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# The Problematics of Race in Selected Writings of Toni Morrison

# Problematika rasy ve vybraných dílech Toni Morrison

**BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE**

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# Abstract

The objective of this thesis is to examine the major writings of Toni Morrison which addressed the issues of race and the outcomes of racial discrimination such as for instance dehumanization through slavery or destruction of identity. The works chosen are mostly Toni Morrison's later novels such as *Paradise*, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child*. Other crucial writings by Morrison concerned with the problematics of race are discussed as well. The analysis focuses on her oeuvre exploring black identity and experience (particularly the experience of African American women) in the United States as well as on the views on race and racial prejudices.

In the introduction, the construction of race and racism is discussed in the context of American history. The analysis of the most pivotal historical moments, such as the enactment of the hereditary slavery law of 1662 in Virginia or the civil rights movement in the 1960s, reveals various issues stemming from the institutionalised racial discrimination such as disenfranchisement, anti-miscegenation laws or racial segregation. The subsequent subchapters encompass the definition of race, highlighting a scientific discovery by Stephen Oppenheimer, which proves that all humans have one common birthplace in Africa. This research demonstrates that race is not a biological reality but a social construct. Lastly, it explains how racial hatred, assumed racial superiority and consecutive discrimination are criticised in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison.

The first chapter is focused on Morrison's portrayal of the devastating effects of racism and sexism in *Paradise*. The novel examines racism within an almost paradisiacal and utopian place of an all-black town called Ruby in rural Oklahoma and focuses especially on the black female experience as the majority of this novel is narrated by female characters. The strict ideology and patriarchism of Ruby seem to be endangered by women living in the nearby Convent, who are autonomous and live by their own rules, accepting everybody who comes there. The central act of *Paradise* is the deliberate and brutal slaughter of the Convent residents performed by Ruby's leaders. Nevertheless, the racially "pure" town fractures as a result of their actions. Morrison engages with the critical race theory and incorporates the element of "racelessness" in *Paradise* as the "race" of her characters is often not specified, even though it differs. The racial hatred between light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans in Ruby springs from the community's long and traumatic history and demonstrates that sterile isolation from the outside world is not the solution for black communities in the post-civil rights era.

The second chapter explores the early stages of the slave trade in the time of colonial America during the late 17th century. *A Mercy* is set in this historical period portraying the coexistence of slavery and white indentureship, which exposes a time when slavery was not yet racialised. This novel explores the roots of racism as well as the concepts of human freedom in the early days of America. Morrison gives a voice to all the marginalised characters undergoing slavery in *A Mercy*, even though they belong (sociologically) to many different races. Their lives and personal experiences are captured through various innovative narrative strategies such as non-linear narration, multiple narrative perspectives or discontinuity persistent throughout the whole novel. Morrison portrays a plethora of forms of enslavement in *A Mercy* to provide an in-depth exploration of the concept of slavery and subsequent racism.

*God Help the Child* represents Toni Morrison's last novel and explores how the sufferings of childhood can have long-term effects on the life of an adult and on the acceptance of one's identity. This novel depicts the tragic childhood of Bride, who is a victim of racial prejudice and discrimination due to her ebony skin tone. Bride experiences this discrimination not only from society as a whole, but also from her light-skinned mother. Nevertheless, Bride is able to make peace with her past and become successful in her career. Her transformation to an empowered woman is closely linked with the philosophy of black feminist theory, which celebrates the minds, bodies and consciousness of African American women. This chapter displays the detrimental effects of racism and a corrupted society by showing how they affect the most vulnerable members of our society: children.

All these later novels written by Toni Morrison use different strategies to present the abhorrent reality of racism and racial discrimination in our society. In the closing chapter of this thesis these strategies are compared and analysed in order to realise the similarities and differences in Toni Morrison's portrayal of race in her literary oeuvre. The theme of "rememory", making peace with traumatic past full of unspeakable events and the use of fragmented narration are only a few strategies that contribute to the unique presentation of slavery, racism and racial hatred in Toni Morrison's later novels. Morrison puts the social construction of race at the centre of her novels and examines its meaning and value in society. The significance of her novels in the examination of what race actually is and how it affects our society is apparent, especially in the context of recent events such as the Black Lives Matter movement or George Floyd protests in 2020. The fact that our society is still remarkably shaped by the concept of race highlights that we have not yet reached the post-racial era and therefore, the examination of race and racial injustice is of paramount importance.

# Abstrakt

Cílem této práce je prozkoumat nejznámější romány Toni Morrison, které se zabývají rasovou problematikou a důsledky rasové diskriminace, jako je například dehumanizace skrze otroctví nebo ztráta identity. Vybraná díla jsou většinou pozdější romány Toni Morrison. Jedná se o díla *Paradise*, *A Mercy* a *God Help the Child*. V této práci jsou probraná i další zásadní díla Morrison zabývající se problematikou rasy. Analýza se zaměřuje na její dílo zkoumající černošskou identitu a životní zkušenosti (zejména zkušenosti afroamerických žen) ve Spojených státech a také na názory týkající se rasy a rasových předsudků.

Úvod pojednává o konceptu rasy a rasismu v kontextu americké historie. Analýza klíčových historických momentů, jako je například přijetí dědičného otrockého zákona z roku 1662 ve Virginii nebo Afroamerické hnutí za občanská práva v šedesátých letech, odhaluje různé problémy vyplývající z institucionalizované rasové diskriminace. Jedná se o zbavení hlasovacího práva, zákony proti míšení ras nebo rasová segregace. Následující podkapitoly zahrnují definici rasy a zdůrazňují vědecký objev Stephena Oppenheimera, který poukazuje na to, že všichni lidé mají společnou kolébku v Africe. Tento výzkum ukazuje, že rasa není biologický koncept, ale sociální konstrukt. Nakonec je v úvodu vysvětleno, jak je v díle Toni Morrison kritizována rasová nenávist, nadřazenost a následná diskriminace.

První kapitola se zaměřuje na ničivé dopady rasismu a sexismu v díle *Paradise*. Román zkoumá rasismus na téměř rajském a utopickém místě zcela černošského města Ruby ve venkovské Oklahomě. Většina tohoto románu je vyprávěna ženskými postavami, a celé dílo se zaměřuje zejména na zkušenost černých žen. Zdá se, že přísnou ideologii a patriarchismus města Ruby ohrožují ženy z blízkého kláštera, které žijí podle svých vlastních pravidel, jsou autonomní a přijímají každého návštěvníka. Hlavní událostí románu *Paradise* je úmyslné a brutální vyvraždění obyvatelek kláštera, které provedou vedoucí představitelé z města Ruby. Rasově „čisté“ město se však důsledkem jejich jednání rozpadá. Toni Morrison pracuje s kritickou rasovou teorií a s prvkem „absence rasy“. „Rasa“ jejích postav často není specifikována. Rasová nenávist mezi Afroameričany se světlou a tmavou pletí v Ruby pramení z dlouhé a traumatické historie komunity v tomto městě. Morrison poukazuje na to, že sterilní izolace od okolního světa není řešením pro černé komunity v době po Afroamerickém hnutí za občanská práva.

Druhá kapitola této práce zkoumá raná stadia obchodu s otroky v době koloniální Ameriky na konci 17. století. Román *A Mercy* se odehrává v tomto historickém období, kdy otroctví ještě nebylo rasové a probíhalo současně s nevolnictvím bělochů. Tento román zkoumá kořeny rasismu a lidské svobody v počátcích Ameriky. Morrison dává hlas všem marginalizovaným postavám podstupujícím otroctví, přestože patří (sociologicky) k mnoha různým rasám. Jejich životy a osobní zkušenosti jsou zachyceny prostřednictvím různých inovativních narativních strategií, jako je nelineární vyprávění, využití více perspektiv nebo diskontinuita přetrvávající v celém románu. Morrison popisuje v díle *A Mercy* nepřeberné množství forem zotročení, aby poskytla důkladný pohled na problematiku otroctví a následný rasismus.

Poslední román Toni Morrison *God Help the Child* ukazuje, jak utrpení z dětství může mít dlouhotrvající vliv na život dospělého člověka a přijetí vlastní identity. Tento román líčí tragické dětství Bride, která je kvůli svému ebenovému tónu pleti obětí rasových předsudků a diskriminace. Bride zažívá tuto diskriminaci nejen od společnosti jako celku, ale také od své matky se světlou pletí. Přesto je Bride schopna smířit se se svou minulostí a být úspěšná ve své kariéře. Její transformace v uvědomělou ženu úzce souvisí s filozofií černošské feministické teorie, která oslavuje mysl, tělo a vědomí afroamerických žen. Tato kapitola poukazuje na škodlivé důsledky vlivu rasismu na nejzranitelnější členy společnosti, děti.

Všechny tyto pozdější romány Toni Morrison využívají různé strategie k prezentaci drsné reality rasismu a rasové diskriminace v naší společnosti. V závěrečné kapitole této bakalářské práce jsou tyto strategie porovnány a analyzovány, aby bylo možné si představit zobrazení rasové problematiky v literárním díle Toni Morrison. Téma „vzpomínání“, smíření se s traumatickou minulostí plnou nepopsatelných událostí a využití fragmentovaného vyprávění je pouze několik strategií, které přispívají k jedinečné prezentaci otroctví, rasismu a rasové nenávisti v pozdějších románech Toni Morrison. Morrison staví sociální konstrukci rasy do středu svých románů a zkoumá její význam a hodnotu ve společnosti. Význam jejích románů, které zkoumají, jak rasová problematika ovlivňuje naši společnost je patrný, zejména v kontextu nedávných událostí jako je hnutí Black Lives Matter nebo kauza George Floyda v roce 2020. Skutečnost, že je naše společnost stále formovaná konceptem rasy, zdůrazňuje, že jsme doposud nedosáhli post-rasové éry, ve které by barva pleti nehrála žádnou roli, a proto má zkoumání rasy a rasové nespravedlnosti prvořadý význam.

**Keywords:** Toni Morrison, God Help the Child, A Mercy, Paradise, race, racism, slavery, dehumanisation, Afro-American literature

**Klíčová slova:** Toni Morrison, God Help the Child, Milosrdenství, Ráj, rasa, rasismus, otroctví, dehumanizace, Afroamerická literatura

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# INTRODUCTION

Novelist and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Toni Morrison, who gained worldwide recognition with her novel *Beloved* and became the first African American female to win the Nobel Prize in Literature, emphasised the ability of language to oppress. When delivering her Nobel lecture in 1993, she stated: "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."[1] In her literary work she focused on various themes such as violence, sacrifice, oppression, justice and perhaps most importantly, on the theme of racial tension between white society and African Americans. She describes extreme situations in her novels and highlights the unimaginable sufferings of slavery. Moreover, she endeavours to deliver these unspeakable acts in a way that they would resonate with the reader. Instead of focusing on describing what slavery looked like, Toni Morrison strives to portray "what it felt like."[2] She wants to translate the historical into the personal[3] and provide an interior rather than exterior view. In order to do that, Morrison adopts unconventional narrative structures, settings, points of view, use of language, foreshadowing and many other devices to expose the sexual and racial oppression, along with its effects, in American society and culture. The stirring effects of her writing as well as how Toni Morrison works with these effects to address her readers will be discussed in the context of her later novels *Paradise* (1997) and *A Mercy* (2008) as well as in the context of her last novel *God Help the Child* (2015).

