

Sweetness and Bitterness: Unmasking the paradox of motherhood in *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison

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Abstract

This research paper aims at bringing out the theme of sweetness and bitterness which serves as a paradoxical illustration of motherhood in the novel *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison. It explores the dichotomy between the nurturing and protective aspects of motherhood and the harsh realities that disrupt maternal care for children. Furthermore, it captures Morrison's narratives through vivid portrayals of abuse, racial discrimination, and emotional turmoil between the conscious and unconscious mind of Bride as daughter and Sweetness as mother. By exploring the dynamics between Bride and her mother, Morrison highlights the ways in which intergenerational trauma and societal expectations would create an experience of sweetness and bitterness in motherhood. This analysis offers an important insight on the complexities of motherhood through psychodynamic theory of Sigmund Freud, as it examines the psychological aspects of the characters.

Keywords: motherhood, sweetness, bitterness, unconscious, trauma

Mother-daughter relationship holds a significant role in the human society, since the moment of conception. It plays a pivotal role in shaping the lives and identities of an individual. It encompasses a wide range of emotional, psychological, and social dynamics that influence their growth and well-being. At the heart of this relationship lies a complex interplay of love, support, conflict, and resilience. There are innumerable implications for the relationship they share. As the mother nurtures and makes her daughter independent. The study of Rastogi and Wampler (1999) highlights the unique and strong bond between mothers and daughters. The daughters are characterized by high levels of interdependence and emotional intensity. It affects various aspect of a daughter's life including self-concept, marriage, identification, and coping skills. Over all it also emphasizes on the impacts of mother and daughter relationship for their development and well-being. In general daughter's happiness is the mother's satisfaction this is the Western ideology of relationship. Catilin Houston says "Words are not enough to express the unconditional love that exists between a mother and a daughter". This research paper subverts this ideology and analyses the paradox of being a sweet and bitter mother through the novel *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison.

Toni Morrison is an acclaimed American novelist, essayist, editor, professor, and a Nobel laureate known for her profound exploration of the human experience through the act of storytelling. Margaret Atwood praises Morrison by claiming "Toni Morrison was a giant of her

times and ours”. As she portrays the intrinsic effects of African Americans in America and their reality. Tayari Jones points out “Toni Morrison is the greatest chronicler of the American experience that we have ever known”. Throughout her works, she has talked about the significance of the mother-daughter relationship. Her depictions of this unique bond serve as a central theme as her writing delves into the lives of the female characters. Morrison examines the interdependence, emotional intensity, and transformative power that exists within the mother-daughter relationship. In her narratives, the mother-daughter relationship goes beyond the conventional portrayal of maternal love and nurturance. Morrison sheds light on how this relationship shapes her female character’s journey of self-discovery, and societal expectation and navigates through the complexities of their own lives. Through her nuanced portrayals, Morrison challenges traditional notions of motherhood and critiques societal expectations placed upon women. This research paper delves into her emphasis on the relationship between Sweetness and Bride in the work *God Help the Child*.

Toni Morrison masterfully explores the concept of bitterness and sweetness through her characters. In many of her characters, this paradox remains reflecting the multifaceted nature of human experience. Sethe in the novel *Beloved* is marked by sweetness and bitterness, as the experience of motherhood and love for her children are sweet for her whereas the traumatic past of being at ‘Sweet Home’ is a bitter experience that she had. Another character is Pecola Breedlove from *The Bluest Eye* who longs for beauty and acceptance and seeking a blue eye seem sweetest to her but the world treated her racially and she was raped by her father and had a bitter ending. Her desire for sweetness becomes entangled with bitterness as the realities of racism hit her hard and she dies. In the novel, *God Help the Child* the character Sweetness, the mother of Bride serves as an exploration of sweetness and bitterness. Sweetness represents both the embodiment of sweetness as love and maternal care, as well as the bitterness of systematic racism and internalized self-hatred. Her character serves to illustrate the interplay of paradoxical emotions within human experience. She behaves unconventionally with her daughter. This paradox highlights the complexities and contradictions within the character and adds depth to this fiction. Thus, Morrison skilfully explores the complexities of their lives demonstrating how sweetness and bitterness coexist shaping a character's identity and narratives. This study examines the paradox of sweetness and bitterness within the character Sweetness, the mother of Lula Ann Bridewell.

The psychodynamic theory, developed by Sigmund Freud serves as a framework for understanding human behaviour and psychological processes. Freud’s theories originated in the early 19th century, which delved into the intricate workings of the unconscious mind. This theory at its core posits that human behaviour is shaped by the unconscious and many develop from early childhood experiences. He believed that the human psyche has three important components namely the id, ego, and superego. He has also explored the concept of defense mechanisms that remain unconscious to protect an individual from anxiety and stress. The central experience of psychodynamic theory is the early experience that paves way for the character development and behaviour. He has also talked about the concept of transference, which is the process of transferring feelings and emotions from their past to present relations.

In the context of the novel *God Help the Child*, psychodynamic theory can be applied to understand the relationship dynamics between a mother and a daughter. This theory focuses on the concept of intergenerational trauma and attachment patterns. It tells us that the early experience of childhood and the relationships in childhood shape or impact psychological development. This relationship will pass on the conflicts, trauma, and attachment from one generation to the other impacting their relationship and well-being. In the mother-daughter relationship of Sweetness and Bride, this theory is applied to understand the psychological process of Bride.

