

Bride's Identity Construction—Middle Class African-American Women's Identity Struggle

He Qian

*Department of Foreign Language, Inner Mongolia Normal University, Hohhot, China
18339183128@168.com*

Keywords: God Help the Child; Toni Morrison; Hybridity; Third Space; Identity

Abstract: Toni Morrison's new work, "God Help the Child" focuses on contemporary American society for the first time, depicting the process of identity construction of the middle-class African-American woman, Bride, from confusion to clarity. Based on Homi Bhabha's theory of the Third Space, this article aims to provoke readers' reflections on colorism and the commodification of black women in post-racial America through an analysis of the "negation," "mimesis," and "hybridity" stages in Bride's identity construction process. It also provides enlightenment to assist middle-class African American women in breaking free from the predicament of survival in a white society.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's new work, "*God Help the Child*", focuses on contemporary American society for the first time, depicting the process of identity construction of the middle-class African-American woman, Bride, from confusion to clarity. Current research on this novel mainly revolves trauma, ethics, feminism, post-racialism and other aspects. For example, Du Ling (2022) examines the traumatic impact of racism on black children from a postcolonial perspective [1]. Sun Lin (2022) explores the real situation of middle-class women in this book from a feminist perspective, reflecting various social issues in American society [2].

Homi Bhabha, as a representative figure in post-colonialism, has been dedicated to studying the issues of marginalized groups through the concepts of "Hybridity" and the "third space". According to Bhabha, cultural hybridity allows for the harmonious coexistence of cultural differences and provides a space for marginalized groups such as mixed-race and other ethnic minorities to have a voice. This article will adopt Homi Bhabha's theory of the "Third Space" to explore how middle-class African-American women in a white world construct their own identities.

2. Contradictions and Fissures: Bride's Identity Predicament in the Black Community

2.1. Distorted Family Culture

In postcolonial theory, Said uses the term "exile" to describe the sense of loss in cultural belonging and the confusion of self-identity among the colonized. Bride has been in a perpetual state of "exile" since she was born. Due to her dark skin, her mother has doubted her as her own

child since her birth, even uttering upon seeing her for the first time, “It’s a damn mess. She’s as dark as it gets, midnight black, Sudanese, scared the living daylights out of me” [6]. Sweetness, during Bride's upbringing, does not allow her to call her mother and tries to avoid physical contact with Bride. Her only requirement for Bride is to “learn to be obedient, to lower her eyes and mind her manners” in the white society [6]. On the other hand, when her father, Louis, sees his “midnight black” daughter, he mutters, “What the fuck is this” [6] and walks away, never to return home again. In Louis’s view, Bride’s deep black complexion will destroy all the privileges he currently enjoys due to her light skin. Light skin can “keep you from being spat on in grocery stores, shoved about at bus stations, moved aside for on sidewalks or in gutters to give white people passage, charged five cents for a paper bag the white man gets to carry free” [6]. The arrival of his daughter, Bride, signifies a change in all of that.

The distorted family culture subjected Bride to the dual anguish of familial and cultural “exile” throughout her upbringing. Therefore, when Bride discovered the child molestation committed by the black landlord, she falsely accused a white female teacher of sexually abusing children in order to gain her mother's love just because Bride had lacked care and attention for a long time. This decision granted Bride a fleeting sense of maternal affection but also plunged her deep into the vortex of lies. While Bride's actions stemmed from her longing for her mother’s attention, they also revealed the immense pressure she endured within the distorted family culture. She was compelled to bear the psychological burden of guilt towards the white female teacher and the rupture in her parental relationship.

2.2. Whitened Black Communities

“In 21st-century America, the racial issue faced by Black people is no longer simply black versus white but the dominant dissemination of white mainstream culture and aesthetics, infiltrating the thoughts and values of Black people invisibly” [7]. Under the influence of white supremacist racial ideology, the terrain of racism has been reconfigured and manifests in more internalized and covert forms. Specifically, just as the white people positions black people as oppressed and marginalized “Others” with a silenced voice, the light-skinned black community elevates their own status by positioning the dark-skinned Black community as the “Other”, seeking psychological balance through this hierarchy. Just like Pecola in “*The Bluest Eye*”, Bride, who has been positioned as the “Other” since her childhood, endures mockery from classmates and teachers at school and disdain from her parents at home. Growing up in such an environment, Bride’s sense of self-identity as a Black person gradually becomes shaken, as she fails to understand what her dark skin brings her.

As Bhabha asserts, the control of one culture over another, manifested through cultural differences, is the root cause of postcolonial identity crises [5]. At this stage, Bride's understanding of black culture is based on the assimilated black people who are positioned above by white assimilation. They believe that black culture is always inferior to white culture. However, in reality, Bride experiences numerous unfair treatments due to white colorism. During this time, Bride realizes that traditional Black culture cannot protect her. And white culture, due to her dark skin, cannot easily “assimilate” her like her light-skinned parents, leaving her on the outside. Therefore, at this stage, Bride’s positioning of her own black identity is contradictory and bewildering, plunging her into an identity predicament.