Firstly, it is important to note that in all her novels Toni Morrison strives to be participatory with the reader. The participatory nature of her writing is one of many crucial elements in which her novels are anchored. Through the representation of the experience of enslavement and bringing out the horrific aspects of slavery, such as in her novel *A Mercy*, Morrison manages to make people feel things and evoke true feelings in them. She does that through her fiction books and this act entails the possible advantage of conveying emotions and feelings, which is something unique especially in comparison with history books that cannot mediate this phenomenon. According to Toni Morrison, "fiction should be the survival of

[1] Toni Morrison, "Nobel Lecture," *NobelPrize.org*, December 7, 1993, https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/.
[2] Toni Morrison, and Carolyn C. Denard, *Toni Morrison: Conversations* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 76.
[3] Morrison and Denard, *Toni Morrison: Conversations*, 76.

human feelings – the compulsion to find out what the requirements for humanness are."[4] Instead of solely providing information about some defining moments or periods in American history, Morrison attempts to touch readers by restoring the humanity of fiction, and hence, she classifies herself as a "restoration novelist".[5] This can be illustrated in her novel *Paradise,* which takes place in the fictional town of Ruby submerged in the real historical era of 1970s, characterised by its post-civil rights environment and ideas.

In this thesis, Morrison's use of various narrative strategies and perspectives in her later novels *Paradise*, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child* is examined, especially how they serve to highlight the detrimental effects of slavery and racism. In her novel *Paradise*, the element of "racelessness" is incorporated as the "race" of her characters is often not specified, even though it differs. This impacts Morrison's readers greatly as they cannot be sure towards which race they are prejudiced. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding race in this novel makes readers examine the reasons behind their desire to know the race of each character as well as to ponder how the problematics of race affect the relationship of the presented characters. Another important tool incorporated by Morrison to present the problematics of race is the narration from a child's perspective. This narrative strategy is used in the crucial scene of the novel *God Help the Child,* when the protagonist narrates her story and presents the events from her naïve and innocent point of view. The use of a child narrator is often employed in Morrison's oeuvre to represent how even the most vulnerable and innocent members of society are affected by the racial prejudices around them. This novel is set in the contemporary period, which makes *God Help the Child* unlike any of her previous novels.

Also, Morrison develops a participatory approach in her readers through foreshadowing certain events in her novels and intentionally omitting specific information. Morrison strives to portray what sexual and racial oppression felt like rather than what it looked like as she underlines the unimaginable sufferings of slavery in her novels, which contributes to the undeniable significance of her literary work. In *A Mercy*, the racial hatred is felt through the protagonist Florens when the white settlers of colonial America believe that her "blackness" is a proof of her being the Black Man's minion and they refuse to even touch the letter she carries. Florens is shocked by the absence of human recognition in their eyes as they examine her. It is crucial to pay attention to Morrison's narrative structures and methods as they illuminate her

[4] Kim Crenshaw, "Toni Morrison: Speaking of Fiction," *Umoja Sasa* (November 1978): 12, www.jstor.org/stable/43689583.
[5] Crenshaw, "Toni Morrison: Speaking of Fiction," 12.

"always careful relation of character to theme, shape to focus, voice to effect. Whether she frames, uses chapters as parentheses, intentionally misdirects, builds episodes, from fragments or relies on the perspective of a child, Morrison moves with steady direction toward her finale."[6] Notwithstanding, the aim of this bachelor's thesis is not only to analyse and compare Morrison's later novels, including the use of narrative methods and strategies, but also to highlight how her later novels portray the concept of race and its subsequent detrimental effects on society over the course of American history.

## THE CONSTRUCTION OF RACE AND RACISM IN THE CONTEXT OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Race and racism have always been the most influential elements leading the course of events in the United States of America. Structural racism and racial issues have been shaping the politics, the history, the society, the culture and daily life in America. Nevertheless, the problematics of race and racism cannot be viewed solely as something in the past, but rather as ongoing and pressing issues affecting the American society even nowadays, in the twenty-first century. This can be supported by the examination of recent events in 2020 involving the George Floyd protests, the Black Lives Matter movement and the destruction and removal of tributes to slave traders and colonialists across the globe. According to Andrew Curran, "[t]he histories of slavery and racism in the United States have never been more pertinent."[7]

The terminus a quo of the colonisation of the Americas can be considered the year 1492 marked by the arrival of Christopher Columbus. The European colonisation launched by various European empires – such as Britain, France, Spain, or Portugal – brought gradual oppression and subjugation of Native Americans demonstrated by forcing them to slavery or indentured servitude and taking the tribal lands. Later in the seventeenth century, hereditary slavery was made official by the Virginia slave code, which introduced the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem*. This passage of the 1662 Act can be translated as "offspring follows belly." Such a slave law established that children of enslaved women were directly born into the social condition of their mothers, which meant slavery.

[6] Catherine Rainwater and William J. Scheick, *Contemporary American Women Writers: Narrative Strategies* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1985), 203.
[7] Andrew Curran, "Facing America's History of Racism Requires Facing the Origins of 'Race' as a Concept," *TIME*, July 10, 2020, https://time.com/5865530/history-race-concept/.

Simultaneously, this *partus* doctrine was used to justify the enslavement and according to Jeffory A. Clymer, this legal doctrine sharply separated the "offspring who could be legal family and legitimate heirs and the unacknowledged mixed-raced children who were legally property and could be inherited."[8] Viewing the children of enslaved women as property that one has a "right" to own only highlights the horrific nature of slavery rooted in its dehumanising nature. The application of the above-mentioned doctrine can serve as a perfect example to demonstrate not only how racism was constructed in the United States, but also how hierarchy became an important structure of American society, which many times highlighted the elements of social injustice and inequality reigning in the society.

It is crucial to note that this inception of "natural" human hierarchy has been established altogether with the establishment of race. According to the anthropologist Edgar T. Thompson, race cannot be found in nature as it has been "made" by humans; [9] therefore we can observe the allocation of race to others, which has always been subjective, as well as its change over the centuries.[10] This subjectivity is evident, for instance, in Benjamin Franklin's *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind, Peopling of Countries, etc.* from the 18th century, in which he expresses his fear that German immigrants in Pennsylvania "will never adopt our Language or Customs, any more than they can acquire our Complexion."[11] As the last part suggests, Benjamin Franklin believed that Germans (as well as Swedes) differed from other Europeans due to their skin complexion and in his essay, he describes them as "generally of what we call a swarthy Complexion."[12] The belief that Germans (or Swedes) are non-whites seems indeed absurd nowadays and only highlights the subjectivity of race as well as exposes race to be solely a human construction, which has evolved over time.

Believing that the issues connected with race and racism, such as slavery which was at the very heart of the divide between the North and the South, ended altogether with the end of the American Civil War in 1865 would be severely overzealous. Even though slavery was

[8] Jeffory A. Clymer, "Blood, Truth, and Consequences: Partus Sequitur Ventrem and the Problem of Legal Title," in *Family Money: Property, Race, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, by Clymer, Jeffory (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 2, Oxford Scholarship Online, 2013, doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199897704.003.0002.
[9] Edgar T. Thompson, *Plantation Societies, Race Relations, and the South: The Regimentation of Populations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1975), 325.
[10] Peter Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 1 (2002): 157-158, doi:10.2307/2700788.
[11] Benjamin Franklin and Alan Craig Houston, *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 221, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xww&AN=174100&lang=cs&site=ehost-live.
[12] Franklin, *Franklin: The Autobiography and Other Writings on Politics, Economics, and Virtue,* 221.

officially abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the strong tendencies to racism and dehumanisation of African Americans prevailed in American society. The "aftermath" of slavery can be spotted in the continued racism and in the "approximately 3500 lynchings of black people in the United States from 1880-1930, that is, well after emancipation."[13]

Considering all the facts above, it may seem less surprising why even in 1963, 100 years after slavery had been abolished by the Emancipation Proclamation, 250 000 African Americans marched on Washington D.C. In the 1960s, African Americans had been already legally freed from slavery, they were citizens of the United States and the men were given voting rights. Nevertheless, one of the largest political manifestations of human rights in American history – demanding civil and economic rights for African Americans – took place at that time. The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was organised for various reasons. The most prominent one was that even though African Americans were not slaves, they still faced social, political as well as economic repression and discrimination. In many states the right to vote was denied to African Americans and interracial marriages were prohibited. According to James M. Nabrit, this massive protest "did more than excite the curiosity of white Americans."[14] The endeavour to end the repression African Americans faced was fully displayed and their fight for justice "could not be seen merely in the context of a minority of a population, [...] it was made clear that the improvement of their status will result in the advancement of all Americans."[15]

The civil rights movement marks an important episode in the history of America as its objective was to challenge the prevailing discrimination and deracinate all forms of racial oppression of African Americans in the United States. There were many contrasting opinions on the best way to secure civil rights for African Americans: for instance, Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail", openly defends the strategy of a nonviolent campaign against racism. It continues by distinguishing between just and unjust laws stating that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws,"[16] which are civil laws out of harmony with moral laws. Any law that degrades human personality belongs to this category. The objective of his direct-

[13] J. Hillis Miller, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 231.
[14] James M. Nabrit, "Critical Summary and Evaluation," *The Journal of Negro Education* 32, no. 4 (1963): 507, doi:10.2307/2294126.
[15] Nabrit, "Critical Summary and Evaluation," 507.
[16] Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," *Atlantic* (2018): 76, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=asn&AN=134398805&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.

action program is to make negotiation possible, which has been consistently refused to African Americans. The suppression of their voices has been creating an underlying force shaping the history of the United States and influencing historical events.

This suppression has been so long, intense and humiliating that the emergence of more radical approaches than the one of Martin Luther King could have been anticipated. His nonviolent activities in Birmingham form the middle ground between two existing extremes of that time: "the 'do nothingism' of the complacent"[17] and "the hatred and despair of the black nationalist."[18] Indeed, many black people became frustrated with the pacifist methods at that time and there were tendencies to resort to a more direct and radical action. An example of one of these tendencies is the approach of Stokely Carmichael leading the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and developing the Black Power movement. Carmichael was also an activist in the civil rights movement, but he was more direct and well-known for his provocative speeches. By comparing his speech with Martin Luther King's open letter, the different approaches and strategies on how to fight against racism and racial segregation can be presented. Carmichael's vision was similar to Martin Luther King's beliefs highlighting that "'Wait' has almost always meant 'Never'"[19] and that there was enough of waiting for justice. Donald J. McCormack describes his tactics as if Carmichael wanted to "fight fire with fire"[20] and one of the main requests of his movement was to establish new types of political institutions in the United States. The Black Power movement founded black-owned bookstores specialising in the writings of African Americans, schools and printing presses. The Black Power movement's "anti-war activism, antipoverty efforts, [...] intellectual and political debates [...] have been virtually ignored in the historiography of postwar America."[21] Nevertheless, it is one of the crucial tendencies of that era, which greatly contributed to the struggle for racial justice in the United States.

Carmichael stresses the dangerous nature of institutionalised racism in America and one of his speeches demonstrates that "a man cannot condemn himself. [...] In a much larger view [...] white America cannot condemn herself for her criminal acts against black America. So black people have done it – you stand condemned. The institutions that function in this country

[17] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 78.
[18] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 78.
[19] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 76.
[20] Donald J. McCormack, "Stokely Carmichael and Pan-Africanism: Back to Black Power," *The Journal of Politics* 35, no. 2 (1973): 395, doi:10.2307/2129075.
[21] Peniel E. Joseph, "Historians and the Black Power Movement," *OAH Magazine of History* 22, no. 3 (2008): 8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/25162180.

are clearly racist; they're built upon racism,"[22] which highlights the process of constructing racism in the United States even more. Carmichael very openly expressed and said what most African Americans felt at that time. In his speech, there is not much evidence of diplomatic efforts to reach an agreement, he firmly believed that the situation had to quickly change, because "this is no 1942, and if you play like Nazis, we're not going to play Jew this time around,"[23] which is not the first time nor the last time when the situation of African Americans in the United States has been compared to the situation of Jews in Nazi Germany. Carmichael's movement at that time was not only for "a call for black people [...] to unite, to recognise their heritage, to build a sense of community,"[24] but also to lead their own institutions and define their own goals,[25] which is exactly the opposite of the feeling of racialised dispossession which African Americans were instructed to feel over the centuries.

