

THE SHIFTING PERSPECTIVE ON BEAUTY IN MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to describe the shifting perspective of African-American society on black women's beauty in the end 20th century up to the early 21st century in Morrison's *God Help the Child*, to reveal the background of the shift reflected in the work, and to explain Morrison's view in the novel.

This study is qualitative in nature. The source of the data is Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*. The data are words, sentences, paragraphs, and expressions relating to the African-American society's perspective on black women's beauty in the novel. This study was conducted by following some steps: reading and rereading the novel, collecting and categorizing the data, interpreting and describing the data.

This study has three findings. Firstly, in the last decade of twentieth century, the Whites' standard of beauty still dominated the African-American society. Darker tone of black skin was considered the absence of beauty. However, the African-American society of the 21st century celebrates the quality of beauty possessed by black women. Secondly, the shift of the perspective is due to the social dynamics that influence the African Americans in viewing themselves. Thirdly, Morrison underlines that black women's distinctive qualities of beauty can be an alternative standard of beauty reflecting Afrocentricity and the African Americans' self-respect.

Keywords: beauty, Morrison, novel, African-American

INTRODUCTION

Beauty shows the quality that a woman has and makes her look attractive. Beauty standard is not always the same in all societies. It can also change. What is considered beautiful in one society may be not in another. What is regarded extraordinary today may turn to ordinary in the future. In fact, beauty standard is dynamic. Skin color is one of the indicators often used to judge someone's beauty. Light skin, for example, is often regarded more beautiful than dark skin. Light skin is sometimes also considered to have higher value than the dark skin.

Beauty and skin color are the issues interestingly discussed in Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*. An African-American husband and his wife are shocked to see their baby girl, named Lula Ann, because of her blue black skin. Even, the baby's dark skin color destroys the happiness of the family since both have light tone of skin that is totally different from the baby's. Although the skin color has made Lula Ann in suffer, later she can prove that her dark skin is the quality that benefits her and leads her to success. The change from unwanted to admirable skin indicates that beauty standard is not fixed but fluid.

"I wonder if he is black as she is. If so, she needn't worry like I did. Things have changed a mite from when I was young. Blue blacks are

all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring movies” (Morrison, 2000: 176).

The statement of Sweetness or Lula Ann’s mother in *God Help the Child* reflects the shifting view of American society about skin color and the dynamics of social condition that influence the shift. As some critics say that in her works Morrison often shows her concern about the issues relating to African-American women’s beauty, Sweetness’ statement reflects the author’s concern. This study tries to reveal the changing idea of African-American women’s physical attractiveness especially their skin color depicted in the novel.

Method

This study is qualitative in nature. The source of the data is Morrison’s novel *God Help the Child*. The data collected from the novel are words, sentences, paragraphs, and expressions related to the issue focused in this research, i.e. the African-American society’s perspective on black women’s beauty in the novel. This study was conducted by following some steps: reading the novel, rereading the novel by paying attention to the details relevant to the issue emphasized in this study, collecting and categorizing the data, interpreting and describing the data.

The Shifting Perspective on Black Women’s Beauty in Morrison’s *God Help The Child*

One of the impacts of racism experienced by African-American people is being dominated with the Whites’ beauty standard. The domination reflects the superiority and inferiority. It is because the standard reflects qualities possessed by the Whites as the superior, but puts the Blacks in the opposite position as the inferior. Unlike African-American men, African-American women are heavily valued based on their physical attractiveness (Hill 2002: 79). In other words, for African-American women the demand for having physical attractiveness gives more burden to them. Collins (2000: 89) says “dealing with prevailing standard of beauty – particularly skin color, facial features, and hair texture – is one specific example of how controlling images derogate African-American women.” A Woman with white skin is considered more beautiful than the one with black skin. Blonde hair is regarded more attractive than dark one. The standard has influenced the African-Americans who then also have the same idea about beauty. Hill (2002: 77) says that “color stratification among African-Americans stem from the persistence of a deeply embedded racial paradigm that perceives character, merit, and prestige through distorting lens of color – that skin color is a diffuse status characteristic.”

In the novel Lula Ann’s or Bride’s blue black skin has made her hungry for her mother’s affection. Both Sweetness and her husband (Lula Ann’s parents) who are African-Americans with light skin color are disappointed with the dark skin of their daughter. Sweetness’ shocking expression after delivering the baby Lula Ann shows that it is difficult for her to accept her baby. She says

“I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies’, even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going

crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes” (Morrison, 2015: 5).

Sweetness knows that blue black skin is considered ugly and not acceptable in her society. People will be surprised to see how dark her daughter is. She is very embarrassed. That is her reason for asking Lula Ann to call her Sweetness instead of mama. Sweetness rarely touches Lula Ann and does not express affection to her. She creates certain distance to her own daughter.

Sweetness realizes that with that kind of skin color, her daughter’s life will be very difficult since she still finds racial discrimination in her society of the nineties.

“It was hard enough just being a colored woman – even a high-yellow one - Black in the nineties when Lula Ann was born, the law was against discriminating in who you could rent to, but not many landlords paid attention to it. They made up reasons to keep you out.” (Morrison, 2016: 6).

The insecure position of the black people she sees in her surroundings actually makes her worry about her daughter. Moreover, the story she gets from her mother who lived during segregation era strengthens the feeling. In other words, she feels more inferior with her daughter’s physical condition because the condition is far from the ideal standard of beauty that dominates the society. Blue black tone of skin refers to ugliness that can be an object of humiliation and mockery as experienced by Lula Ann.

