

# Unpacking the Cultural Politics of Race and Ideology in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

Dolly Ningthoujam

## Abstract

Amidst the landscape of post- disciplinary thoughts, African- Americans continue to face racism, which had evolved and adapted to work under the guise of dominant cultural ideology. This ideology, seemingly innocent and operating freely in the domain of the lived culture, perpetuates racial stereotypes and reinforces further domination by the dominant culture consciously and unconsciously. Breaking free from the shackles of racism and misrepresentation necessitates examining the subtle mechanisms by which the oppressive cultural ideology operates in multiple, often insidious ways. The perpetuation of racial oppression is furthered by the culture industry's representation of the non- whites, which serves the interests of the few business corporations and the ruling class. The culture industry's supposed claim of 'inclusivity' rather leads to the commodification and objectification of non- white bodies, thus subsuming the minorities' identities and cultural practices in the mainstream culture. This study aims to examine the complex interplay of ideology, culture and race in the subjugation of the Black women, through transformative journey of the protagonist, Bride. The study also investigates how Bride's confrontation with the traumatic past, marked by the troubled history of sexism and racism, ultimately leads to her discovery of an authentic self. Her liberating journey serves as an allegory for all oppressed non- white bodies.

**Keywords:** Culture; Culture industry; Dominant practices; Identity; Ideology; Objectification; Race commodification; Toni Morrison.

## Introduction

The legacy of slavery and racism is a persistent and pervasive force that continues to influence and shape our society till today. The effects of slavery with its historical injustices and discriminatory practices have left

an indelible mark in our institutions, culture and individual lives. Toni Morrison's oeuvre have intricately explored the complex and enduring legacy of slavery that continues to impact the African- American from the Middle Passage till the present day. Despite the introduction of numerous landmark emancipatory bills and rights, for the protection of Black identities and Black culture, racism has evolved and adapted, persisting in the various apparatuses of ideology and cultural institutions. The issues of racism may be seemingly irrelevant in today's post modern society amidst the proliferation of post- disciplinary thoughts because Ideology has subsumed and masked racism, perpetuating and reinforcing the mainstream culture's oppression of minorities yet effacing its traces subtly. This legacy is poignantly reflected in Toni Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015) through the nuanced and complex experiences of the characters.

The novel focuses on the life of Bride, an African -American young woman who faces racial discrimination because of her "Midnight black, Sudanese Black"(Morrison1)skin. However, as Bride matures, she leverages her physical appearance to secure acceptance and validation within the dominant culture. Maintaining her position as a regional manager at Sylvia.Inc, Bride's life seems complete with the attentions of her boyfriend. However, with Booker's sudden disappearance, her world begins to crumble. As she struggles to cope with this emotional breakdown, the traumatic experiences of her miserable, loveless childhood resurface. As Bride embarks on her journey to confront Booker, she undergoes a profound physical and mental catharsis. This necessitates confrontation with her past and making amends with it. The superficial commodified identity she adopted to fit in within the dominant culture gradually wears down. Her encounter with Rain, a survivor of sexual trafficking, awakens her self. Rain serves as a mirror to Bride's own experiences, as she openly confronts her traumatic childhood, while Bride has suppressed hers. Ultimately, her journey to Whiskey Village culminates in a triumphant confrontation with Booker .Bride ,having consolidated enough confidence through the support and guidance of Queen Booker's aunt, boldly confronts him and demands respect. She then undergoes a final, liberating catharsis. While rescuing Queen who was engulfed in flames, Bride discovers her authentic self – a body no longer treated as a commodity within the white cultural ideology.

## **Literature Review**

In "Polyphony of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*" (2016, Jiyan Zayed and Shaista Maeah analysed the novel by drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's

concept of dialogism. They focused on Morrison's narrative structure and the diverse voices that collectively shaped the narrative. They also argued that the novel's varied perspectives illustrated the subjective, relational nature of truth and thus characters could "speak their own version of reality without stamping it into the ultimate one" (2016). In "'Childhood is not a story' to pass on": Trauma and Memory Paradox" in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, Soumya Bouacida examined how the novel explored the dynamic tension between remembering and forgetting the past. Her analysis highlighted the importance of confronting past experiences, demonstrating how Bride's complete healing was facilitated by her confrontation with her past memories.