Even though these divergent methods of ensuring civil rights for African Americans have different approaches to this complex matter, they have very much in common. They have all agreed on the urgency of this situation as Malcolm X said: "Civil rights [...] means: 'Give it to us now. Don't wait for next year. Give it to us yesterday, and that's not fast enough.'"[26] All mentioned civil rights activists have stressed the importance of recognising human dignity. They did not believe that "white people can give anybody his freedom. A man is born free. You may enslave a man after he is born free, and that is in fact what this country does."[27] They represented countless African American men and women who wanted equality on economic, social and political levels in accordance with their rights that have been denied for so long. Overall, these problematics are not only the case of civil rights as addressed above, but according to Malcolm X: "We need to expand the civil rights struggle to a higher level—to the level of human rights… Civil rights means you're asking Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with."[28] Every human being is born with human rights, but

[22] Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches* (2004): 297, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edo&AN=43605419&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.
[23] Carmichael, "Black Power," 299.
[24] Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 44.
[25] Ture and Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, 44.
[26] Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," *Ripples of Hope: Great American Civil Rights Speeches* (2004): 250, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edo&AN=43605412&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.
[27] Carmichael, "Black Power," 298.
[28] Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 251.

the core of the problem is the denial of these rights, which has been manifested by the construction of race and racism in the United States.

The civil rights movement in 1950s and 1960s marks a crucial period of American history. This period showed not only the importance of respecting human dignity but also how even in a civilised society unjust laws, which support racial prejudice and deep misunderstanding, exist. Hopefully, in accordance with the vision of Martin Luther King Jr.: "in not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty."[29] All the historical events included in this thesis represent only a few chosen periods or moments in American history, which either contributed to the complex construction of race and racism in the United States of America or tried to change this poignant reality and put an end to racism. Moreover, these important moments of American history can serve to reveal various issues stemming from the institutionalised racial discrimination such as disenfranchisement, anti-miscegenation laws or racial segregation.

## THE DEFINITION OF RACE

The ways in which race and racism affected, or more fittingly shaped, American history have been discussed in the previous subchapter. Nevertheless, the reasons behind it have yet to be examined. Many academic journals, scholarly articles and innumerable books have tried to shed light on the complex nature of race. What is race? How can it be defined? What determines one's race? Is it appearance, ancestry, culture, genes, or something else? The importance of these questions and comprehending the concept of race has been belittled by many historians who underestimated the deep roots of American racism and failed to recognise how the "development of a culture of white supremacy [...] directly affected economic development and political struggles."[30] Even nowadays, many people struggle "to distinguish between the notion of 'race' as a social construct and the pernicious, false belief that 'race' is a biological reality."[31] The crucial distinction between these two notions regarding race serves as a first step towards a prolific discussion on this topic.

[29] King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," 81.
[30] Herbert Hill, "The Importance of Race in American Labor History," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 9, no. 2 (1995): 317, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20007240.
[31] Bárbara C. Cruz and James A. Duplass, "Making Sense of 'Race' in the History Classroom: A Literary Approach," *The History Teacher* 42, no. 4 (2009): 425, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40543494.

It is crucial to note that being labelled as "white" has typically been "associated with ancestry from the European continent, the denial of African blood"[32] and appearance. This practice of "labelling" people based on the colour of their skin has served as an important tool to coordinate social inclusion or exclusion, which played an important role not only in American history but worldwide. It is possible to discover the geographic journey undertaken by our ancestors, through a scientific analysis of our genes made up of DNA, which has now been proven to begin in Africa. According to research undertaken by Stephen Oppenheimer, a world-recognised expert in the synthesis of DNA studies, the newly constructed Adam-and-Eve genes, which are gender-specific gene lines inherited only through our father (the Y chromosome) and mother (mitochondrial DNA), enable us to trace the detailed history of our origins.[33] The most important discovery changing greatly our view on race indwells in the resolution of a dispute between the 'Multiregional' and 'Out-of-Africa' view. The former view claims that the archaic human populations evolved into multiple local races that can now be observed all around the world, whereas the latter view claims that all modern humans have descended from a movement from Africa less than 100,000 years ago.[34] The latter view wins, which rebuts multiple misconceptions and prejudices surrounding the concept of race. Stephen Oppenheimer's discovery that there was a sole exodus from Africa, and not multiple waves of migration creating various races, proves that we are all ultimately African and have one common birthplace in Africa. This discovery shows that the colour of our skin is scientifically and biologically of no importance as all modern humans share African origin. Therefore, it can be officially said now that there is only one race and that is a human race. This research demonstrates that "race is an ideological or social construct rather than a biological fact."[35]

Even though the idea or concept of race, which signifies that "the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioural differences,"[36] has been proven false, it is still present in our society nowadays and the idea of race is very often accompanied by racism. Trying to eliminate racism and misconceptions regarding race cannot be done through the ignorance of the differences between humans such as different skin colour, hair, height and weight of a person as well as other physical features. Failing to

[32] Melanie Bush, "Race, Ethnicity, and Whiteness," *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 29 (2004): 6, doi:10.1177/0307920104050563.
[33] Stephen Oppenheimer, *Out of Eden: The Peopling of the World* (London: Robinson, 2004), xvii.
[34] Oppenheimer, *Out of Eden: The Peopling of the World*, xx.
[35] Kolchin, "Whiteness Studies: The New History of Race in America," 155.
[36] Y. I. Takezawa, Audrey Smedley, and Peter Wade, "Race," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, November 23, 2020, https://www.britannica.com/topic/race-human.

acknowledge these differences would represent only another form of racism based on the ignorance of human variability altogether with a forced "blindness" of the different human physical appearances such as body shape, skin colour, etc. All these differences are a result of human adaptive responses to the unique environment, for instance, the different colour of skin is a product of divergent variables: "Europeans, as an example, became light-skinned and developed other traits to better absorb Vitamin D through Ultraviolet B rays due to the necessity of the climatic and dietary conditions of northern Europe."[37] This example invalidates the main argument of racism which brings attention to the difference between multiple skin colours and claims superiority of one over another.

Still, it is important to acknowledge that there exist various skin colours as well as diverse ethnic groups of people having a shared set of attributes such as language, nation, culture, religion, history, traditions and customs. Being a part of an ethnic group "is more frequently chosen by the individual. And because it encompasses everything from language, to nationality, culture and religion, it can enable people to take on several identities. Someone might choose to identify themselves as Asian American, British Somali or an Ashkenazi Jew, for instance."[38] Race and ethnicity have been frequently and inextricably interwoven, which led to the misuse of both of them and can be without a doubt shown through various forms of discrimination and oppression. For example, during the Rwandan genocide in 1994, many members of the Tutsi ethnic group were massacred by the members of another ethnic group in Rwanda called Hutu. This demonstrates that even though ethnicity and race are not truly inherited features but rather a social construct or a sense of belonging to a national, racial, ethnic, or religious group, they can be both misused to commit unspeakable crimes such as genocide, torture, or enslavement. All these acts are internationally recognised crimes, which sprang from the division between humans to "us" versus "them" and arise from the terrifying failure to recognise humanity in others.

Considering the above-mentioned arguments, if "race" does not exist and is only an artificially created concept by our society, is it even substantial to delve into this topic? The answer is yes. Even though this concept of "race" does not exist genetically or biologically, it still applies sociologically, as can be observed in our society nowadays. Many scholars have openly refuted the idea of "race" as they agree that the idea of various human races exists solely

[37] Cruz and Duplass, "Making Sense of 'Race' in the History Classroom: A Literary Approach," 429.
[38] Emma Bryce, "What's the Difference Between Race and Ethnicity?" *Live Science*, Feb 08, 2020, https://www.livescience.com/difference-between-race-ethnicity.html.

because it has been created in our society and perpetuated in various forms over the centuries.[39] Nevertheless, the effects of the history prevail, and the real influence of race and ethnicity can be observed in the world today.

[39] Alan H. Goodman, *Race: Are We So Different?* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2019), 10.

# THE PROBLEMATICS OF RACE IN THE WRITINGS OF TONI MORRISON

The misconceptions about race still dramatically affect American society and lead to subsequent racism and discrimination. For instance, racism was evident quite recently during the 2008 presidential election between Barack Obama and John McCain, when – according to multiple political experts – it seemed very probable that many white Americans would "be uncomfortable with a Black First Family headed by a biracial father."[40] The race was discussed and had an impact on the election, whose results were understood "in somewhat troubling tones [...] as prima facie evidence of the lack of racism in the United States."[41] When asked about the emphasis on race during this election, Barack Obama stated: "It would have been naïve for me to think that I could run and end up with quasi-front-runner status in a presidential election, as potentially the first African American president, and that race wouldn't come up. [...] I think we've got to talk about it. I think we've got to process it. But we've got to remind ourselves that what we have in common is far more important than what's different."[42] This example stresses the importance of domestic issues in the United States; the issue of race being the most prominent one. The racial hatred and assumed racial superiority can be seen in the use of offensive stereotypes presented by mass media as well as in the prejudice and discrimination in everyday life. This disturbing and abhorrent reality is analysed in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison, who highlights in her novels that race is a social, cultural, and historical construct, which has been used specially to defend the poignant and horrible events in human history such as a justification of slavery, racial prejudice, discrimination, or the ideology of supremacy.

Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), highlighted the detrimental effects of "the ceaseless standard of white beauty"[43] and racism, which has been the prevailing topic in her books, and is mirrored in her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), which focuses on the notion of self-image and race as well. Since the beginning of her writing career, Toni Morrison portrayed race in a very original and interesting manner. In her first and only published short story, "Recitatif" (1983), the conventional understandings of race and racism are challenged from the beginning. As a first example of Toni Morrison's writing, this short

[40] Squires, "Re-framing the National Family: Race Mixing and Re-telling American History," 41.
[41] Thomas Edge, "Southern Strategy 2.0: Conservatives, White Voters, and the Election of Barack Obama" *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 3 (2010): 427, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40648600.
[42] Gwen Ifill, *Breakthrough: Politics and Race in the Age of Obama* (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 61.
[43] Rebecca Carroll, "Meaning, Without the White Gaze," *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, 7 Aug. 2019, www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/08/toni-morrison-free-white-gaze/595675/.

story offers insight into her narrative techniques as well as into her approaches towards the idea of race altogether with its consequential problematics.

The first exhibition of racism comes from one of the main characters Twyla and her mother Mary. When Twyla is being put into an orphanage for children, St. Bonny's, she expresses her disgust and discomfort with the reality that she is being "stuck in a strange place with a girl from a whole other race."[44] She continues by saying that her mother will not be happy about that as Mary always told her that such people as this other girl, Roberta, "never washed their hair and they smelled funny" (1). This incident introduces the racial tension and racism in the short story and this racism is interestingly happening in a nonspecific way there as neither Roberta's nor Twyla's race is revealed. Even though the initial description of the characters informs the reader that the girls look different from each other as they "looked like salt and pepper" (1) together, it is not clear which girl is African American and which one is Caucasian, which has an immense impact on the readers of "Recitatif" as they cannot be sure towards which race they are prejudiced.

Furthermore, the "racelessness" in this short story is not formed through the absolute absence of race, but through its ambiguity, which is one of the methods Toni Morrison uses when examining the concept of race and presenting it to her readers. This intentional racial ambiguity creates a mystery in the story which compels Morrison's readers to face the racialised suppositions they might have already formed about characters.[45] This phenomenon raises many questions. Why is it so crucial for us to know of which race is each girl? What would that knowledge bring or change eventually? By not stating directly the race of each girl, this intentional omission of information creates a unique and constant uncertainty. This feeling does not fade over the course of the story, which leads to thought-provoking questions about race and the various complications regarding race produced in and by our society. In "Recitatif", this mystery and "racelessness" apply to other characters as well.

