group themselves “according to skin color...in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools”(4). In the parents’ neighborhood, “the lighter [color], the better” (*ibid*). In other words, the social context in which Bride was born is that of these color-based communities or neighborhoods. The skin color becomes the criterion that creates communities, and determines in the same proportion people’s memberships to specific groups.

Bride’s strange color is said to be the reason why the black community takes its distance from her parents. The reaction of the entire society dominated by white people is similar to that of black neighborhoods. As a consequence, the father does not feel any enthusiasm when he sees his daughter. The family, he believes, is now in “trouble” (5). Definitely, the girl’s parents abandon her, because they are unable to meet the challenge of racial differences and categorizations, especially when their baby has been born. The girl also abandons the name Lula Ann and becomes Bride as a response to the failure of her mother Sweetness who is unable to provide maternal protection to her baby (31). But, whether she is called Lula Ann, or Bride, she faces her first challenge at home : the household proves a circle that cannot protect, nor support the girl. When she grows up, she faces her second challenge at home when she is abandoned by her man (8). The black female protagonist’s skin color appears to be the common reason why she is abandoned. It is her “tar”(3) skin color that embarrasses not only the father(4), but also the mother and the man she loves.

Bride’s mother justifies that the race-based communities help Black people preserve their dignity. Some wealthy Whites, who hire Black servants, have indecent attitudes to their colored workers, especially female black maids. If such race-based subcommunities are spaces for the preservation of black dignity, according to the woman, they also turn to be in the long run spaces for social and even economic compartmentalizations. Associations, neighborhoods, churches, female gatherings, and schools accept memberships that correspond to the racial requirements established in each group. The girl’s mother adds that the lighter black skin color is considered to be the better. By these terms, she means that the spaces for socialization, religious worships, and education also participate in the construction of race. To this end, black “social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, ” and ”schools” certainly preserve the dignity of colored people. But these spaces give form to race constructs.

In this context, the task for the baby Lula Ann and the teenage and adult Bride gets even more tougher, because her terrible color is source of embarrassment and exclusion. The challenge for the black female character is to live in her community and make her way. The mother has tried to give a help by providing her daughter some pieces of advice. Indeed, acting like an adult who has perfect knowledge of the society they live in, the mother foresees the challenge her girl can face when she becomes an adult. The mother who speaks to the unconscious of her baby girl recommends the latter to behave carefully, and be “be strict, very strict.” In addition, when her daughter grows, she will need “to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not make trouble” (7).

Nonetheless, Bride’s reaction to any unpleasant observation about her skin color sounds like an opposition to the mother’s recommendations and pieces of advice. Instead of adopting a submissive posture that can mean being ashamed of her skin color, she makes the decision to have an opinion of her own about herself. Proudly, she puts the following question: “I can’t have thoughts of my own ? ” (8) This question expresses an impressive and authoritative response to race constructs and anti-Black ideology, one that Mar Gallego calls “racist dominant ideology” (Gallego, 307). The question is likely the answer to her mother’s concern when she has to go outside home with her tar-skin baby : “How else can you avoid being spit on in a drugstore, showing elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, charged a nickel at the grocer’s for a paper bag that’s free to white shoppers?”(4) If the woman constantly feels humiliated due to the baby she carries, the daughter shows her mother the way she should behave. She refuses to act carefully, and stay in the place she is attributed by the community. Contrastively, she affirms her own identity. Thus, Bride’s question resonates as an answer to people who look at her as a strange black lady whose color is not “lighter.” Like a premonition, her name Lula Ann is given after her grandmother Lula Mae. The latter is said to have been proud of her skin color, in that she has refused to pass (7). Similarly, the baby Lula Ann who grows up and become Bride refuses to pass. “Bride’s body is textually foregrounded as the privileged site for the construction of her identity”, the critic Paula Martin-Salvan notes.

