



# Investigating through Feminist Lens; the struggle of empowerment in Toni Morrison's Novel *God Help the Child* (2015)

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**Abstract**— This study is a thorough investigation of Toni Morrison's feminist approach in the novel *God Help the Child* (2015). This essay studies the sexist and racist oppression of the female characters applying the lens of Radical feminism. Radical feminism considers that patriarchy is the main cause of female oppression. It is a comprehensive survey of the struggle of the female characters to empower themselves from the position of powerlessness and mobilize their socio-political actions and experience a psychological change. In order to study the cyclical process of empowerment of the female characters in the novel, the feminist empowerment theory of E. Summerson Carr (2003) has been applied which advocates that empowerment originates from a position of oppression and powerlessness through self-knowledge and Conscientization. This essay aspires to explore the oppression of the female characters due to patriarchy and their struggle to empower themselves despite the liability of belonging to a particular gender, class, race, and nationality. The technique of textual analysis is employed in this qualitative study to explore the feminist oppression and the process and struggle of their empowerment.

**Keywords**— Conscientization, Empowerment, Identity, Patriarchy, Radical Feminism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The latest novel of the Nobel Laureate, Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (2015), is multiple voiced that enables all characters to express their perception on the distinguished subject matters. Bailie (2020) asserts that the literary career of Toni Morrison, comprising of five decades, has certain works that highlight issues like 'gender', 'class', and 'nationalism'. Toni Morrison is an authentic voice among the feminist advocating for the rights of both Black and White women in the globalization of the modern world where the oppression of the subordinate class and gender is a pathetic issue.

Toni Morrison is an Afro-American novelist who commemorates the feminist subjects, racist oppression, and child abuse in her novel *God Help the Child* (2015). *God Help the Child* (2015) is a novel in which the female characters and the struggle in their lives receive special

treatment from Morrison. This is the story of a Black girl Bride who suffers a great deal due to her parents and her boyfriend. Her sufferings are catalyzed by a patriarchal mindset and a racist approach of her father. After being abandoned by her father, she struggles in a male dominated society to empower herself beyond the ensnarement of racial prejudices. Bride is not the only victim of sexism, but characters like Rain, Sweetness, and Brooklyn too suffer such discrimination. Toni Morrison, being a feminist, does not only deal with their plight but empowers them as well.

Women, no doubt, are the most beautiful creations of Nature, but in all ages and all societies, her subordination and oppression knew no bound. The reason behind her exploitation has been various, but one common reason has invariably been the patriarchal social set-up against which feminists have always voiced their concern. Radical feminism is the ideology that has endeavored to explore

sexism and patriarchy as the leading cause of women's oppression. (Doude & Tapp, 2014). Radical feminism took its roots and aspiration from the second wave feminism and Women Liberation Movement (WLM) (Mackay, 2015). Women don't suffer only outside their homes, but there is a great range of oppression inside the houses and in the close relationships and Radical feminism highlights that both aspects of women sufferings are prey to sexism and socially constructed gendered disparity in "Law, employment and Relationship" (Doude & Tapp, 2014).

Radical feminism concentrates that sexism is a cause of female oppression and the silence of the women makes it difficult to struggle against it. Radical feminism argues that men enjoy universal privileges while women's oppression is widespread (Doude & Tapp, 2014). Sadly, this oppression included women's experiences of "sexual harassment, discrimination at work, isolation in pregnancy and child-rearing as well as incidents of rape and other forms of male violence" (Mackay, 2015, p.333). Jaggar (1983) argues that rape is a tool to restrict the women in the fetters of fear which is a source of the men's violence against women. Radical feminism highlighted the issue of rape in the sixth conference of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1972 (Doude & Tapp, 2014). Radical feminists abolish the idea of women's psychological and physical domination by the man folk and emphasize the empowerment of the women to turn off against the violence and abuse of the man instead of being a passive victim of it (Aboudaif, 2012). They used the term Consciousness-raising (CR) to highlight the issue of rape through the 1960-70s to break their silence over the shared problems that they before thought were of the individual (Bryson, 1992).

The socially developed distinction between the role and traits of the genders is the reason that put women in an oppressed position. They struggle to empower themselves against the ascribed expectations of society but in vain. Radical feminists work to uproot the gender distinction. Mallet (1969) puts forward the idea that the centuries old social roles are not biological and adds, "Sexual politics obtain consent through the socialization of both sexes to basic patriarchal politics with regard to temperament, role and status" (p.35).