For instance, the kitchen lady Maggie is described by Twyla as an "old and sandy-colored" (2) woman, but later this view is disputed as Roberta claims that Twyla "kicked a black lady who couldn't even scream" (16), which is again a reference to Maggie. So, even this

[44] Toni Morrison, "Recitatif," 1983, 1, https://www.cusd80.com/cms/lib/AZ01001175/Centricity/Domain/1073/Morrison_recitatifessay.doc.pdf. All subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated in the text by parentheses.
[45] Kelly Lynch Reames, "A Girl from a Whole Other Race': Toni Morrison's 'Recitatif,' *Beloved*, and *Paradise,"* in *Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing. American Literature Readings in the 21st Century* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 131.

mention about race in "Recitatif" is not so straightforward and definite, because the truth and remembrance seem gravely inconsistent or even distorted. The arguments over Maggie's race later in the story highlight the traumatising childhood of both girls at St. Bonny's and the difficulty to leave their past behind. This problematic childhood was the unifying element between Twyla and Roberta, but what separated them later was the socioeconomic inequality and racial tension.

Another example of the notions of "racelessness" in the oeuvre of Toni Morrison springs from her intriguing use of language and portrayal of racism in the absence of race. The nature of the above-mentioned short story is experimental, and Morrison has indeed experimented with the language as she wanted to "free up the language from its sinister, [...] almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains."[46] This highlights that even though the girls' racial difference has a great impact on their relationship in the story, Morrison does not abandon her aspiration to free up her language from the racial language and she manages to avoid that in her writing. Nothing in her short story, neither the social status of the two main protagonists nor the behaviour of their mothers, does determine the race of its characters.

Moreover, the descriptions of the girls' mothers do not define their race, which is left ambiguous and surrounded by mystery. Both mothers are described as problematic: Twyla's mother "dances all night" (10) and Roberta's "was sick" (1) and "she never got well" (20), both mothers neglect their daughters. Twyla and Roberta are reminded of their different race every Sunday when their mothers arrive at St. Bonny's. It is the reason why Roberta's mother would not even shake hands with Twyla's mother during their first encounter. Later in the story, the contrast between the girls is even accentuated by their division due to the economic difference and racial segregation. Roberta's "silvery evening gown and dark fur coat" (18) as well as her groceries consisting of "bunch of asparagus and two cartons of fancy water" (8) are in stark contrast to Twyla, who is embarrassed that during their encounter all she can think about is her shopping consisting of the "Klondikes melting" (10). This shopping episode indicates that Roberta is now wealthy and secured, whereas Twyla could be defined as lower middle-class. Even this socioeconomic inequality and social status of Twyla and Roberta do not shed light on their race.

[46] Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the American Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 11.

Toni Morrison managed to describe racial tension in her short story without revealing which of the women is white and which one of them is black. This experiment succeeded in the "removal of all racial codes from a narrative about two characters of different races for whom racial identity is crucial"[47] and affects their life. Morrison's "Recitatif" purposefully challenges the reader's already existing assumptions and their perspectives regarding race. It has also demonstrated that Toni Morrison is trying to distance her oeuvre from "the white gaze" and "the racial gaze", free up the language in her novels from the racial and gender implications, which leads to the examination of what race de facto is and pondering why it is so important for us to know the race of her characters as race is biologically non-existent and sociologically it is far from identifying a person.

[47] Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the American Literary Imagination*, 11.

# PARADISE

Toni Morrison's seventh novel *Paradise* (1997) purposefully challenges readers' already existing assumptions and perspectives regarding race in a similar way to her short story "Recitatif". It is her first novel since receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993 and it is supposed to represent the finale of Morrison's freely connected "trilogy" which started with *Beloved* (1987) and continued with *Jazz* (1992). This third novel of Morrison's Beloved trilogy has a similar objective to her already discussed short story, which can be observed via Morrison's portrayal of the devastating effects of racism and sexism throughout the whole story of her novel *Paradise*. When compared to the earlier novels of this trilogy, which are "principally concerned with the process of the individual reconstitution of the self," [48] *Paradise* portrays "the role of narrative in the community as a whole."[49] In this novel, Morrison focuses on the examination of the black experience within the black community, especially on the black female experience, as can be seen in the structure of the novel, which consists of nine chapters mostly enunciated with the names of various female characters such as Ruby, Mavis, Grace, Seneca, Divine, Patricia, Consolata, Lone, and Save-Marie.

*Paradise* depicts the story of a group of African Americans, the descendants of former slaves, who founded their very own town in rural Oklahoma, in which the conditions seem idyllic: they have their own set of rules, economic autonomy, no jail or cemetery and any "sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, [...] walk out the yard and down the road. [...] Nothing for ninety miles around thought she was prey."[50] The endeavour to protect this utopian place from all outside forces creates a sense of exceptionalism and superiority felt among some members of the local community (especially the local wealthy patriarchs) and this desire for uniqueness and sterile isolation forms the beginning of this all-black community's fall.

According to Channette Romero, the citizens of this town try to protect themselves from any further oppression by creating unbending and strict code of behaviour which rejects any new beliefs, ideas, or ethnicities that could possibly endanger their sense of racial pride and

[48] Rob Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" *Twentieth Century Literature*, no. 3 (2001): 355, doi:10.2307/3176022.
[49] Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 355-356.
[50] Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 8. All subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated in the text by parentheses.

community.[51] The nearby Convent, which is occupied only by women following their own rules and accepting everybody who is in need of shelter or company, serves as a stark opposition to the isolated town called Ruby. This juxtaposition highlights the dangerous nature of the town's strict ideology and racial genealogy, which are both very fragile and the more they crumble, the more the local men feel the need to assert their power.

The title of this novel evokes an idealised place usually used in a religious context. Nevertheless, Morrison criticises the traditional view of paradise which springs from the Judeo-Christian tradition "as the isolation of its god's 'chosen people' from the non-righteous" [52] in her novel. The original all-black town Haven created by the Old Fathers and later the town Ruby are founded precisely on this idea of paradise, which is open only to "the chosen ones" and anyone else is viewed as an enemy or intruder of this sacred place. Morrison is not afraid to question religion (especially when perverted to justify one's evil actions), nation, gender stereotypes and race in her novel *Paradise* and demonstrates that sterile isolation is not the solution for black communities in the post-civil rights era. Quite the contrary, what seems to embody paradise in the form of the town Ruby, because of its ideal economic independence and territorial political power, becomes degenerating isolationism,[53] which will eventually break the fragile structure of the local community altogether with the principles on which this community has been built.

Even though *Paradise* opens in the 1970s and is set in a small-town Ruby in Oklahoma, many parts of this novel portray the earlier events and slowly reveal the traumatic history of the town's inhabitants. This all-black town was created during the second migration in the 1920s and traces back to the previous town Haven founded in the 1870s, after the political failure of Reconstruction thanks to its "Founding Fathers" as well as the indignation of exclusion and the inability to be protected from the outside world.[54] This history could be also read "allegorically, as a reconfiguration of the founding of the United States, [with its] totalizing patriarchal historiography"[55] as America was founded by its white "Founding Fathers". The whole novel could be therefore seen as "a provocative allegory of nationhood".[56]

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[51] Channette Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" *African American Review* 39, no. 3 (2005): 416, http://www.jstor.org/stable/40033672.
[52] Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 419.
[53] Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 419.
[54] Justine Tally, "The Morrison trilogy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 75.
[55] Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 371.
[56] Davidson, "Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 371.

Ruby's austere and well-established hierarchies continue to shape the lives of its citizens, which suggests that the past plays a crucial role in Paradise. The strict exclusion of people coming from the outside world leads to the culmination in which Ruby's leaders decide to deliberately and brutally kill the residents of a nearby Convent, which provided a safe haven for all those who came there. The opening of this novel displays not only this gruesome massacre, but also the mysterious riddle regarding race which is never fully answered in *Paradise* and which stems from the first three lines: "They shoot the white girl first, but the rest they can take their time. No need to hurry out here" (3). This is the only direct reference to race which is made by Toni Morrison over the course of her whole novel, and she does so in order to demonstrate that knowing the race of a character is simply "the least amount of information to know about a person."[57] This conviction puts the social construction of race at the centre of this novel while examining its value as well as its meaning in the society.

In her novel, Morrison engages with the critical race theory whose purpose is to explore "how the idea of race infects common interactions, even among people arguably of the 'same race'"[58] as could be observed in *Paradise*. The violent act which opens this novel is described through the statement starting with the impersonal pronoun, "They", which stresses "precisely the *impersonal* nature of any categorization by race and gender."[59] Why did they shoot the white girl first? One of possible explanations could be that it is not only the literal representation of a body that is being destroyed, but the idealised whiteness itself.[60] The identity of "the white girl" is never explicitly revealed in the book, which creates an intentional "racelessness" in *Paradise*. This novel deals with the extremely dangerous nature of racism which is not only limited to the race of this particular girl. It is crucial to note that there are two different types of racial hatred depicted in the novel: the abstract hatred towards all white people, which is indeed present in Ruby, and the undoubted racism existing between dark-skinned and light-skinned African Americans in the novel.

Both types of racial hatred spring from the community's long and traumatic history. The Old Fathers' desire to establish a new town far away from any other form of civilisation has

[57] Shelley Fisher Fishkin, "Desegregating American Literary Studies," in *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliot, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyne (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 124.
[58] Richard L. Schur, "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory," *Contemporary Literature*, no. 2 (2004): 297, doi: 10.1353/cli.2004.0019.
[59] Tally, "The Morrison trilogy," 78.
[60] Schur, "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory," 294.

been motivated by their fear of all white men along with their hope that in their own all-black town they would never be forced to leave their homes overnight.

> Nor would they be among the dead and maimed of Tulsa, Norman, Oklahoma City, not to mention victims of spontaneous whippings, murders and depopulation by arson. Except for a crack here, a chink there everything in Ruby was intact. (112)

The way other African American minorities were treated altogether with the racism they had witnessed was the main force that made the Old Fathers migrate for so long and look for a new suitable place to live. The signs such as "No Niggers" (154) or the various names of towns such as "Pura Sangre" (153) – meaning "pure blood" – were common phenomena during their peregrination. This experience of maltreatment, abuse and racism explains the strong and pervasive hatred felt in Ruby towards all white people.

The second type of racial discrimination and racism has originated during a turbulent period of the community's history (so-called great migration), which has been named "disallowing". The Old Fathers and their families were constantly being disallowed by other communities and towns when they were searching for a new place to stay and begin their lives.

> It was the shame of seeing one's pregnant wife or sister or daughter refused shelter that had rocked them, and changed them for all time. The humiliation did more than rankle; it threatened to crack open their bones. (95)

They found to their dismay that this rejection came also from their brothers, other African Americans, who allowed them to stay only for one night and then pushed them to leave and continue their journey. What the Old Fathers experienced was a very vivid and real form of racism (shocking indeed as it came from men like them), whereas "[t]heir horror of whites was convulsive but abstract" (189).

Notwithstanding, the community also experienced racism from the political institutions in the United States, which is epitomised by the town's name: Ruby. The town has been named so after an incident that happened to "that sweet, modest laughing girl whom he [Deek] and Steward had protected all their lives" (113). Deek and Stewards are the descendants of one of the founding fathers of Ruby, therefore they view themselves as the leaders of Ruby. Their sister Ruby Morgan Smith had gotten suddenly sick on their journey, she recuperated and then she got sick again. After they drove her to a hospital, they learnt that:

> No colored people were allowed in the wards. No regular doctor would attend them. She had lost control, then consciousness by the time they got to the second hospital. She died on the waiting room bench while the nurse tried to find a doctor to examine her. (113)

The pinnacle of agony and desperation was reached when they found out that "the nurse had been trying to reach a veterinarian, and [when] they gathered their dead sister in their arms, their shoulders shook all the way home" (113). The palpable sense of loss is accompanied by the devastating humiliation as they experienced the dehumanisation of their beloved sister, who was not treated as someone but rather as "something" animalistic. This incident forms an important part of the town's history and enables us to better comprehend the reasons behind the sterile and strict isolation of Ruby from the surrounding world.