3. Imitation: Bride’s Identity Exploration in the White Society

3.1. Breaking Through the Dark Skin Barrier in the White Workplace

Accompanied by uncertainty about her self-identity, Bride entered a predominantly white society

in search of employment after graduating from high school. In order to conform to white cultural standards, Bride changed her name from “Lula Ann Breedlove” to “Bride”, because the name “Bride” better aligned with white pronunciation habits. During her job interviews, Bride followed the viewpoint of the designer, Jerry, who believed that “black has selling points”, and this approach helped her secure a sales position. In the interviews, Bride exclusively wore white clothing, creating a stark contrast with her deep dark skin to emphasize her “Otherness” as a Black individual and capture attention. This method proved effective, and from then on, Bride adopted the concept of “wearing only white” to achieve career success and upward mobility, transforming from a despised “black bitch” into a successful middle-class Black woman. “She drove luxury cars and used luxurious goods, even buying throw pillows made of goat skin and silk” [2]. From that point on, Bride achieved economic freedom through her black skin and white clothes.

“Mimicry, as defined in Bhabha’s works, refers to the phenomenon in which the colonizers impose their own culture on the subordinate country, and the colonized people passively or actively imitate their civilization” [4]. In the white society, Bride “as the object of the gaze, gains the power of that gaze through mimicry” [4]. By imitating the mainstream cultural standards of white people, she achieved success in her career and gained the power to counter the white gaze in society. This is precisely what Bhabha refers to as “rearticulating existence through the denial of its ‘Otherness’” [5]. It was the once-despised dark skin that shaped Bride and remade her. Despite the unfavorable external conditions, Bride, through her agency, liberated herself from external constraints, transformed her life, and discovered her own brilliance, establishing personal confidence. Bride's black skin helped her achieve new breakthroughs in the white workplace.

3.2. Alienating Consumerism: The Commodified Dilemma of Dark Skin

Unlike other female characters in Morrison’s works, Bride survives in a society filled with colorism and rearticulates her existence through her “Otherness”. Sweetness, her mother, interprets this as an increased inclusivity towards Black individuals in the post-racial era, failing to recognize the underlying issue of the commodification of Black women.

During Bride’s job interview, the stylist Jerry achieved success by having her exclusively wear white clothing, but the true purpose behind this act was to highlight the superiority of the white population through the contrast with white clothes. Jerry unabashedly stated, “You’ll be the hottest thing in the civilized world” [6]. Additionally, the text compares dark skin to various food items, such as extracts made from licorice root, Hershey’s syrup, chocolate-covered cream eggs, handmade black chocolates, and more [6]. Whether it’s being the “hottest thing” or being likened to various food products, it is a form of commodification of Black women, transforming them into visual commodities in a white-dominated society.

At this stage of self-identity exploration, Bride has transitioned from initially "denying" both cultures to an attitude of “mimicry”. Through “mimicry” of the white-dominated mainstream culture, she achieves success in her career. At this time, “mimicry is no longer passive but contains active resistance, allowing the oppressed to occupy a space for discourse” [8]. However, while engaging in mimicry, Bride are also trapped in the dilemma of whether to remove the white mask because Bride has achieved career success by donning a white appearance, once she removes this white mask, she becomes the ignored little girl once again.

4. Hybridity: Bride’s Identity Construction

According to Homi Bhabha's theory of the “third space”, maintaining the purity of their respective cultures in cultural exchanges is impossible because cultural exchange is not a simple binary opposition but rather exists within a third space between the two [9]. At this point, Bride has

entered the “third space” of cultural fusion between black and white cultures, constantly lingering in the “liminal zone” of both cultures. This is “gap between fixed identities opens up the possibility of cultural hybridity” [3], allowing Bride to resolve her confusion within a “third space” where the colonizer no longer exercises control. As a result, she successfully constructs her own subjectivity and identity.

4.1. Warm Care from the White Family: Steve and Evelyn Couple

On Bride’s journey to find Booker, an unexpected car accident leads to her being taken in by the couple, Steve and Evelyn. Steve and Evelyn are a well-educated white couple in their 50s, living in the countryside with their adopted daughter, Rain. When Rain encounters the accident involving Bride, she calls upon the white couple to rescue her. “Why is she so dark?” “Why are you so white?” “Oh, so it's like my little cat?” “Exactly, it's natural” [6]. This seemingly ordinary conversation between Rain and Evelyn dissipates much of Bride’s fear towards the white couple and provides an opportunity for her to reconsider her own black identity.