For Bride, the identity construction equates with challenging race constructs that exist not only in the white dominant society, but also within the black community. On the one hand, the novel implies that the society considers white skin as the norm. The practice of passing, for instance, illustrates that the white skin identity is the desire of some black characters. Sweetness, the protagonist’s mother, views the white color as one that opens up the doors to

social integration. As a result, she reports that her grandmother who has passed for white has cut off the link with her own parents, children and relatives (3). Although Sweetness does not pass for white, she believes that her baby with tar skin color can possibly cause trouble, in such a way that she cannot avoid the mockery of people in public places (4). Thus, the woman means that being black is source of devaluation in the fictional community.

On the other hand, within their community, Blacks are categorized according to the nuance of their respective skin colors. The lighter, the better is the formula used by Sweetness (4). In this sense, the lighter skin color is similar to a ‘biological passing’ that bestows some privileges upon the lighter-skin Black. Bride who is not given the privilege of a light skin, does not pass for white. Instead, as critic Delphine Gras notes, the figure of this female character helps define the novel: “*God Help the Child...* disarticulates racial categories, exposing them as detrimental social constructs that still dictate the ways Black female bodies are perceived and treated to this day” (Gras, 2). This disarticulation of racial categories achieved by Bride emphasize her desire to challenge race constructs. To paraphrase Michael Omi and Howard Winan who define the Civil Rights movement as black militancy that “confronted not only the state but the nation itself – “the American people.” (Michael Omi and Howard Winan 2015 : 185), Bride confronts not only the race-based community but also the people who devalue her blackness. Proportionally, she tends to design what Alain Locke phrases as “the Negro soul” (Locke, 23). Like the New Negro, Bride’s posture is the “rehabilitation” of the black race (Locke, 15). This rehabilitation comes into being when she refuses to use any cosmetic product she sells. Thus, while people laugh at her blackness, she also ridicules the norms of beauty designed by the society:

I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available...I built up immunity so tough that not being a ‘nigger girl’ was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don’t need silicon in my butt. (57)

From her perspective, the cosmetics are not merely products to ameliorate the beauty of the skin ; they are instrumental to the construction of race, to the extent that the complexion of the skin is transformed. This transformation, Bride likely believes, equates with creating a skin color that conforms to the race constructs. Her refusal reads, in this sense, as a form of challenge to such constructs. In the same way, she ridicules racial norms to affirm her own identity. This identity adds to her achievements in business that help shape the soul of the New Negro she tries to embody.

3. Shaping the New Negro through Business

In his description of the concept of the New Negro, Alain Locke insists on the Black's efforts to enter American citizenship through "artistic achievements and cultural contributions, past and prospective" (Locke, 15). Also connecting the concept with the notion of citizenship, Charles Johnson writes that "American Negroes in the 1920's were just a little more than a half century on their rugged course to citizenship" (Johnson 2004 : 167). The added value to black citizenship is operated by the female protagonist in the novel *God Help the Child*. The period of Harlem Renaissance that gave rise to the concept of the New Negro was certainly one of the glorious facts in the history of the black race. As Locke describes black creative arts, it was also a significant challenge. Quite similarly, the story of Bride is one that consists in transforming obstacles into opportunities.

The obstacles are expressed by Bride's skin color that embarrasses her mother (4), other people alike. First, her birth causes the dislocation of the family, when her father leaves the home, and her mother fails to be supportive and protective. In addition, she can hardly enjoy a permanent conjugal relationship, because she is not the woman men want (8). Nonetheless, like the vigor in her voice when she replies that her lover is not the man she wants, Bride's way to success is characterized by strong commitment. She begins as a "regional manager at Sylvia, Inc., a small cosmetics business" (10). Noticeably, entering the company as an employee means for her investigating the business world.

Another phase of Bride's story begins in the same way, when she leads a crew in the company. She has to "maintain the right relationship with the crew", she affirms her sense of leadership ((10). Bride's skin color tends to exclude her from the norms of beauty in her community. But, she frames her own identity when she works hard and become the chief of a crew in her company. She is not merely a worker, but also a black woman who succeeds in operating a "transgressive identity" (Kouadio 2025: 12). Kouadio holds that a "transgressive identity" is one that "opposes the commonly accepted aspirations of a given community" (ibid).