Considering the complete seclusion and remoteness of this all-black town, could the absence of racism be presumed in this "paradisiacal" place? One of the main characters Soane notices that even though there "were no whites (moral or malevolent) around to agitate or incense them, make them ugly-up the Oven and defy adults" (102), there were still conflicts in their community as well as hatred and aversion towards some members of Ruby. These members seemed not to "fit in" due to the complexion of their skin, which was lighter than the blue-black skin colour of other Ruby citizens. The light-skinned African Americans in Ruby were marginalised and faced racism from their neighbours, colleagues and relatives.

> This time the clarity was clear: for ten generations they had believed the division they fought to close was free against slave and rich against poor. Usually, but not always, white against black. Now they saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. (194)

This marginalisation of light-skinned members of Ruby's society has its roots in the previously mentioned Disallowing. The people of the town remembered that "the Disallowing came from fair-skinned colored men. Blue-eyed, gray-eyed yellowmen in good suits" (195), which has marked the unofficial establishment of the "blood rules" shaping the lives in Ruby.

The detrimental consequences of this separation and discrimination of light-skinned citizens of Ruby are evident when Roger Best, one of the New Fathers, marries "the hazel-eyed girl with light-brown hair" (201) with a "pale skin" (198). Nobody says anything directly, apart of Steward, who says out loud: "'He's bringing along the dung we leaving behind'" (201). This event marks the first violation of Ruby's unofficial "blood rules", according to which marrying

a light-skinned spouse was a violation of these rules. The hatred and malevolence towards people with lighter skin have been felt especially by the progeny of the founding families called 8-R: eight-rock.

> An abbreviation for eight-rock, a deep deep level in the coal mines. Blue-black people, tall and graceful, whose clear, wide eyes gave no sign of what they really felt about those who weren't 8-rock like them. (193)

The personal experience of Roger Best marrying a light-skinned woman along with the subsequent negative reaction of the community clearly illustrates the intraracial discrimination in the all-black town of Ruby. Morrison's profundity and emphasis on the participatory nature of her writing is apparent when she uses extreme and personal stories to expose the most concerning issues affecting and infecting the society, such as racism and its pernicious effects.

Robert Best's daughter Pat recalls one of these moments in her collection of the family trees and diverse histories of the citizens of Ruby. When Pat's mother was in labour, unexpected complications occurred and the situation was too complicated for local midwives. Therefore, the women in Ruby begged their husbands to get help from the Convent or from a doctor in another town.

> They came up with excuses because they looked down on you, Mama, I know it, and despised Daddy for marrying a wife with no last name, a wife without people, a wife of sunlight skin, a wife of racial tempering. (197)

According to Pat, the patriarchs despised her mother due to her fair skin. Also, they did not want to ask people outside of their town for help nor did they want to bring a white man into their all-black town. Consequently, Pat's mother died in childbirth and her child died as well. This poignant incident discloses the hidden animosity present in Ruby, which penetrates the society and according to 8-rock families, justifies the established social hierarchy in town (based on one's roots and skin colour).

The phenomenon described in *Paradise*, when racism is present even in an all-black town, challenges the presumptions regarding race and racism, because it shows that racism can also spread among a black community as well as universally. It is not limited by community or country, moreover, it does not have to be always intentional, sometimes racism is a "by-product

of a society with a particular history and cultural of race."[61] In *Paradise*, Toni Morrison focuses on the serious nature of racial discrimination and the unconscious effects of race and racism on society as a whole.

The massacre taking place at the Convent depicted at the end of *Paradise* is an attempt to destroy what the men of Ruby view as a very dangerous, sinister and perverted place. Why and how did the women endanger the town? What danger did a group of women represent to the local authorities? First and foremost, it is important to note that Morrison's emphasis in *Paradise* is not chiefly upon class differences (suggested by the social hierarchy in the town), but upon the multitude of challenges to local community posed by race and gender.[62] The Convent represents the outside world, embodies diversity and epitomises the "free space" not dominated by male authorities. In other words, "the women at the Convent become a convenient scapegoat because their acceptance of different ideas, behaviors, races, and ethnicities while retaining economic autonomy calls into question the necessity of Ruby's rigid code of behavior and politics of exclusion."[63]

This group of women at the Convent represents such a threat to the male authorities in Ruby as they are not dependent on any male figures. They are autonomous and live by their own rules, accepting everybody who comes to the Convent (especially those who take refuge there from the rigid rules and strict exclusion of Ruby). These women are not idealised nor depicted as saints: some of them are notorious for drinking excessively, smoking, cursing, having sexual relations, quarrelling, fighting each other or committing crimes in the past. Pat Best ponders the reasons for the massacre at the Convent and comes to her own conclusion.

> [T]hat nine 8-rocks murdered five harmless women *(a)* because the women were impure (not 8-rock); *(b)* because the women were unholy (fornicators at the least, abortionists at most); and *(c)* because they *could* – which was what being an 8-rock meant to them and was also what the "deal" required. (297)

The men wanted not only to protect their families from the "outside danger", symbolised by the unrestrained Convent, but also desired to assert their power by showing what they were still capable of. The irony of this gory ending lies in the fact that as the men of Ruby stalk the women living in the Convent, "they repeat the threat of racial and sexual violence they found so

[61] Schur, "Locating *Paradise* in the Post-Civil Rights Era: Toni Morrison and Critical Race Theory," 297.
[62] Elizabeth Kella, *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in Fiction by Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison and Joy Kogawa* (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000), 210.
[63] Romero, "Creating the Beloved Community: Religion, Race, and Nation in Toni Morrison's '*Paradise*,'" 419.

reprehensible in the white males who once circled Ruby's women."[64] Successively, the male leaders of Ruby have become exactly the danger their ancestors ran away from due to their focus on separatism as well as on racial purity.

At the end, it is indisputable that the strategy of the men in Ruby backfired, when their racially "pure" and perfect town cracks as a consequence of their actions.[65] According to Missy Dehn Kubitschek, the novel challenges "the myth of unity and perfection in black society relieved of white oppression."[66] In *Paradise*, the harmony, balance and perfection are not achieved, which suggests that "paradise" is not and cannot be an isolated place, but should be accessible to all who desire to enter it. The isolation from all white people is not a solution for the citizens of Ruby as new forms of hatred and discrimination have been created in this all-black town, which emerged not from the outside world but from the very inside of their community. Morrison, therefore, warns against all possible types of discrimination whether it is due to the skin colour, gender, age or any other factor. The final thoughts of Reverend Misner in the novel question the very concept of Ruby.

> Unbridled by Scripture, deafened by the roar of its own history, Ruby, it seemed to him, was an unnecessary failure. […] How can they hold it together, he wondered, this hard-won heaven defined only by the absence of the unsaved, the unworthy and the strange? Who will protect them from their leaders? (305)

The only way to heal would include doing precisely what the women at the Convent did: confront their traumatic and problematic past, embrace it and become reconciled with it. It is not an easy process, as can be seen over the course of this novel, but Morrison always depicts characters in her oeuvre who are "capable of achieving self-knowledge and ultimately, in one sense or another, salvation."[67]

Morrison never stops examining the abundance of different meanings ascribed to race in her rich oeuvre. Her novels are centred on race above other themes and topics she presents in her novels and Morrison's subjectivity evokes contrasting reactions. After the publication of *Paradise,* with only one mention of race and that being the moment when the white girl is shot,

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[64] Kella, *Beloved Communities: Solidarity and Difference in Fiction by Michael Ondaatje, Toni Morrison and Joy Kogawa*, 214.
[65] Shirley Ann Stave, "*Jazz* and *Paradise*: Pivotal Moments in Black History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 67.
[66] Missy Dehn Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1995), 179.
[67] Stave, "*Jazz* and *Paradise*: Pivotal Moments in Black History," 73.

she was interviewed in 1998 and asked if she could "ever change and write books that incorporate white lives into them substantially."[68] Toni Morrison reacted adequately: '"You can't understand how powerfully racist that question is, can you? [...] Because you could never ask a white author, 'When are you going to write about black people?' ... Even the inquiry comes from the position of being in the center ... and saying, 'Is it ever possible that you will enter the mainstream?' It's inconceivable that where I already am is the mainstream.'"[69] The interviewer's question comes from the position of a presumed centralism, which implies the flawed logic, according to Robert Hemenway, that "black author must transcend race in order to write universally."[70] Therefore, this flawed reasoning implies that in order to write universally, Morrison would have to enter the assumed mainstream and focus on lives of white people in her novels eventually.

Toni Morrison refuses this approach and in her literary oeuvre she never stops to focus on the problem with the ignorance of racial issues as well as with the prejudices and racism faced especially by African American women and their struggle emerging from that. While she was working on her novel *Paradise*, she stated that '"[i]n the novel I am now writing, I am trying first to enunciate and then eclipse the racial gaze altogether"'[71] which she managed to do by portraying "racelessness" in her novel as the characters are not defined by their race, which still remains an enigma. Toni Morrison has never stopped fighting for "a space that is not invaded by the 'white gaze'"[72] and she succeeded in creating that "free space" in her novels, especially in her above-discussed novel *Paradise*.

[68] Emily Bernard, '"Raceless' Writing and Difference: Ann Petry's *Country Place* and the African-American Literary Canon," *Studies in American Fiction* 33, no. 1 (2005): 87, doi:10.1353/saf.2005.0000.
[69] Bernard, '"Raceless' Writing and Difference: Ann Petry's *Country Place* and the African-American Literary Canon," 87.
[70] Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), 307.
[71] Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House That Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998), 9.
[72] Bernard, '"Raceless' Writing and Difference: Ann Petry's *Country Place* and the African-American Literary Canon," 87.

# A MERCY

Another one of Toni Morrison's later novels examining the problematics of the concept of race and subsequent racism is her eighth novel *A Mercy*, which was originally published in 2008. This novel is set in the late 17th century in the time of colonial America, which makes this novel go back to the early stages of slave trade. What makes this novel differ from other Morrison's novels is the carefully chosen historical period during which can be observed the coexistence of slavery and white indentureship.[73]

These two forms of enslavement existed simultaneously at the same time and place, which exposes a period during which slavery was not yet completely racialised. The representation of enslaved African Americans as well as of white Americans highlights differences between slavery and racism, which are less apparent in the subsequent historical periods when these two elements were frequently mixed together, and slavery became racialised. According to Joseph M. Armengol, this phenomenon is evident when we analyse later slave narratives such as Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* which "illustrates the increasing racialisation of slavery throughout the nineteenth century,"[74] and therefore, we can interpret Morrison's *A Mercy* as a "prequel"[75] to Douglass as well as a neo-slave narrative.

Hence, slavery and racism have not always been related to African Americans in America. This novel explores the roots of racism as well as the concepts of human freedom in the early days of America. Similarly, as in her most famous novel *Beloved*, Morrison once again gives voice to those who had no voice in the past, especially African American women under slavery. Nevertheless, the voice is given to all marginalised characters undergoing slavery in *A Mercy*, even though they belong (sociologically) to many different races. Their lives and personal experiences are captured through various innovative narrative strategies, such as non-linear narration, as well as through abrupt changes in point of view, enigmatic beginnings of each chapter, multiple narrative perspectives, elements of magical realism and discontinuity

[73] Markus Nehl, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," in *Transnational Black Dialogues: Re-Imagining Slavery in the Twenty-First Century* (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2016), 55, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt1v.6.
[74] Joseph M. Armengol, "Slavery in Black and White: The Racialisation of (Male) Slavery in Frederick Douglass's Narrative and/vs. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *Postcolonial Studies* 20, no. 4 (2017): 479, doi:10.1080/13688790.2017.1410770.
[75] Armengol, "Slavery in Black and White: The Racialisation of (Male) Slavery in Frederick Douglass's Narrative and/vs. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," 480.

persistent throughout the whole novel. The use of short simple sentences, limited vocabulary and incorrect grammar for slaves' narratives adds a sense of realism to Morrison's writing and makes the recounted stories even more credible.