This study particularly studies the aspect of modern radical feminism in the novel of Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* (2015). Modern radical feminism seeks to empower women beyond the restrictions of race, class, sex, etc. It focuses on the construction of the identity of women with relations to the other women rather than one depending on the patriarchal domination and adds that certain

associations among the female folk can shape the lives of women (Aboudaif, 2012).

As the ultimate goal of feminism is the empowerment of women, this study applies the theoretical framework of feminist empowerment of E. Summerson Carr (2003). Many theorists over the years have given their theory on empowerment. Some of them consider empowerment as an outcome, while others have considered it a process and some others believe it is both (Carr, 2003). According to Zimmerman (1995), empowerment is a "developmental construct" (Carr, 2003, p. 9). However, the empowerment model of Carr (2003) is "process-oriented" consisting of the cyclical and interdependent stages. Carr (2003) anticipates the "recent feminist thought on positionality, interpretation, identity building, and mobilization for change to map the process of empowerment" (p.9).

The model comprises of three stages i.e. Position, Conscientization, and Political Action, and some sub-processes. As per Carr (2003), the origin of empowerment is the 'position' of 'powerlessness', 'oppression' and 'deprivation' (p.13). The theorists of feminism, as well as the theorists of empowerment, theorize this position of deprivation and powerlessness by considering both socio-economic and psychological factors (p.13). Solomon (1976) defined powerlessness as "the inability to manage emotions, skills, knowledge, and/or material resources" (Carr, 2003, p.13: Solomon, 1976, p.16). The empowerment model of Carr (2003) enables to rise from the stage of positionality through self-knowledge, psychological awareness, and Conscientization and ascends to the socio-political stage to experience the empowerment and make one capable of overcoming the internal and external obstruction caused by racism, sexism, and classism.

The second stage in Carr's (2003) theoretical model of empowerment is of prime importance which is the development of the critical consciousness. Radical feminism too supports the idea of Consciousness rising (CR) and awareness of the political facet of their shared social matter. Just like feminist scholars, Carr (2003) believes that consciousness-raising (CR) is possible through the critical interpretation of the world creating an identity of the self in the society, and mobilizing the components which catalyze the action.

According to Carr (2003), the final stage of empowerment is that of the action and change where one formulates the political dimensions of the social and interpersonal actions. As consciousness rising results in action, it is vital to note that actions can be either a failure or a success. In the first case, it is an addition to the existing knowledge and in the

case of the latter, interpersonal and intrapersonal change is evident.

Toni Morrison's treatment of the woman folk in *God Help the Child* (2015) has been studied before from the perspective of Black Feminism, but this study perceives the characters and the events through the lens of radical feminism and analyzes the process of the empowerment of the female character through the framework of Carr's (2003) empowerment model in the novel *God Help the Child* (2015) by Toni Morrison. It analyzes the struggle of these characters who struggle to construct their identity and seek psychological and social empowerment.

## II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Life fades away when you find no one around. Succeeding from it bestows a kind of hope to life. The world around has witnessed and is witnessing the male dominance and non-stop patriarchal oppressions on the woman folk. The literary figures, especially with feministic approaches have worked it quite well to voice the feminist vulnerability in society. The Radical Feminists more specifically question and challenge the unfair practice of patriarchy. It opposes class distinction, racism, and sexism in order to eliminate such practices and to empower women. Among the dynamic feminists, stands Toni Morrison, the author of *God help the child* (2015), who has breathed and experienced in this patriarchal society and knows how such oppressions help women in their empowerment.

Toni Morrison uses the technique of polyphony to give opinions to her characters. The novel is in different voices, but it is imperative to note that Morrison only makes the female characters narrate the story of their miserable life as the female characters in this novel have the benefit of the limelight. The only prominent male character Booker has no voice of his own. His part of the story is narrated in the third person and from the mouth of Queen Olive.

