

Magic Realism in Toni Morrison's *God Help The Child*

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ABSTRACT

The Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winner Toni Morrison has garnered critical acclaim for her contribution to Afro-American literature. This paper attempts to analyse her eleventh novel, *God Help the Child* (2015) in its use of the postmodern technique of Magic Realism. The magical transformation of the protagonist Bride's body from an adult to a child finds apt ground for the analysis of this technique in use in the novel. The reasons for this transformation are explored through this paper along with an interpretation of the device in use with regards to the text. The Magic Realism that is used in the novel can be observed as having a negative connotation as Bride's body reverts to a child's. In the end however, the novel ends on a positive note as Bride gets back to her original form after coming to terms with her guilt and confessing her wrong doing to Booker.

Keywords

Toni Morrison, Afro-American Literature, Magic Realism, Postmodern

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Magic Realism

Magic realism is a device in which magic elements are introduced into seemingly realistic situations or settings. The term however, was subject to various definitions and interpretations since the 1920s. The term was first applied in 1925 by Franz Roh, a German art critic in reference to a group of painters. In the 1927 June issue of *Revista de Occidente* popularized by Jose Ortega, the Spanish philosopher, a partial translation of Roh's book was published owing to the widespread use of the term 'magic realism' by Latin American critics. The term was further publicized by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier in the 1940s used it mainly in reference to Latin-American literature. Some of the Latin American magic realists that garnered critical acclaim for their use of this device include Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Isabel Allende, Jorge Amado and Julio Cortazar.

Though magic realism was popularized primarily as a Latin American device, it is undeniable that its use can be identified in a plethora of works across different cultures and backgrounds. As Isabel Allende rightly observes in an interview with Priya George: "Life is very mysterious and there are many things we don't know. And there are elements of magic realism in every culture, everywhere. It's just accepting that we don't know everything and everything is possible." The use of magic realism in the New Latin American novel is fitting on account of the everyday realities of war, internal disputes and border conflicts that plagued the people. Afro-Americans suffered a similar plight in terms of being discriminated on the basis of their race and having to carry the trauma of slavery from one generation to another. Therefore, Afro-American writers employ magic realism to portray the plight of racism through their literature. It is argued by the scholar, Jose David Salvidar

that the elements of magic realism though present, have not been fully explored by critics of contemporary Afro American literature.

Toni Morrison, the critically acclaimed Afro-American woman novelist, though refusing to be referred to and penned down as a magic realist, has elements of magic realism in her works as has been observed by a number of critics and scholars. Critic Jasmina Murad has aptly observed that: "Morrison's strategic and emancipatory introduction of magic realism is evident to varying degrees, in all of her fiction." (4). Therefore, this paper is an attempt to identify the magic realism or the inexplicable elements which can be regarded as magical in nature set against the backdrop of starkly realistic contemporary setting as can be observed in her latest novel *God Help the Child* (2013).

Magic Realism in *God Help the Child*

In *God Help the Child* (2015) we have the emancipatory tale of Bride, who having suffered the trauma of internal racism on account of being born with a darker complexion than her parents, is finally able to come to terms with herself and all she has done to win the affections of her mother during her difficult childhood. The magical elements in the novel are introduced intermittently while Bride is given the opportunity to tell her story.

The first hint we get of Bride's transformation is in the second chapter titled 'Bride' where she mentions that the change that is unfathomable to her begins when her boyfriend Booker, walks out on her stating "You not the woman I want" (8). Bride describes feeling like she's "melting away" in the same page. The reader gains more clarity by the end of the chapter in understanding that the reason for Booker's anger is Bride having visited the falsely accused child molester, Sofia. Booker, having his own

ghosts from the past reacts the way he did. Having never fully gotten over the death of his brother, Adam who was victim to a child molester, Booker is immensely angered and confused at Bride's move to meet Sofia. This sets the ball rolling towards her bodily reversion. This reversion could be seen as symbolic of the helplessness Bride experienced as a child, and now on experiencing a similar kind of helplessness, begins to magically revert to her childhood appearance.

The first change that Bride experiences is the disappearance of her pubic hair. She describes it as follows: "Every bit of my pubic hair was gone. Not gone as in shaved or waxed, but gone as in erased, as in never having been there in the first place." (12-13). There is no practical explanation as to why this is happening which lends it the inexplicable magical quality. One must note however, the magical element in this novel is not used to signify positivity but instead it is something provoking curiosity and dread. Her pubic hair, symbolic of adulthood is the first thing that she mysteriously loses after her break up.

The next transformation that Bride undergoes a few days later is her ears becoming chaste. She is surprised to notice, "After all these years, I've got virgin earlobes, untouched by a needle, smooth as a baby's thumb?" (51) This signifies that her transformation isn't solely sexual but a complete bodily one. Later in the day she discovers that her armpits and pudenda as well are free from hair: "There is not a single hair on my armpit" (52) and "My pudenda, perhaps. It's already hairless." (53).

Her transformation isn't complete with this. In California, Bride is surprised at her rapidly shrinking body when Rain's clothes fit her perfectly. Furthermore, one fateful day, Bride realises that her body is bereft of breasts, "It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only nipples to prove it was not her back." (92).

It is only after having confessed what she had done as a child in falsely accusing Sophia of being a child molester to Booker that the reversion ceases. The transformation could be interpreted as a reminder that though she was successful and beautiful now, as an adult, by continuing to carry the guilt of that false accusation and avoiding confessing it to Booker, she is still as helpless as she was as a child. Therefore, after spitting it out to Booker, she has a sound sleep: "deeper than drunkenness, deeper than she had known." (161). The weight of her sin had lifted from her: "Having confessed Lula Ann's sins she felt newly born." (162). As she reconnects with herself, her body returns. She is overjoyed at "the magical return of her breasts." (166) and when Queen gifts Bride a pair of earrings she is elated that her ear holes have returned as well: "Bride touched her earlobes, felt the return of tiny holes....Everything was coming back. Almost everything. Almost." (169)

Another noteworthy use of magical realism can be observed in the character of Rain. Rain is the girl who rescues Bride after her car is wrecked in California: "A girl, very young, carrying a black kitten, stared at her with the greenest eyes Bride had ever seen." (83). Rain had been rescued by Evelyn and her husband from an abusive household after which Rain hadn't grown. Evelyn explains: "Her baby teeth were gone when we took her. And so far she has never had a period and her chest is as flat as a skateboard." (97). This

state of Rain's body could be interpreted as being so on account of the fear of growing up after being witness to the nastiness of adulthood that she had been witness to before her adoption.

Conclusion

Magic realism in this novel, as discussed earlier, works in a negative way where Bride is seen losing the emblems of her womanhood, all which signify power and independence. These are replaced by her childhood body which is symbolic of her helplessness and suffering. However, the ending is hopeful with Bride regaining her adult body on having confessed and having had come to terms with herself.

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