It is indeed possible to draw parallels between *A Mercy* and *Beloved*, not only because both novels deal with the extensiveness of maternal sacrifice, but also because *A Mercy* is "a multi-perspective, highly fragmented, self-reflexive, non-linear and poetic text full of unresolved tensions and inner ambiguities, [which] reflects the black slave characters' experiences and uprootedness, sexual abuse and fragmentation in late seventeenth-century North America."[76] Morrison stresses the abhorrent reality of female victimisation during this historical period as the majority of characters in *A Mercy* are females.

*A Mercy* unfolds multiple stories of diverse characters working on the farm or in the household of Jacob Vaark, an Anglo-Dutch trader and farmer in New England, who differs from other masters of that epoch as he himself was an orphan and lived in a poorhouse, therefore he feels pity for his slaves and servants. His household consists of his servant Lina, who is a Native American and whose village has been wiped out by a plague of smallpox; Sorrow, an odd and enigmatic girl, described by her previous master as "a bit mongrelized"[77] and presumably suffering from some kind of mental illness; Florens, the slave girl Jacob accepts instead of a payment from a Portuguese Catholic slave trader D'Ortega; Willard and Scully, the two European male indentured servants who often work at Vaark's farm. What unites all these divergent characters with different backgrounds and "races" is their submission to slavery. Morrison stated in a National Public Radio interview before the publication of her novel *Mercy* that by presenting people belonging to different races and ethnic groups in *A Mercy*, she "wanted to separate race from slavery to see what it was like, what it might have been like, to be a slave but without being raced."[78]

The Native American woman Lina offers a reflection on the European colonisation and the origins of American nationalism including the plunder and exploitation of her people.

> Her people had built sheltering cities for a thousand years and, except for the deathfeet of the Europes, might have built them for a thousand more. [...] The Europes [...] would come with languages that sounded like dog bark; with a childish hunger for animal fur. They would forever

[76] Nehl, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," 56.
[77] Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (London: Vintage, 2009), 118. All subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated in the text by parentheses.
[78] Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison Discusses *A Mercy*," interview with Lynn Neary, *Book Tour*, *National Public Radio*, 27 Oct. 2008.

> fence land, ship whole trees to faraway countries, take any woman for quick pleasure, ruin soil, befoul sacred places and worship a dull, unimaginative god. (52)

Thanks to Lina's perspective, we get a deeply ironic look and examination of the origins of America's sense of exceptionalism with its myth of "chosen" people founded on the dangerous binary divisions between white and black, elect and damned, New World and Old.[79] Lina embodies the Old World, America before the European colonisation, and represents the ancient wisdom and harmony with nature, which serves as a stark opposite to the settlers' behaviour. Even though she trusts her master Jacob's and his wife Rebecca's judgement, she does not "trust their instincts" (53).

Moreover, Lina criticises the superior attitude of the newcomers who are mesmerised by the multitude of "forests untouched since Noah, shorelines beautiful enough to bring tears, wild food for the taking" (10) for the first time and instantly think that they can claim ownership of that land. This god-like attitude is paradoxically contrasted with their inexperience of the harsh reality of everyday life in America. When a catastrophe such as an off-season blizzard occurred to Vaark's household, it was Lina who saved them from starvation.

> [She] carried a basket and an axe, braved the thigh-high drifts, the mind-numbing wind, to get to the river. There she pulled from below the ice enough broken salmon to bring back and feed them. She filled her basket with all she could snare; tied the basket handle to her braid to keep her hands from freezing on the trek back. (98)

The fact that the white settlers were many times dependent on the experience and knowledge of their Native American servants serves as an intentional paradox which "undercuts any easy association between the Vaarks and prelapsarian Adam and Eve, and hence between European settlers and divine or moral superiority. Lina is critical of the couple for acting as if they were the first humans on earth"[80] and of their belief that they did not need anyone else to survive in the unknown wilderness.

Instead of receiving gratitude, Lina experiences discrimination and humiliation. As the story develops, her Mistress (Rebecca Vaark) does not let her sleep inside the house and starts

[79] Susan Strehle, "'I Am a Thing Apart': Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*, and American Exceptionalism," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (2013): 109, https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2012.722569.
[80] Tessa Roynon, "Her Dark Materials: John Milton, Toni Morrison, and Concepts of 'Dominion' in *A Mercy*," *African American Review* (Winter 2011): 598, https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/her-dark-materials-john-milton-toni-morrison/docview/1040835472/se-2?accountid=35514.

to view her servants and slaves as "savages" (157). Moreover, the Mistress does not allow Lina to bathe naked in the river anymore and she must "cultivate alone" (158). This transition of the settlers' behaviour towards their slaves depicted in *A Mercy* is supposed to reflect the political upheaval of that historical period. Events such as Bacon's Rebellion, during which an alliance between European indentured servants and Africans was formed, signified a danger for the upper class of the colonial society and resulted in the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705, which institutionalised racialised slavery and hindered any future form of collaboration between these two above-mentioned groups. Nathaniel Bacon succeeded at his efforts to create a group "not defined by race, status or class"[81] which consisted of "blacks, natives, whites, mulattoes– freedman, slaves and indentured– [and] had waged war against the local gentry led by members of that very class" (8).

Moreover, Morrison explains in her novel that in the early stages of colonisation of America, many incoming Europeans still viewed slaves as human beings. The first occurrence of this phenomenon is during so-called forced "mating" at the plantation of D'Ortega, where "the man who were told to break we in apologized" (164) afterwards. As a result, Florens and her brother were born. This event displays how children of slaves were often conceived at that time: not out of love, but due to master's order stemming from the desire to multiply his property and wealth. The fact that the men apologised after raping the women at the plantation is a noteworthy event as it exhibits how slaves were recurrently viewed in the 17th century. The men who were assigned to "break in" acknowledge the women's humanity through their apology and, moreover, this incident shows that in their eyes, "Africans were still human beings and not subhuman property."[82]

The second occurrence is when Jacob Vaark accepts a young slave girl Florens from D'Ortega instead of a payment. When Jacob sees a healthy-looking woman (Florens's mother) standing in the doorway with two children, he asks for this slave. Nevertheless, D'Ortega refuses and Jacob "recognizing the clove-laced sweat, suspected there was more than cooking D'Ortega stood to lose" (22). What happened next is the central point of this novel, later explained as an act of mercy.

> "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter." Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter,

[81] La Vinia Delois Jennings, ""*A Mercy*": Toni Morrison Plots the Formation of Racial Slavery in Seventeenth-Century America," *Callaloo* 32, no. 2 (2009): 647, http://www.jstor.org/stable/27743026.
[82] Jennings, ""*A Mercy*": Toni Morrison Plots the Formation of Racial Slavery in Seventeenth-Century America," 648.

> and was struck by the terror in her eyes. [...] Suddenly the woman smelling of cloves knelt and closed her eyes. (24-25)

Young Florens does not understand her mother's reasoning for offering her daughter instead of herself and considers it an unforgivable betrayal and rejection. Also, Florens does not understand why her mother would choose to rather lose her than her little brother. At the end of *A Mercy*, Florens's mother explains that she saw that Jacob Vaark "see you [Florens] as a human child, not pieces of eight" (164). Her main motive was to save Florens from all dangers of sexual exploitation and dehumanisation she would experience had she stayed at the plantation of D'Ortega. This episode in *A Mercy* serves as a link to Morrison's *Beloved*, because this novel also deals with the complex nature of maternal sacrifice raising many ethical questions, which can be asked only by those who were directly affected by the sacrifice: their children.

This pivotal moment hinted at the beginning and fully explained at the end of this novel serves as the root cause of all insecurities Florens has, especially her feelings of worthlessness and desperation for love, affection and acceptance. It also explains her infatuation with the Blacksmith who sometimes works for the Vaark's household; not as one of Jacob's slaves but as "a respectable free Negro blacksmith who knows herbal medicine."[83] The ambiguous beginning of this novel, narrated in the first person and including a second-person address, is later unravelled as the narrator is revealed to be Florens addressing her writing to the Blacksmith. One of Morrison's narrative techniques is starting *in media res* using the second-person address "you" to make her reader feel responsible in some way for the story, even though later is revealed that the story is not addressed directly to the reader.[84] This strategy once again aims to develop a participatory approach in her readers, which is crucial especially later in the story to comprehend what slavery felt like.

Morrison truly portrays a plethora of various forms of enslavement in *A Mercy* to explore the concept of slavery and subsequent racism. The above-mentioned burning passion felt by Florens for the Blacksmith is described in the novel as a form of slavery. Florens travels to him, because her Mistress Rebecca is suffering from smallpox and he is the only one who

[83] Geneva Cobb Moore, "A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*", *Southern Literary Journal*, no. 1 (2011): 4, https://www.proquest.com/undefined/demonic-parody-toni-morrisons-em-mercy/docview/2152659678/se-2?accountid=35514.
[84] Stephen Best, "On Failing to Make the Past Present," *Modern Language Quarterly* (2012): 469, doi: https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-1631478.

can cure her, and Florens shares her innermost thoughts with her audience (addressed to him). She has based all her identity and persona on worshipping and admiring him. The Blacksmith later confronts Florens about this toxic view of him and her emotional investment in their relationship.

> I want you to go. [...]
> Why? Why?
> Because you are a slave. [...]
> Sir makes me that.
> I don't mean him.
> Then who?
> You. [...] You have become one.
> How?
> Your head is empty and your body is wild.
> I am adoring you.
> And a slave to that too.
> You alone own me.
> Own yourself, woman, and leave us be. (139)

The Blacksmith confronts Florens that she is not a slave because she was forced to be one, but because even her mind is enslaved through her unhealthy attachment to him. He blames her for her voluntary subordination to slavery. In addition to that, the Blacksmith's status as a free man with all his rights and higher social status, even though he is not a white man, would be threatened by this bond with Florens, an enslaved woman, as the slavery and race has already begun to be conflated in the early colonial period. [85] According to Valerie Babb, he rejects Florens "for his own social survival [as] he must maintain a clear demarcation between his free blackness and Florens's enslaved blackness."[86]

The Blacksmith's fear to be viewed as other Africans, oftentimes slaves, in the later 17th century demonstrates that the anti-black laws and tendencies already started at that time, after Bacon's Rebellion, and that slavery started to be identified with race. Morrison reflects on this

[85] Nehl, "From Human Bondage to Racial Slavery: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* (2008)," 66-67.
[86] Valerie Babb, "'E Pluribus Unum?' The American Origins Narrative in Toni Morrison's '*A Mercy*'," *MELUS* 36, no. 2 (2011): 154, http://www.jstor.org/stable/23035285.

phenomenon as well as on the conservative, strongly religious and superstitious society in *A Mercy*, which is especially visible when Florens receives help from Widow Ealing and her daughter Jane, who is suffering from a squint which leads the other villagers to believe that she is a demon. Her mother, Widow Ealing, is beating her daughter to prove that Jane is not a demon as "demons do not bleed" (107). This disturbing situation intensifies when a part of the religious group from the village comes to examine Jane and they see Florens.

> [A] little girl [...] screams and hides behind the skirts of one of the women. Then each visitor turns to look at me. The women gasp. The man's walking stick clatters to the floor [...]. One woman speaks saying she has never seen any human this black. [...] She is Afric. Afric and much more, says another. [...] It is true then says another. The Black Man is among us. This is his minion. (109)

The villagers' strong reaction to their encounter with Florens highlights that dark skin colour has already started to be viewed as something negative, or, more specifically, as a sign of demonic qualities such as Jane's physical handicap mentioned previously. Their repugnance, fear and superstition are palpable when they refuse to touch Rebecca's letter Florens is carrying, which explains the purpose of Florens's journey and should serve as proof that she is not a Black Man's minion. They make Florens to take off her clothes while they examine her whole body. There is no hate in their eyes, but the complete absence of human recognition. Florens recounts that "[s]wine look at me with more connection when they raise their heads from the though" (111) than these women examining her. Morrison stresses that a slave at that epoch, especially dark-skinned African, was predominantly viewed not as human being but as a "soulless animal" (164).