In the novel *God Help the child* (2015), the patriarchal authority begins with the abandonment of Sweetness by her husband, Louis, who thinks she has cheated on him because their newborn baby has been born with a black complexion. The lack of trust broke their familial world into pieces. Without the second thought, Louis reinforces his manly power on Sweetness by blaming her and "treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger- more than that, an enemy" (P.7). Sweetness becomes the direct victim of patriarchy and Bride becomes an indirect victim. They suffer what Carr (2003) calls positionality or the state of oppression and powerlessness. The patriarchal oppressions strike Sweetness with the socio-economic and psychological setback in the society. How hard can single parenting be? The answer lies in the expressions and

reactions of Sweetness towards her only child, Lula Ann. Her distaste look while bathing Lula Ann, screaming at her, and punishing her without touching her black skin were all the impacts that let Lula Ann become an indirect victim of patriarchy. The unjust attitude of her husband left her to deal with the people like Mr. Leigh, who raises the house rent according to race and class and seeks pleasure in victimizing the oppressed but she struggles to empower herself. This also raises the consciousness of the little girl Bride towards the racist and sexist approach of the society as she says; "I know now what I did not know then – that standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment" (p.50). She has self-knowledge and knows what she is doing to her child.

To be a single parent in a racist society is really hard. She knows that she has to put up with the attitude of the landlord and the 'friends or strangers' who "would lean down and peek in to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning" (p. 8). Toni Morrison empowers her as a tough mother in terms of social actions and a woman who stands with her child against the mentioned molestation of Sofia Huxley. She creates her identity as a single mother in a racist society despite the victimization.

Such disgust that she goes through enables her to call the landlord, "mean as spit". However, even if life leaves her miserable in the hands of patriarchal social set-up, yet her continuous struggle of self-financing and self-empowerment are exceptional. Working in a hospital at night raised her identity as a self-empowered woman. Though she was harsh with her daughter sometimes in her childhood, it was a choice to empower her and develop in her Conscientization in a society where Black had to learn the codes and conducts of a racist and patriarchal society. This is evident through her words; "When my husband ran out on us, Lula Ann was a burden: "A heavy one, but I bore it well" (p. 156).

The protagonist of the novel *God Help the Child* (2015) is the prominent representative of the feminist oppression and empowerment in the male dominated society. Her sufferings start with her father leaving her and her mother, her black color in a racist and patriarchal society, and her boyfriend leaving her without explanation. Her fate is similar to that of her mother. Both are the abandoned women in love. Despite the racist and sexist oppression, she empowers herself and creates her identity from Lula Ann Bridewell to Bridewell and then Bride by inventing her cosmetic company the Salvia Inc. Though she is hated by her parents due to her black color, the 'Midnight black', 'Sudanese black', but she becomes the attractive and beautiful girl and the 'hottest commodity' according to Jerri. As the empowerment model of Carr (2003) suggests

that empowerment is a cyclical process. In the case of Protagonist Bride, The process of her empowerment is cyclical and begins with her self-knowledge and conscious actions. With the help of Jerri, she develops her personality and identity when she sets her style with her white dress and her no make-up look. She hurls; "True or not, it made me, remade me" (p. 33).

As a child, her unspoken trauma of witnessing the sexual assault of the boy by the landlord signifies that she has been in a position of powerlessness, but she inculcates the discernment of the situation. Even if her mother hushes her but she consciously ruminates over her silences when she is grown-up. "What if it was the landlord my forefinger was really pointing at in that courtroom?" (p. 52). She undergoes a myriad of stress and troubles throughout. She thinks; "I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like a trash or whipped like a slave" (p. 35) and she experiences both.

She suffers a great deal of mental torment when her boyfriend Booker leaves her "like a skunk leaves a smell" saying "you not the women" which became a great psychological setback for her. She feels that she has been rejected and scorned by everyone in her life; however, Booker has been someone who has apparently voiced it on her face. Her words like, "How he hit me harder than a fist with six words: You not the women" (p. 11). She thinks; "I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Samaritan things not directed at him" (p. 13). Bride is always surrounded by men who want her, try to gain pleasure from her body, but do not bother to know what she thinks and feels. Toni Morrison criticizes the land dominated by the power of the man and says; "Such was the landscape of men" (p.34).

The man whom she considers being a solace in her life, who she expects would stick back the broken pieces of her life together with his love, becomes a source of her distress throughout until all the misunderstandings are cleared off. She avers; "He was the part of the pain – not a savior at all, and now her life was in shambles because of him" (p.68). Despite the hard times that she goes through her strength to stay firm is a means of her empowerment and struggle to get back what she lost. It states; "There was nothing in the world left to do but stand up for herself finally and confront the first man she had bared her soul to" (p. 68).