The community expects her to use cosmetics to cover what people consider to be as the imperfections of her body. She does not resort to any of these beauty-making artifacts at the market place. Her efforts, instead, are concentrated on changing obstacles into opportunities in business. As a result, she enters, it can be argued, the canon of citizenship. From then on, it is not her color that captivates people, but her sense of leadership and her commitments in her company. Next, as a thriving business woman, she hires other people to whom she helps

guarantee social stability and family life. She equally helps build the economic progress of her community. To paraphrase, the Harlem Renaissance poet, Langston Hughes in the verse “I, too”, Bride too, sings her country.

Her singing that sounds as a consistent contribution to the building of her community, is heard in the description of her personal life and her commitments to society. She sings, when she exposes her successful life: she has “money and a crotch” (8), a “beautiful Jaguar” (12) and a driver (51). She feels proud of her achievements, a sentiment that is echoed through a monologue when she is in her bedroom: “Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion, I couldn’t help smiling at the lipstick smile on my wineglass, thinking, ‘How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful ?’” (11) As a space for intropection, the bedroom offers her the possibility to evaluate her own efforts, her achievements and her future plans in the domain of business identified as being competitive and challenging. She equally considers her sucessful achievements as a form of revenge on her own destiny, owing to the exclusion of which she has been victim. Proportionally to this phase of her life during which she has been in a state of vulnerability, she expresses her pride in the following terms : “I have what I’ve worked for and am good at it ” (53). Indeed, she has what she has worked for, and she is who she desires to be. Illustratively, of the “six cool cosmetics lines”, one is Bride’s property (10).

Bride’s outstanding success is certainly the result of a double talent. At work in when she has been an employee, and in the small cosmetics business Sylvia, Inc., she actively contributes to the blossoming of the company that makes “waves” (10). Her talent is even more shining when she decides to invent her own line of cosmetics named “YOU GIRL : Cosmetics for Your Personal Millenium” (50). Symbollically, part of the name of the line, Your Personal Millenium suggests designing society in which girls and women have a command of their time. Having one’s own thoughts and deciding on what is good for oneself are what Bride qualifies as “successful” life (53). If her success is visible in business, it is also noticeable through her choice to live according to her own thoughts about her body. In this sense, Bride’s prosperity in business parallels her capacity to make decisions regardless of public opinions.

That double success is symbolized by her double quality as a worker for the cosmetics business Sylvia, Inc., and as a talented black woman who has invented a line of cosmetics. The novel shows that the two positions held by Bride are not divergent ; they are complementary. She still works in the company that hires her. Her mother Sweetness states her daughter has “a big-time job in California”(43). In a parallel way, she runs her own business “YOU GIRL :

Cosmetics for Your Personal Millenium.” Being simultaneously an employee and an employer helps qualify the protagonist as an impressive woman. She is impressive not by trying to dominate other people, but setting black citizenship in the frame of black leadership and entrepreneurship. That is how Bride ensures her own rebirth in the novel.

Conclusion

Two facts help describe the female protagonist Bride. On the one hand, she refuses to use cosmetics and cover the unpleasant traits of her skin color that people judge ugly and embarrassing. On the other hand, she invents her own line of cosmetics. These two facts are different only on the surface. A closer analysis enables to show how they are similar as to the values of the New Negro in the novel. The impressive figure of female black protagonist suggests that the concept means finding one’s proper way, and giving sense to the black citizenship in the national context. In the novel, Bride is a name chosen by Lula Ann to affirm an identity and a citizenship not given by other people. Like the Negro renaissance, her name resonates as a rebirth that shapes another norm of beauty and a way to black citizenship, which takes form through individual achievements.

The conditions in which a person is not that much important to determine their life trajectory. What matters is how the person transforms the conditions of their birth, the social and economic landscape that shape their lives in order to be the person they wish to become. To be or not to be, that’s the question. The Harlem Renaissance in the twenties was, for Black people, not only a movement, but also a period of questioning who they wished to be. Likewise, the black female protagonist in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* echoes the same question to be, or not to be. The context is different, but the echo of the spirit of the New Negro that calls the black character in the novel is identical. Definitely, the story in *God Help the Child* can be used as a metaphor of the black race that challenges history, and gain a new identity in the writing of history.

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