In another research article on the novel, titled "Space and the Commodification of Difference in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*", Roumaissa Silini and Ahmad Majdoubah employed Henry Lefebvre's spatial theory to examine the novel. Their analysis revealed how American society perpetuated spatial homogenization through the exploitation of cultural differences. Furthermore, the study explored America's spatial hegemony to dominate spatial narrative and the resultant struggle of the Blacks to assert identities in these contested spaces.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Scholarly inquiry into the ideology and cultural politics of race representation in Toni Morrison's oeuvre is limited and more remarkably absent in analyses of her final work, *God Help the Child*. This essay aims to investigate the intersection of ideology and cultural industry in the representation of the Black race that often creates deformed Black identities and commodification of Black female bodies. The investigation examines to uncover the mechanisms through which dominant ideologies and the culture industry reassert existing power dynamics, stereotypes and marginalisations. The study draws on some specific excerpts from the Adorno and Horkheimer's book *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Louis Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" and Bell Hooks' *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. In his essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus", Althusser states "Ideology has material existence" (165). Ideology is not only a representative of the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real condition of existence but as a lived, material practice. According to this definition, ideology turns individuals into 'consenting individuals' through the act of interpellation. Thus, ideology is a material practice that creates subjects, imposing its distinct thought patterns and behavioral norms. Ideology precedes individuals and resides in various

apparatuses – education, organised religion, family, the media, the culture industry, the organised politics etc (Althusser 170-174). These Ideological State Apparatuses work to naturalise and justify the existing social order often obscuring the underlying power dynamics and contradictions. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison presents Sweetness as a character who has internalised the white supremacist ideology. She considers her daughter Bride, born “blue- black” as a disgrace and even contemplated killing her. The family’s internalised racism is so profound that Bride’s birth led to the divorce of her parents who are relatively light- skinned with more Eurocentric features.

Althusser’s concept of ideology has had a profound influence on cultural studies, particularly in understanding the dynamics of the “culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1973). The culture industry was initially a bastion of liberalism, espousing new ideas, creativity and free thinking. However, it has become concentrated and totalitarian, transforming individuals into passive consumers. This industry, dominated and controlled by the business corporates and the ruling class, reinforces dominant ideologies that oppress the marginalized manipulatively. Thus, the culture industry consolidates socialism norms, becomes a mechanism for mass control and limits the potential for a radical change. This further led to the contention that even if diverse ideas or representations, including emerging ideologies are granted entry into the cultural industry, they are subsumed and assimilated in such a way that confirms and subscribes to the existing norms, rather than challenging or subverting them. As a result, the Black and the non- whites bodies, historically marginalised and denied representation in the culture industry including media, fashion, television shows, advertisements etc are ensured success only if they subscribe to the existing power structures and exploitation. However, this exploitation is masked under the pretense of inclusivity. While the culture industry voices celebrating and embracing diversity, in reality it serves the same masters. These forms of misrepresentation include the objectification and commodification of non - white bodies, a phenomenon poignantly critiqued in Bell Hooks’ seminal work *Black Looks: Race and Representation*.

This misrepresentation reduces black bodies to mere objects of desire, consumption and spectacle. In *God Help the Child*, Bride underwent a series of interviews at Sylvia.Inc for a sales position, and was ultimately hired after taking the advice of Jeri, a self-proclaimed ‘total person’ to wear only white. This stylistic choice accentuates her black skin against the white clothing, contrasting blackness with whiteness. However this deliberate

emphasis in her blackness was also a subtle nod to the dominant whiteness that often seeks to erase and suppress any assertion of black power and identity.

### Critical Context

Within a dominant culture, ideology reproduces and reinscribes the interests of the ruling class. Culture and Ideology are almost used interchangeably since both share the same conceptual landscape and are used as tools to reinforce existing power dynamics. Inhabiting the lived white culture, Sweetness, Bride's mother who has assimilated the white racist ideology of black skin inferiority reacts to Bride's birth with dismay. She says "Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison 1). When Bride's father's discovers her dark skin, he reacted with outrage and suspicion, accusing Sweetness of infidelity and promptly abandons them. Sweetness' inculcated beliefs are a result of her conditioning in a society that inherently oppresses the Blacks. Her parents were forced to use separate Bibles at the courthouse, one designated for the Negroes and the other for the Whites. Despite encountering such discriminatory practices, they choose to conform to the prevailing white cultural norms as "neither one would let themselves drink from a colored only' fountain even if they were dying of thirst" (Morrison 4). This highlights how religion as an apparatus of ideology consolidates the white cultural ideology. Sweetness' parents were interpellated to internalize racism, conditioning them into consenting subjects and the reward for consent lies in access to exclusive public places. Bride grows up craving maternal love and acceptance, experiencing 'Skin Hunger' as evident in the following passage that Bride says of her mother while Sweetness bathes her:

"Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me actually after a half hearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch-I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated- bed without supper, lock me in my room" (Morrison 31) .