Though Bride suffers mental distress and physical mutation after Booker leaves her, she has the abstract entity about her conditions. She questions herself about why has she made herself miserable because Booker left her and she struggles to get over her dejected condition. She professes; "I've gotten over all that and moved on"

(p.49). This Conscientization enables her to mobilize for the search of the meaning and explanation of Booker's behavior. The process of her empowerment is cyclical and ultimately she is economically, mentally and socially empowered who gives financial aid to her mother and Booker.

She does not only fight against sexist discrimination and oppression but also suffers the racist prejudice in a male dominated and racist society. Bride endures the ill-treatment from the school where she was treated "like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper", but this empowers her psychologically. "So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal virus through my veins, with no antibiotic available. Which, actually, was a good thing now I think of it, because I built up immunity so tough that not being a "nigger girl" was all I needed to win" (p. 52).

Radical feminism holds the notion that women do not always suffer outside the home but there is a great need to protect her in her house. Rain is a victim from her home who comes under sexist oppressions due to her mother. She as a child suffers the lustful and patriarchal oppression in the shape of her rape as a young girl. Her mother welcomes those men in her house so that she earns little money through her daughter. The twenty-dollar bill had smeared her mind, even not gauging what would she go through psychologically with such sexual abuse and Radical Feminists protest against such harassment of the female. Disgust spread all around that let Rain/Raisin resist in many ways. Fear rules her nature as she is terrified when Steve and Evelyn come to help her. She thinks Steve is one of those mean men who had come to hurt her. "Men scared her, Rain confessed, and made her feel sick" (p. 92).

Radical feminism empowers the female to raise her voice against all kind of oppressions above all rape. In the novel *God Help the Child* (2015), Rain is not a passive victim of the man's oppression, but she learns resistance from her childhood. Her aggressive nature, observed in the car of Steve, biting the man, and her replies to Bride at first are formed through her psychological conditions that she went through in her childhood. She becomes the victim of child abuse and her mother is a patron of it allowing the outsiders come in the house and rape her. She recalls the traumatic assault by a regular man; "Some guy. A regular. One of the ones she let do it to me" (p. 90). Her Conscientization makes her leave her mother with great hatred and Toni Morrison empowers her to have the courage for the street life to learn to find a safe place where she could sleep. She realizes a change in her life living with Steve and Evelyn. Her position changes and she is empowered out of such a scornful and oppressive society.

One of the sufferers by man's suppressions is Brooklyn, who has used her oppressions as her strength. She believes she could read one's mind and that developed in her childhood when people around started hurting her. Especially the landlord, who stole their money saying that they were behind in rent and her uncle's sexual assault, warned her of the menaces inflicting on her ways in life. These patriarchal practices developed in her a suspicious attitude. She had the guts to know what people want and who to please or not. Harder it is to succeed from such patriarchal oppressions and get empowered. But she resisted, she stayed, realized, and changed her situations. As she says, "I was fourteen and there was nobody but me to take care of me to take care of me so I invented myself, toughed myself" (p. 119).

Radical feminism also advocates the rights of those male who are weak in a society and just like women they become the victim of the patriarchal assaults and harassment. Toni Morrison has also portrayed this aspect of Radical Feminism through the harassment of Adam by Mr. Humboldt who has harassed and killed six young boys. Morrison sketches a pathetic and horrible picture of the molestation; "Apparently the children were kept bound while molested, tortured and there were amputations" (p. 103). Moreover, the molestation of the little boys in the house of the landlord Mr. Leigh is an equally horrible scenario which is an example of Toni Morrison's Radical Feminist approach.

### III. CONCLUSION

To infer, almost all the major female characters in *God Help the Child* (2015) go through oppression due to the patriarchal social system and racism. They are not only exploited outside their house, but also inside their home. Characters like Bride, Rain are the victim of the oppression due to their parents and Brooklyn becomes the victim of her uncle's assault. The oppression of the female character is both physical and psychological, but the characters essay to empower themselves out of their oppressed positionality. Toni Morrison ensures that the characters have self-knowledge and Conscientization which helps them in their struggle of the construction of their identity through their social actions. This novel is replete with all kind of disastrous physical and psychological torments of the female in a racist society. However, in this novel some other characters also suffer due to the political set-up which can possibly be further explored.

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