“Just like later in school when other curses - with mysterious definition but clear meanings – were hissed or shouted at me. Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides, imitating zoo monkeys” (Morrison, 2015: 56)

The name-calling people often give to her in her childhood is racist because it relates to her physical condition as an African-American with blue black skin. With the absence of beauty, Sweetness knows that her daughter will have more difficult problems. That makes her very strict to Lula Ann so that she will be obedient and does not dare to make any problem. Unfortunately, Sweetness also contributes in creating problems that Lula Ann has to face. Her being strict, lack of affection and improper treatment make her only daughter in suffer.

Lula Ann realizes her own condition. Getting used to being treated badly by people, she grows to be a tough girl who does not easily give up. Her life changes after taking Jeri’s advice to change her appearance by exposing her original beauty, her blue black skin.

“You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time... Not only because of your name...but because of what it does to your licorice skin... And black is the new black... Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you... no makeup. Not even lipstick or eyeliner. None...No jewelry at all... Just you, girl. All sable and ice. A panther in snow. And with your body? And those wolverine eyes? Please!” (Morrison 2015: 33-34).

Jeri’s advice emphasizes the pride and quality of black beauty. Wearing white clothes without make up nor accessories exposes the beauty of her black skin. Her body that she should be proud of is the center of attention. She looks unique and special.

The advice works well. By exposing her original beauty, Bride gets much attention and her life changes. Her natural beauty is admired. Her career in a cosmetics company is also successful as she describes:

“Then walking down the hall toward the interviewer’s office, I could see the effect of I was having: wide admiring eyes, grins, and whispers: “Whoa!” “Oh baby.” In no time, I rocketed to regional manager” (Morrison 2015: 36).

It can be inferred that darker tone of skin color can be an alternative standard of beauty. Bride’s new black is unique and should not make anybody ashamed of it. Even, Sweetness does not even think how black Bride is since Bride knows how to use it. Sweetness’ thought about Bride’s skin has also changed. She can see the positive quality of her daughter’s skin, once she feels embarrassed. Such a dark tone of skin color can be acceptable in society.

The Social Dynamics of American Society in Morrison’s *God Help the Child*

Social dynamics indicate factors that influence social change. America is a big country with diversity of multiple races, culture, and ethnic groups. The diversity influences the interaction among people in the society. The influence brings about changes in the society, including society’s perspective.

As seen in the novel the setting is in the end of 20th century up to the early decade of 21st century. Both Sweetness and Bride explain that they both still experience racial discrimination, particularly in the end of 20th century, although officially it is forbidden. In her childhood Bride even becomes the object of mockery because of her dark tone of skin which is considered ugly. The Whites’ beauty standard that has influenced African-Americans makes them dominated by the principle. Thompson ((2006: 48) says:

...skin that was “too dark” was viewed as unattractive and belonging to the lower class... This pressure has brought the conscious impulse to lighten skin color... Light skin is seen as a valuable social resource allowing the individual to receive preferential treatment in a variety of situations....

Those who want to get light skin or “bleaching syndrome” (Thompson, 2006: 48) can use not only cosmetics, like bleaching lotion and cream, but also the progress of medicine and technology.

However, the appearance of famous African-American actresses, actors, singers, hosts, or models who have various tones of skin color in media establishes their existence and influences the society. The society becomes familiar with various tones of skin color. As described in the novel, Blue blacks are often seen, such as on TV, fashion magazines, commercials, even movies. People get used to seeing them. People can see that, like other skin colors, blue black also has attractiveness. The skin color has its own quality of beauty. People’s perspective on the dark tone of black skin color then shifts.

Such kind of social dynamics also influences African Americans in viewing themselves. Sweetness who once feels embarrassed because of her daughter’s dark complexion turns to admit that her daughter possesses distinctive beauty. Her black is different and new. With self-respect Bride also gains admiration and success that makes Sweetness proud of her.

Morrison's View about Black Women's Beauty

In *God Help the Child* Morrison proposes her idea of racial purity as an alternative of beauty. Her resistance to the dominating white standard of beauty is reflected in Bride's experience. Walther (1990: 775) says "Morrison has moved to redefine beauty out of the specular system and into racial authenticity." Bride proves genuineness. The contrast of color between her skin and her clothes has made her the center of attention. "See?... Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world..." (Morrison, 2015: 36). Jeri's statement shows that Bride's beauty is very noticeable and creates her success. She has moved from nobody to somebody.

The fact that finally Bride can celebrate her dark skin shows Afrocentricity. Afrocentrism or Afrocentricity refers to "a term referencing traditions of Black consciousness and racial solidarity" (Collins 2000: 21). The consciousness indicates a way of seeing from the Blacks' perspective. Afrocentricity is absolutely needed to improve African-American women's position from powerless to powerful, and from passive to active. It reflects the African-Americans' self-respect to see their real positive sides and qualities which once are ignored by the Whites. Having such a consciousness enables them to have self-respect which is important to see themselves with dignity. Morrison underlines Afrocentricity and self-respect. Both arouse confidence and improve the position of African-American women from object to subject, from nobody to somebody. Morrison confirms that blue black skin is not a shame, but pride.

CONCLUSION

God Help the Child depicts the shifting idea of African-Americans in viewing themselves. The domination of Whites' standard of beauty has made them inferior. They are not confident to value the dark tone of black skin. Yet, they finally gain self-confidence. They celebrate the qualities of their black beauty. The change is owing to the social dynamics that influence how they value themselves. Morrison tries to propose an alternative standard of beauty by presenting black women's typical qualities which reflect self-respect and Afrocentricity.

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