Sweetness passes her internalised shame and self-hatred to her daughter, Bride. She believes her strict parenting is necessary to prepare Bride for the harsh realities of a white dominated society. Survival with the white culture entails assimilation or subordination; resistance proves futile and ensures no success. Sweetness believes that conformity is the only way to

avoid trouble and achieve acceptance. She believes that policing Bride will prevent her victimization, necessitated by a world where "you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in a school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired" (Morrison 40). After witnessing the harassment of a young Black girl by white boys, Sweetness rationalizes her strict parenting approach as essential to educating Lula Ann about "Skin privileges" (43). According to Althusser, ideology dispels contradictions in lived experience by offering seemingly true but false solutions. The solution for Sweetness to navigate within the lived white culture is inculcating the white ideology of Black submissiveness. This ideology reinforces the notion of Black docility, rather than standing up to defend oneself. Sweetness' pride in her daughter's accomplishments is apparent in her assertion "Some of my schooling must have rubbed off" (Morrison 177). She also alerts readers to the challenges of a Black mother in a racist society.

Bride, having succeeded in the cosmetic industry, after the commodification and adoption of a superficial identity, reduces human relationships to materialistic comparisons. She keeps comparing her romantic relationship to idealized magazine spreads and music saying "it was nothing like those double page spreads in fashion magazines" and "our affair didn't even measure up to any old R & B song" (Morrison 4). In their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the chapter "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", Adorno and Horkheimer critiques the culture industry's attempts to merge the reality and the screen, creating a deceptive seamless experience. Horkheimer and Adorno posit "The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry" and continue "The more densely and completely its techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it creates the illusion that the world is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema" (99). Thus, the culture industry distorts Bride's view of reality. They continue that the culture industry like movies, TV, magazines, music shapes our perceptions of the world. The industry ability to recreate familiar worlds can lead to passive acceptance of the status quo. To gain acceptance into the cosmetic industry, Bride following Jeri's advice prefers white clothing only "only white and all white all the time" (Morrison 33). As stated earlier, this deliberate emphasis on her blackness, by contrasting her Midnight black skin against white, is a subtle nod to the industry's desire to erase and suppress Black power and identity. Jeri, calling himself a 'total person' reduces Bride to edible terms evident in the way he describes her "You are more Hershey's syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate souffle every time they see you" (Morrison 33). She, thus, becomes

an edible commodity bounds to the demands of the market. This industry, driven by the corporate interests and dominated by the ruling class, thus becomes an apparatus to reinforce the existing power dynamics and ensures the docility of the Black bodies. Jeri's assertion "Black sells. It's hottest commodity in the civilized world" (Morrison 36) reinforces his view of Black people as commodities rather than individuals. The commodification of Black bodies for financial gain is a manifestation of the insidious nature of commodity culture. The cosmetic industry's prioritization of physical appearance reinforces this culture, wherein individuals are valued for their market appeal rather than their inherent worth.

In her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Bell Hooks argues that the "while cultural shift enables the Black women's bodies to be represented in previous exclusive magazines like the high fashion magazines, they are reinscribed as spectacle rather than documenting the beauty of black skin, of black bodies" (71). The inclusivity of Black women had an insidious reason behind, as Hooks claims "They are represented so that the readers will notice that the magazine is racially inclusive even though their features are often distorted, their bodies contorted into strange and bizarre postures that make the images appear monstrous or grotesque" (71). Jeri in calling Bride "a black panther in snow" dehumanises her by associating her with animalistic qualities. He, thus, reinforces harmful stereotypes that reduce her to an exoticised and marginalized Other.

In her desperation to gain maternal affection and acceptance, Bride as a child, falsely accused her former kindergarten teacher, Sophia, of molestation, thereby perpetuating a harmful transference of victimhood. For the first time, Sweetness held her daughter's hand with pride and enjoyed societal acceptance. Following Sophia's release, Bride attempted to amend their relationship through material gestures, such as "the gift package of You Girl", "two envelopes – the slim one with the airline gift ticket then the fat one with five thousand dollars" (Morrison 20). Notably, the five thousand dollars was an estimate of "about two hundred dollars for each year if she had served her full sentence" (20). This demonstrates her limited understanding of love, reparation, and the capitalisation of emotions, mirroring the cosmetic industry's exploitation. Sophia vents her deep-seated anguish and torment, which she has accumulated over the last fifteen years by brutally beating her. Both victimized women bear mark of oppression. Foucault regards the body as "the object and target of power" (136), Bride and Sophia's bodies become the sites where power is exercised and controlled, Bride's body is disciplined through commodification of beauty culture and Sophia's body confined and punished through



incarceration. Sophia, once a dynamic kindergarten teacher, bears little resemblance to her former self "thin as rope, size 1 panties, an A- cup bra if any" (Morrison 16). Rather than focusing on the pain Sophia has endured, Bride thinks the commodities like Glam Glo, Formalise Wrinkles Softener, Juicy Bronze, Botox and Tango Matte lipstick can erase the traces of trauma. This underscores Bride's perception shaped by superficial relations. Just like the cosmetic industry fixes her identity, Bride believes the same would erase traces of trauma. Experiencing a lifetime rejection, Bride does not have an authentic sense of self. Gaining entry into the previously exclusive cosmetic industry which gives her subsequent financial success and public acceptance, Bride invested deep faith in the redemptive potential of the consumer culture. According to Martins Sturkenn and Lisa Cartwright's analysis of commodity culture, "it has been argued that people derived their sense of their place in the world and their self-image at least in part through their purchase and use of commodities which seemed to give meaning to their lives in the absence of the meaning derived from the closer-knit community" (193). Thus, Bride lives a commodity driven existence.