According to Geneva Cobb Moore, Morrison's novel *A Mercy* can be considered a demonic parody of early American experience, shortly after the colonisation by the Europeans, "for Native Americans, black Africans, and black Americans, with demonic imagery of their gradual genocide and enslavement emphasizing the hell on earth they suffered."[87] This novel offers a meditation on the origins of racialised slavery and via recounting multiple personal stories, Morrison enables her readers to feel what it must have been like to form a part of a marginalised group such as servants, slaves or women in the seventeenth century. She delivers

[87] Moore, "A Demonic Parody: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," 3.

stories of women under subordination, especially those under slavery, such as Florens's mother, who summarises her position in a few sentences.

> There is no protection. None. [...] To be female in this place is to be an open wound that cannot heal. Even if scars form, the festering is ever below. (160-161)

Morrison strives not only to depict the experience and marginalisation of black individuals in *A Mercy*, as she does for instance in the previously discussed novel *Paradise*, but also to portray the suffering of the Native American, multiracial, and multi-ethnic slaves as well as the indentured servants in the early days of European settlement.[88] In *A Mercy*, Morrison exposes and investigates various types of enslavement and their influence on American society. Exploring the roots of institutionalised racism in 17th century America serves as an interesting link to her last novel *God Help the Child* set in contemporary America, which also portrays the impact of racism on the lives of people from various backgrounds and the detrimental consequences of racial discrimination affecting all members of American society.

[88] Gladys Lydia, and A. Sheeba, "Perpetuation, Mediation and Annihilation of Oppressions in the Matriarchal and Patriarchal Spaces of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*," *Language in India* 18, no. 2 (February 2018): 66, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edo&AN=137936892&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.

# GOD HELP THE CHILD

Toni Morrison's last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015), explores how the sufferings of childhood can have long lasting effects on the life of an adult and on the acceptance of one's identity. The fact that the central focus of Morrison's last novel is on the problematics of race and subsequent racism again, as it has been in many of her preceding writings such as *The Bluest Eye* or "Recitatif", displays that Morrison viewed this issue as an ongoing and central problem in American society, even at the end of her literary career. In *God Help the Child*, she once again recounts the lives of her marginalised characters in a racially discriminated milieu of American society and highlights that race is still a crucial topic which needs to be discussed even in the so-called post-racial era.[89] Morrison emphasises the dangerous nature of skin privileges in her novel and the way they shape even the African American community. In one of her interviews, she recalls her time at Howard University where the "paper bag test" served as a tool to distinguish "whether your skin is darker or lighter than a paper bag. There were whole sororities that were proud that they had the lightest skin color."[90] Morrison's personal experience of this shocking and abhorrent reality is mirrored in her last novel as she discloses that many African Americans behaved according to the unwritten rules of society, which were based on the wrong assumption that "the lighter, the better", reflecting the social inequalities closely tied to racial inequalities.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison depicts a tragic childhood of a young woman Lula Ann Bridewell, later changing her name to Bride, who is a victim of racial prejudice and discrimination, which she experiences not only from the society, but also from her own mother. The protagonist, Bride, was born with an ebony skin tone, which causes her mother to despise her. She does not let Bride call her "Mother" or "Mama" but insists that her daughter calls her "Sweetness" instead, especially in public. Bride's very dark skin colour is also the reason why Bride's father, Louis, left the family, as he did not believe she was his own child nor that her "blackness" could have potentially come from his side of the family. The novel begins with Sweetness' perspective on her daughter right after she was born.

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[89] Tamara Jovović, "Rethinking Race: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*," *BAS - British & American Studies* 25 (January 2019): 203, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edb&AN=137284107&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.

[90] Maddie Oatman, "The New Black," *Mother Jones* 40, no. 3 (May 2015): 60, http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=asn&AN=102150337&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site.

> It's not my fault and you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black.[91]

This extreme reaction is caused by Sweetness' personal experience with her grandmother, who "passed for white" (3) and never talked to the rest of her family again. Sweetness also describes herself as a light-skinned person and lists all the privileges that people with lighter skin can enjoy in the society, such as trying on clothes in the front part of the store or not being charged for a paper bag at the grocery store. Morrison later explained that she truly wanted her character Sweetness "to make explicit the advantages of being a light-skinned Negro."[92] Therefore, her daughter represents an obstacle to these privileges and Sweetness is truly embarrassed of her blue-black daughter. She even considers committing infanticide or giving her daughter away to an orphanage. Also, Sweetness refuses to breastfeed her daughter as, in her words, it feels "like having a pickaninny sucking my teat" (5). This offensive term used for her child truly demonstrates the level of disgust she feels towards her daughter. As a result, Sweetness denies Bride all forms of love and affection and just the thought of physical touch with her daughter sickens her.

As a result, Bride is truly desperate for all forms of affection and validation as a child. This deprivation of maternal love and human contact has a tragic outcome on her confidence and strongly affects her childhood. This novel exposes all unimaginable dangers and trauma children face on a daily basis and some of these issues are repeatedly mentioned in *God Help the Child,* such as paedophilia, sexual abuse, physical and emotional abuse, neglect and exploitation. Such brutal and horrific events which happen to young and innocent children can make this novel disturbing and uncomfortable to read. In *God Help the Child*, an eight-year-old Lula Ann, who is Bride herself before she changes her name later, is called to testify against Mrs. Sophia Huxley, who has been accused of child molestation. The social workers and psychologists are trying to comfort all kids present at the trial, but nobody hugs or comforts Lula Ann with her "licorice skin" (33). It is only after she does what they expected of her, which

[91] Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (New York: Vintage, 2016), 3. All subsequent quotations from this text will be indicated in the text by parentheses.
[92] Oatman, "The New Black," 60.

was to point her finger directly at Mrs. Huxley in order to convict her, when the situation changes.

> Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. [...] Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. (31)

The little Lula Ann is beyond ecstatic as her mother touches her in an affectionate way for the first time. She testifies against Mrs. Huxley, encouraged by Sweetness, even though she has no proof or evidence that Mrs. Huxley was the child abuser. Lula Ann's biggest motivation for bearing false witness at the court is the promise of her mother's affection and the praise from the community. As Sweetness later recounts, "[i]t's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites" (42).

This incident is quite paradoxical as when Lula Ann discovers the true molester, Mr. Leigh, who is their landlord, Sweetness is furious and orders Lula Ann to never talk about it again. The motive behind her strict command is the fear of Mr. Leigh and the knowledge that "standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment" (54), which would be extremely hard, especially to find another "safe, meaning mixed, neighborhood" (54) where they could live. This is one of the childhood lessons Bride receives altogether with keeping her head down, not fighting back and being religiously obedient. Sweetness' negative reaction after the incident with Mr. Leigh teaches little Lula Ann that "community is less important than self-preservation and that telling the truth on the behalf of vulnerable others is not advisable if it threatens to undermine one's social position or safety."[93] This double standard represents only one of the many discrepancies in the society that children are forced to deal with. Morrison examines different dangers and prejudices children are exposed to at a very young age and how these elements shape their lives as adults.

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye* and her last novel *God Help the Child*. Both novels display the detrimental effects of racism and a corrupted society by showing how they affect the most vulnerable members of our society: children. When the events in the novels are narrated from the point of view of a child, it brings

[93] Rhone Fraser and Natalie King-Pedroso, *Critical Responses About the Black Family in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2019), 85.

out unexpected phenomena. The reader is aware of the fact that child's perspective is limited, and that the child does not comprehend everything. The protagonist, Bride, even acknowledges that "I know now what I didn't know then" (54), when she recounts the episode with Mr. Leigh and understands Sweetness' motives, even though she does not justify her actions. The power of the child's point of view as a narrative technique derives from the fact that it highlights the child's innocence and naivety, which can make the reader more vicarious as well. Morrison acknowledges that children cannot understand everything but subconsciously, they absorb all the emotions and non-verbal communication, so grasping the meaning is not impossible for them.

In order to fully comprehend why Morrison chooses to portray specific events in her novel from a child's perspective and not from a perspective of an authoritative narrator, her approach to narrative voice must be analysed. It can be classified as "postmodern" because it does not find "narrative authority as conditional, [...] meaning is now not merely contingent but indeterminate, and the notion of a narrator as a textual 'higher' authority [...] becomes not merely hollow but absurd."[94] This is a pivotal moment in the history of antislavery novels as prior to that it was remarkably common that "the narrator and the most authoritative characters are educated African-Americans whose voices were indistinguishable formally from those of educated whites."[95] Her novel, *God Help the Child*, therefore, serves as a counter narrative since it untraditionally refers to the narratives which arise from points of view of those who, over the course of history, were marginalized. In accordance with that, Morrison repulses being silent about things that may be too uncomfortable to hear, and she refuses to let herself "drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate"[96] in her novels.

Notwithstanding the traumatic childhood and horrific incidents that Bride has witnessed and experienced, she turns out to be a very successful and ambitious businesswoman who excels at her work in the cosmetics industry. To enhance her dark skin colour, her designer suggests that she should only wear white clothes and white accessories all the time.

> "You should always wear white, Bride. [...] Not only because of your name, [...] but because what it does to your licorice skin," he said. [...] "[N]o makeup. [...] No jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No. Not even that. Just you, girl. All sable and ice. A panther in snow." [...] I took his advice and it worked. Everywhere I went I got double takes

[94] Susan Sniader Lanser, "Unspeakable Voice: Toni Morrison's Postmodern Authority," in *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 126, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctt207g6vm.10.
[95] Lanser, "Unspeakable Voice: Toni Morrison's Postmodern Authority," 124-125.
[96] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory", in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1995), 90-91.

> but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry. (34)

Bride makes peace with her past, she embraces her idiosyncratic features and becomes very successful. This is quite a contrasting outcome to Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which ends tragically as the main character does not recuperate from the horrors of her childhood. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison represents the idea that "black is the new black" (33) and the empowerment of the novel's female protagonist is closely linked with the philosophy of black feminist theory, which celebrates the minds, bodies and consciousness of African American women. Emerging as a reaction to "sexism in the Black Power movement and racism in the women's liberation movement,"[97] the black feminist theory represents the movement which does not display solely the detrimental effects of patriarchy, but also portrays the oppression of white supremacy. According to Ula Y. Taylor, since the economic differences are the principal determinants producing variations in the lives of African American women, black feminists strive to combat sexism, racism, and poverty concurrently.[98] As Bride becomes an empowered, successful and remarkably wealthy African American woman, she attacks racism, sexism and poverty all at the same time.

Morrison's protagonist, Bride, is empowered also thanks to the support of her boyfriend Booker, who helps her to accept her past and not feel responsible for the evil actions of other people. He gives her many valuable lessons and shares his insights regarding racism, racial hatred and discrimination. During one of their conversations, Bride shares with him her hurt from the past regarding Sweetness and how Sweetness despised her for her blue-black skin.

> "It's just a color," Booker had said. "A genetic trait–not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin."
>
> "But," she countered, "other people think racial–"
>
> Booker cut her off. "Scientifically there's no such thing as race, Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it." (143)

This powerful statement about racism as well as revealing to Bride that racism is a social construct changes the way she thinks about the racial discrimination and her "blackness".

[97] Ula Y. Taylor, "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism," *The Black Scholar* 28, no. 2 (1998): 19, http://www.jstor.org/stable/41069774.
[98] Taylor, "Making Waves: The Theory and Practice of Black Feminism," 18.