During the time spent recovering at Steve and Evelyn’s home, Bride is no longer seen as a black person within the binary system of race but simply as an ordinary patient. “The family she disturbed lived in poverty, but they helped her without hesitation and without expecting anything in return” [6]. Nobody cares about her physical transformation here, and Bride no longer has to wear white clothes every day as she used to. She can freely wear regular short sleeves and jeans. When Bride makes a request to bathe, Evelyn softly responds, “You’re not comfortable right now, I can help you wash” [6]. For Bride, who has struggled in a white-dominated society, “their offer of help is difficult to understand and strange” [6]. Accustomed to racism and isolation from a young age, Bride is unprepared for this sudden care and attention, especially from unfamiliar white individuals. Despite being hard to comprehend, Bride feels an unprecedented warmth from the Smith couple.

In addition to providing care and warmth to Bride, the Smith couple also corrects the alienating consumerism that Bride had adopted during her “mimicry” phase. When Bride hears the highly educated couple giving up city life and “moving to California to live real lives,” she can't help but sarcastically remark, “Does 'real' mean being poor?” Steve’s response delivers a blow to Bride’s expectations: “Can money get you out of that Jaguar? Can money save you?” [6]. Evelyn and Steve, in their own way, demonstrate to Bride that the happiness of life is not directly tied to material possessions. They lead a fulfilled life, free from being slaves to materialism. Their care for Bride stems from a simple pursuit of humanitarianism. The care and encouragement from the Smith couple support Bride's progress in her journey of self-identity construction.

4.2. Leader of Black Culture: Aunt Queen

The care and encouragement from the Smith couple help Bride overcome colorism within the binary system, while Aunt Queen reignites Bride’s interest in black traditional culture. On her journey to find Booker, Bride first visits Aunt Queen's home. Unlike her previous experiences, Aunt Queen’s house is filled with African-American elements, which excites Bride greatly. Everything in Aunt Queen’s home seemly connected to the essence of African culture, which is a stark contrast to the black community where Bride grew up. Aunt Queen doesn’t feel ashamed of her roots in African culture; instead, she takes pride in it. Aunt Queen's bravery and pride deeply inspire Bride, helping her reestablish a sense of black cultural identity.

Faced with elements of both black and white cultures in her life, Bride goes through stages of denial and imitation, ultimately utilizing a “negotiation” strategy within the third space of her journey in search of Booker to find her own identity, one that can be described as “hybridity”. According to Baba’s perspective, he sees “hybridity” as an effective strategy to dissolve opposition

between two polar cultures. He believes that culture is never unified or simply a binary opposition between self and other. He emphasizes the “hybridity” of cultures within a postcolonial context. In the “third space” constructed by the Smith couple and Aunt Queen, Bride successfully discovers her true self. Here, she is no longer objectified by white people, and she no longer harbors disdain for her native black culture. In this space, she achieves genuine self-redemption.

5. Conclusion

Both the kind and caring white couple and Aunt Queen, who embraces black culture, are indispensable in Bride's process of self-identity construction. At this time, Bride is no longer the silent little girl in her childhood or the objectified commodity in her work. With the Smith couple, Bride dissolves the colorist notions within the binary opposition and corrects her alienating consumerist attitude. With Aunt Queen, Bride reestablishes a sense of identification with her ethnic culture. Now, Bride strives to live in white society with a sense of ethnic identity, existing as a hybrid identity. She is no longer defined by others and has freed herself from the shackles of being the "other." This transformation allows Bride to confidently live her life with her authentic identity.

References

- [1] Du, L. (2022). *God Help the Child: Childhood Trauma and Healing Methods of African-American Children*. *Famous Works Appreciation*, 26, 158-160.
- [2] Sun, L., & Wang, X. (2022). *On the "Puppetization" Emotion of African-American Middle-Class Women in God Help the Child*. *Fudan Journal of Foreign Languages and Literature*, 01, 64-69.
- [3] Sheng, A. (2004). *Research on Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Theory*. Beijing Language and Culture University (Master's thesis).
- [4] Li, L. (2021). *The Erosion of Colonial Hegemony in the Third Space*. Huazhong University of Science and Technology (Master's thesis).
- [5] Bhabha, H. (1994). *Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge.
- [6] Morrison, T. (2015). *God Help the Child*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- [7] Peng, Y. (2018). *New Racism under the "Post-Race" Mask: God Help the Child*. *Anhui Literature*, 11, 158-160.
- [8] Zha, R. (2011). *Spatial Turn, Cultural Negotiation, and Identity Reconstruction: A Review of Homi Bhabha's Postcolonial Cultural Criticism*. *Foreign Theoretical Trends*, 03, 74-80.
- [9] Fa, X. (2011). *Construction of Ethnic Minority Identity in the Third Space: Interpreting Yoko Tawada's "Obasan" from the Perspective of Postcolonialism*. *Shandong Social Sciences*, 08, 96-99.