### **Journey to Reclaim Identity**

The brutal beating at Sophia's hands leaves her face disfigured. It is during this recovery phase that her traumatic past begins to resurface. She discovers the lack of meaning in her life despite financial success and decides to seek out Booker to confront him for his sudden disappearance. This marks the beginning of her journey towards self discovery and liberation from the oppressive beauty standards and the cultural impositions that have defined her life. En route to Whiskey, a car accident leads her to seek refuge with Steve and Evelyn, a couple living a simple, non- materialistic life outside of civilization. Their love and non- materialistic approach to life serves as a foil to Bride's culture- driven existence. Her encounter with Rain, a survivor of sexual trafficking perpetuated by her own mother and later adopted by Steve and Evelyn, awakens her to the harsh realities of trauma and the importance of confronting one's past. Rain serves as a mirror to Bride's own experiences, as she openly confronts her traumatic childhood while Bride has buried hers and masked with a superficial identity. In a powerful act of selflessness, Bride defends Rain with her own body when a group of racists attacked Rain, thus experiencing the profound meaning of unconditional love. Rain also symbolises the cleansing of the body from the corrupting influence of materialism. Astonishingly, Bride undergoes a profound physical catharsis as she regresses back to that of a girl, characterized by loss of feminine traits, as evident in the de-



scriptions "how flat the Tshirt hung on her chest" and "she was changing back into a little girl" (Morrison 97). Through this metamorphosis, Bride's body once a site of oppression and control, undergoes change to resist and reassert her identity, free from the shackles of commodification. As Bride navigated the journey to Whiskey village, she is not only cleansing her body but negotiating the ideology that has stifled her existence. This final rite of passage prepares her to exorcise the ghosts of her past and reclaim her identity. Whiskey village represents the liberated space for the Black people, a negotiating ground for power dynamics and a foil to the materialistic city life. Her encounter with Queen, Booker's aunt marks a significant turning point. Queen seems unbothered by her beauty as she does not appreciate Bride. Bride says "for the past three years, she'd only been told how exotic, how gorgeous, she was everywhere from almost everybody's – stunning, dreamy, hot, wow!" (Morrison 144).

Through Queen, Bride gets the unconditional acceptance and maternal love she had been longing since her birth. Queen strengthens her confidence to confront Booker. Although Li's analysis primarily centers in *Desdemona*, her exploration of Morrison's concept of "Rootedness: The Ancestors as Foundation" also applies to Queen as an ancestral figure common in Morrison's stories. Initially, she is apprehensive about meeting Booker, for she had "counted in looks for so long, how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness or her cowardly- the vital lesson Sweetness taught and nailed to her spine to curve it" (Morrison 152). Confronting Booker and addressing her traumatic past marks a symbolic rebirth for Bride. She claims "having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly birth" (Morrison 161). The changing of names from Lula Ann to Luna Ann Bridewell and finally to Bride symbolises her journey towards self discovery. The act of rescuing Queen from the flames represents her second experience of selfless love and marks the completion of her physical and emotional catharsis. Fire metaphorically purges her sins and forges her authentic identity free from the shackles of cosmetic industry, an identity that asserts Black power, untainted by the pervasive white ideology. Significantly, her body transforms back to its original state, symbolising her full embrace of her true self. The novel culminates with Bride's announcement of her pregnancy. Bride and Booker look forward to a new beginning as they envisage "A child. New Life .Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, hurt, self- loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus Wrath" (Morrison 175).

## Conclusion

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison masterfully exposes the intricate web of ideology, culture and race that perpetuates the oppression of Black people. Racism has been debunked as a myth of the past, yet it persists in insidious forms, embedded in the state apparatuses and cultural institutions. These power structures reinforce white supremacy, indoctrinating the oppressed with internalised inferiority and Otherness. The novel highlights how these institutions suppress the potential of the marginalized individuals to challenge the status quo. Bride's empowering journey serves as a powerful allegory for the struggles and triumphs of racially oppressed communities, as they navigate the interconnected forces of patriarchy, racism and colonialism. Bride's journey confirms Foucault's assertion of the body as "the object and site of power" (136), emphasizing the need to resist the docility and commodification of Black bodies perpetuated by white discursive practices. The novel calls for dismantling these entrenched systems of oppression that have historically silenced and erased Black voices.

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