According to an African American feminist critic and literary scholar Mary Helen Washington, one of the recurring themes in African American literature is the theme of double consciousness, the divided self, which is especially prominent among suppressed women.[99] The same theme is present in *God Help the Child*, when Bride is divided between an empowered, successful, beautiful woman and that fragile little girl with blue-black skin who was despised by her mother. Only after she has dealt with her past and admitted the impact of her very own history on her relationships and emotional state did she find the courage to take her life into her own hands and look for new beginnings without the paralysing fear and constant submission to her mother.

Moreover, African American female characters can be divided into three groups (according to Mary Helen Washington): 1. "the suspended woman", who is stopped from growth and development; 2. "the assimilated woman", who is solely a victim of psychological violence; 3. "the emergent woman", who represents the new and empowered woman.[100] Considering this schema, the development of Morrison's female characters can be observed as Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, who would fall into the first category, and Bride in Morrison's last novel *God Help the Child* would be representative of the third group. This transition highlights that Morrison did not portray the protagonist of her last novel solely as a victim, but also as a strong, empowered and beautiful woman, who is fully aware that she is responsible for her own life.

Nevertheless, over the course of the novel, Morrison stresses the importance of events that happen in one's childhood and the lessons we learn as children. Even though Bride seems to endure all the hardships and becomes a rich executive of a prospering cosmetics company, she is still very emotionally dependent on other people, especially on her boyfriend Booker, as a result of her mother's neglect. At the end, Bride is expecting a child with Brooker, which suggests an unexpected happy ending in this novel.

> A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath.
>
> So they believe. (175)

[99] Mary Helen Washington, "Teaching Black-Eyed Susans: An Approach to the Study of Black Women Writers," *Black American Literature Forum* 11, no. 1 (1977): 20, doi:10.2307/3041534.
[100] Jovović, "Rethinking Race: Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and *God Help the Child*," 203.

Although Morrison does not degrade this wonderful act of bringing a child into this world, she stresses the hard work it requires to raise good, responsible and happy children in our society, which is full of various forms of prejudice and discrimination. *God Help the Child* reveals violent and disturbing crimes that children face from a very young age, which makes this novel sometimes difficult to read, but the personal stories and detailed descriptions of evil acts that children had to endure add a sense of realism to Morrison's writing.

In addition, Morrison's characters are never simply good or bad, but encapsulate a mixture of positive and negative qualities. This phenomenon can be observed with the character of Sweetness, whose behaviour towards Bride was motivated by her desire to prepare her for the evil world full of racism and racial prejudice as well as for the hard life she is going to have with such an "obsidian-midnight skin" (133). Therefore, Sweetness was very strict and tough with her daughter, which influenced negatively their relationship, which led them to not see each other anymore. In multiple chapters, Sweetness ponders her actions and behaviour towards Bride and concludes with a powerful message that forms a substantial part of Morrison's affecting legacy, displayed through the main story in *God Help the Child*, which underlines that "[w]hat you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (43).

# CONCLUSION

The problematics of race and racism are still a very pressing and relevant issue in our society, even though many years passed since the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865 which formally abolished slavery in America. The recent protests and demonstrations, especially after the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, have caused turmoil in the United States and the subsequent Black Lives Matter protests climaxed on June 6, when in almost 550 places across the United States approximately half a million people protested.[101] This phenomenon proves that even though the idea of race is not a biological construct, which would be proven by scientific research, it greatly shapes our society as well as our lives and causes racial discrimination, hatred and unequal justice around the world. Toni Morrison was sceptical of the ecstatic view that we are reaching the goal of a post-racial society and she focused her oeuvre on the concept of race, racism and various forms of slavery instead.

All of Morison's later novels *Paradise*, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child* explore the roots and the aftermath of racial injustice. Her novels are focused on race, stressing that all human beings are raced (many times unknowingly) due to our assumptions, prejudices, fears of something different and of the unknown. The first step towards truly post-racial era would be to become aware of the presence of these assumptions and ponder how they affect the way we think and act. This is more of a sociological question, which Morrison represents via her literary oeuvre. She strives to display the lives of her characters without the "white gaze" as she puts the lives of African Americans (as the biggest minority group in the United States) and other marginalized groups at the centre of her novels.

Nevertheless, Morrison does not idealise the characters in her novels. She displays racial hatred between light-skinned and dark-skinned African Americans in the midst of an all-black community in *Paradise*. In an attempt to create a safe place to live, the patriarchs of Ruby paradoxically become exactly what they have been running from: the violence and hate connected with assumed racial superiority. When the women of a nearby Convent become a scapegoat, Morrison still does not portray them as saints but as women who had various issues and vices and some of them even committing crimes in the past. This phenomenon adds a sense of realism to her novels and makes the discussed issues more complex.

[101] Larry Buchanan, Quoctrung Bui and Jugal K. Patel, "Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History," *The New York Times*, July 3, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html.

In *A Mercy*, the enslaved Florens experiences rejection from the Blacksmith, who is sociologically of the same race, but he realises that the union with an enslaved woman would endanger his social position as a free man. Instead of a union of these two African Americans during the time of colonial America, they end up going separate ways. Those who view slaves in *A Mercy* as human beings and treat them nicely, such as Jacob Vaark, are not idealised either. Jacob's greed and rejection of help from others substantially leads to his death. Similarly in *God Help the Child*, Sweetness is not portrayed simply as a villain in the novel with her extreme level of racial hatred and discrimination towards her daughter with blue-black skin, but the complexity of her situation is shown as she is simply trying to protect her daughter and survive in the harsh society. These similarities show that the problematics of race are a universal issue affecting all divergent communities and are not only tied to white supremacy.

Different methods and strategies are used in Morrison's novels to highlight the abhorrent reality of racism, subsequent slavery and racial discrimination. Morrison's novel *Paradise* focuses on showing the devastating effects of racism and sexism in the absence of race, which is directly mentioned only in the first sentence of the novel and points out to the fact that race is the least amount of information that can be known about someone. This challenges the way of thinking about race and racism. Depicting racism in the all-black town Ruby shows the extremely dangerous nature of racism as it can spread even among the all-black community. As a matter of fact, Morrison manages to describe the racial tension in *Paradise* without revealing the different race of women living at the Convent. Neither their social status nor the appearance and behaviour can illuminate that. This enables the reader to discover and observe racism in the absence of race.

Moreover, not specifying the race of Morrison's characters in *Paradise* leads to intentional ambiguity surrounding race, influencing readers' way of thinking about race as well as disrupting the already existing assumptions they may have. Howbeit, the element of "racelessness" incorporated in this novel serves as a thought-provoking tool to question the importance of knowing the race of each character as well as to ponder what would change if we knew who "the white girl" shot at the beginning of *Paradise* was. Morrison shifts the attention to the prejudices and racism faced mostly by African American women in her oeuvre and she does so in a "raceless" environment.

Morrison's strategy of disremembering and re-remembering is used in another one of her novels: *A Mercy*. The protagonist Florens relives various moments from her childhood, especially the episode of being disallowed by her mother at the plantation of D'Ortega, which

haunts her all her life. As Florens keeps remembering this memory, it highlights that "memory is always a 'rememory,' that is, one repetition in an endless sequence of rememberings or reassemblings of the past."[102] This theme of "rememory" is idiosyncratic for Toni Morrison as the process of remembering serves as a healing tool for Morrison's characters to make peace with their past, even though they will probably not forget their past, no matter how desirable that might be (especially in the context of slave narratives). Florens is haunted by her past, but she is not the only one. It is also her mother, who explains her motives at the last page of *A Mercy,* praying that Florens will understand that the act of sending her away with a foreign white man was a way to protect her from a very likely sexual exploitation at the household of D'Ortega and that this maternal sacrifice was the best decision she could make at that time.

It is interesting to note that Morrison accomplishes to "write about slavery and persistent racism without the heavy weight of this history collapsing her stories,"[103] which facilitates the process of reading her novels. In regard to history, Toni Morrison focuses on delivering the emotions encompassing the horrific aspects of slavery rather than just on presenting noncommittal facts. When she decides to highlight some important aspect from history, she focuses on delivering the feelings behind it, such as when the villagers refuse to even touch the letter Florens is carrying as they believe that she is a Black Man's minion. The lack of human recognition in their eyes is an abhorrent moment during which the humiliation and pain Florens feels is palpable. The fact that especially dark-skinned Africans were viewed not as human beings is something that "the reader didn't need to *see* it so much as to *feel* what it was like."[104] This strategy Morrison implements in a plethora of her novels and through reliving horrible experiences with the characters, she achieves to make the feeling of slavery imaginable, especially through making her characters vulnerable as they have "gaps, silences, and omissions of significance."[105]

Morrison gives integrity to her often-marginalised characters as she gives them a voice and centres her novels around their lives. Morrison provides power to those who had no power in the past, which defines for us a world far beyond the precincts mapped out by the definers

[102] Miller, *The Conflagration of Community: Fiction Before and After Auschwitz*, 235.
[103] Sarah Ladipo Manyika, "On Meeting Toni Morrison," *Transition*, no. 124 (2017): 147, doi:10.2979/transition.124.1.27.
[104] Morrison and Denard, *Toni Morrison: Conversations,* 76.
[105] Cynthia S. Hamilton, "Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative," *Journal of American Studies*, no. 3 (1996): 430, www.jstor.org/stable/27556178.

and oppressors.[106] Many times the horrific experiences described are even intensified by the narrative strategy of using a child narrator. In *God Help the Child*, there are instances when the limited and naïve perspective of a young Bride displays the inequalities and double standards present in our society as well as all forms of abuse and discrimination children may experience at a very young age. Morrison is going back to the themes and issues already introduced in her first short story "Recitatif", where two young girls of different races become friends, but later when they reach adulthood, they become enemies due to their different views on racial segregation and their social class differences. The guilt they feel over what happened to Maggie and the unresolved issues from their childhood are similar to what Bride experiences in *God Help the Child*. Bride also suffers from the past trauma and the guilt emerging after she gave a false witness statement at the court, but as an empowered heroine in Morrison's novel she faces these issues from her past and obtains healing by making peace with it.

In all Morrison's mentioned writings can be found the emphasis on various narrative strategies and techniques (such as starting her novels *in media res*) in order to awaken the empathy and feelings for racially discriminated people, not only in the era of the slave trade but also afterwards. As a matter of fact, Morrison identifies racism even in the current epoch with references to the war in Iraq or cell phones in *God Help the Child*, which she has never done before in any of her novels, and by portraying the effects of racism in this contemporary setting, Morrison stresses that the world is far from perfect and that "race still matters despite the silencing effects of post-discourses."[107]

Overall, the powerful effects of Morrison's writing resonate with readers as she makes them relive the horrors of slavery and racism with the characters in her novels. Providing the interior views of characters, individual back stories and displaying their vulnerabilities plays an important role in comprehending characters' feelings and behaviours in extreme situations. She strives to portray what sexual and racial oppression as well as economic differences felt like rather than what they looked like, as she underlines the unimaginable sufferings of slavery, racial discrimination, oppression and hatred in her novels. In *Paradise*, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child*, there is always some tragic event portrayed, which is depicted with the use of unconventional narrative structures that make Morrison's readers feel involved with her characters and imagine things that might be too horrific to imagine. Toni Morrison puts the

[106] Arnold Weinstein, *Nobody's Home: Speech, Self, and Place in American Fiction from Hawthorne to DeLillo* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 287.
[107] Delphine Gras, "Post What? Disarticulating Post-Discourses in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*," *Humanities* 5, no. 4 (2016): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/h5040080.

social construction of race at the centre of her novels and examines its meaning and value in society. She tries to distance her oeuvre from “the white gaze” and “the racial gaze”, frees up the language in her novels from the racial and gender implications. This leads to the examination of what race actually is and why is it so important for us to know the race of Morrison’s characters, as race is biologically non-existent and sociologically it is far from identifying a person. Toni Morrison reveals the unspeakable acts regarding the effects of racial superiority in her novels and enables her readers to truly feel them, which has an indisputably powerful effect on her readers and contributes to the undeniable significance and influence of her literary work.

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