In the case of Sweetness, as she belongs to a different generation, she knew the treatment of being white and black in American society. She as a white woman would have a mask of the American eye and she couldn't accept the reality of her daughter being black. This discrimination begins from the very start of the novel, as the novel itself starts with the character Sweetness as she lets everyone know that it's not her fault that Bride is born black,

"It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and 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. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. (Morrison 3)

She starts her narration with a racist tone on her daughter, since her birth. This act would completely deny her affection towards her daughter. There is a generational shift and suddenly a black succeeds over a white and that becomes an unsolved trauma for Sweetness, as she knows how blacks were treated in American society. This trauma shaped her parenting style and she started to have difficulty in having a secure attachment with her daughter Bride.

Sweetness reveals her own identity and how her ancestors were especially about the life of her grandmother and mother and she alludes Bride to them, "You might think she's a throwback, but a throwback to what? You shouldn't have seen my grandmother; she passed for white and never said another word to any one of her children. Any letter she got from my mother or aunt she sent right back, unopened" (Morrison 3) She talks about her mother and the way she suffered even from even touching the same Bible. She confesses that her mother was a housekeeper for a white couple though she cooked and scrubbed their backs she was not allowed to touch the same Bible. This eventually stops her from being kind to her own daughter as she was born black. Even she tried to kill her or give her to an orphanage because of her racist eye and the society that she lived in. Though she was named Sweetness she remains bitter to her daughter and this serves as a paradox in the novel. She even asks Bride to call her Sweetness rather than Mother. What mattered to Sweetness was the color and not anything else, as American society demanded beauty and that serves as the only key for acceptance and that's the norm for even a family or any relationship. This racist identity of Bride disturbs the relationship between her mother and Bride.

However, Lula Ann Bridewell, changes her name to Bride out of her insecurities but Sweetness can't accept her and she acknowledges that "I don't care how many times she changes her name. her color is a cross she will always carry. But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not" (Morrison 7). Bride was trying to do something to make her

mother feel at least motherlike and this happens only when they had a trial with Sofia Huxley and the situation,

“Outside the courtroom, all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs up. 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. Rinse me, actually, after a half-hearted rub with a soapy washcloth. I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated bed without supper, lock me in my room but screaming at me was the worst. When fear, rules, obedience is only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved. Frightened as I was to appear in court. I did what the teacher psychologist expected of me. Brilliantly I know, because after the trial Sweetness was motherlike” (Morrison 31&32)

Sweetness emphasizes on how she treated Lula but she says that is just to protect her, as she says that she feels bad for treating her that way. Bride actually adopts the situation of society only on the way she was treated at home. “I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her” (Morrison 41). Sweetness had a bitter face in order to safeguard her daughter from the whites. She herself addresses that she was a bad mother in other’s eyes but she just protects her daughter from the society. As she says, “I wasn’t a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges” (Morrison 43). This psychological impact on Bride had shaped her in better way to be bold and confident and this made Sweetness to love her daughter. “Last two times I saw her she was, well, striking. Kind of bold and confident. Each time she came I forgot just black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes” (Morrison 43). She also adds that what we do to children matters a lot because they are highly influenced by parenting.

Though Sweetness had initially treated Bride badly towards the middle and end of the novel she reveals the reason behind it and she also makes sure that she doesn’t repeat the same treatment that her ancestors went through. She opens the letter sent by Bride and she also tells that Bride need not feel bad even if her baby is black because time has changed with media “I reckon the thrill is about the baby, not its father, because she doesn’t mention him at all. I wonder if he is as black as she is. If so, she needn’t worry like I did. Things have changed a mite from when I was young. Blue Blacks are all over TV, in fashion magazines, commercials, even starring (Morrison 176). Sweetness amidst all her confessions, remain alone at the end because she treated Bride badly when she was young, though it molded her she still doesn’t get very much connected to her mother and Sweetness addresses this at the end of her narration, “As soon as she could she left me all alone in that awful apartment. She got as far away from me as she could” (Morrison 177)

In the last chapter, Morrison reveals about Sweetness again to portray the African-American mother-daughter relationship. In the first chapter, Sweetness was just portrayed as a bitter

character as the very beginning of the life of Lula Ann Bridewell was portrayed but at the end, the reasons behind her behaviour and her being bitter is revealed,

“ Yes, I was tough on her. You bet I was. After she got all that attention following the trail of those teachers, she became hard to handle. By the time she turned twelve going on thirteen, I had to be even tougher. She was talking back, refusing to eat what I cooked, primping her hair. When I braided it, she’d go to school and unbraid it. I couldn’t let her go bad. I slammed the lid and warned her of the names she’d be called. Still, some of my schooling must have rubbed off. See how she turned out? A rich career girl. Can you beat it?” (Morrison 178).

As Roxane Gays claims, “ It is difficult to judge Sweetness’s choices. She should know better, but it is painfully clear her choices have been shaped by the realities of being black in a white world where the lighter your skin, the higher you might climb”.

In conclusion, the exploration of sweetness and bitterness as a paradox in the novel *God Help the Child* serves as a powerful reflection on the complexities of the mother-daughter relationship. It reminds that sweetness and bitterness are not isolated discrete emotions, but intertwined facets of human experience. Through this mother-daughter relationship we understand the complexities of life. It also emphasizes on the fact that within bitterness lies the potential of growth, resilience, and also sweetness of self-discovery.

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