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Motherhood as Existential Choice: An analytic study of maternal character in short story Sweetness by Toni Morrison

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ABSTRACT

Motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sweetness is portrayed not as a mere biological imperative but as an existential choice deeply entangled with anxieties and societal pressures. While previous research has extensively examined the bittersweet dynamics of cultural acceptance and the representation of colorism in *Sweetness*, there remains a notable gap in exploring the existential dimensions of motherhood within the text. Addressing this gap, the present study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in feminist and existentialist frameworks to unravel the layered existential dilemmas of motherhood and reimagine maternal identity in ways that challenge conventional stereotypes. The findings reveal that *Sweetness* presents motherhood as a complex negotiation shaped by internalized racism, societal expectations, and the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class. This intricate depiction underscores the paradoxes of maternal love within oppressive systems, offering a profound critique of traditional maternal narratives.

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Introduction

Literary studies, with an emphasis on gender studies, feminist criticism, and African American literature is essential for understanding the intricate intersections of race, gender, and societal expectations in literature. African American literature analyses how historical and cultural contexts influence relationships and identity, particularly in the backdrop of oppressive regimes. On the other hand, feminist criticism challenges conventional narratives about gender roles and provides insights into how motherhood is often portrayed as a selfless and natural act can also be a place of conflict, agency, and resistance. Studying these areas is essential to highlight the issues related to human identity, agency, and survival in repressive societal structures in addition to the living realities of those who are marginalized. However, In Toni Morrison's Sweetness, Motherhood is depicted not as a biological imperative but as an existential choice fraught with anxieties and societal pressures. By analyzing the story, the current study aims to highlight the layers of existential dilemma of motherhood and redefine the maternal identity in a way that challenges conventional stereotypes in Toni Morrison's *Sweetness*. This part will introduce the study by first discussing the background and context, followed by the research problem, the research aims, objectives and questions, the significance and finally, the limitations.

Literature Review

Toni Morrison, the first African American novelist to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature, has published nine novels, including Sula (1973), Song of Solomon (1977), Tar Baby (1981), Beloved (1987), Jazz (1992), Love (2003), and Mercy (2008). According to Dostanic (2015), Toni Morrison, famous for her 'three-woman families,' conducts studies examining the features of Black women, as well as their desires and challenges that differ from those of non-Black women. She utilizes her African heritage to condemn Black people's lifestyle choices, despite the obvious disparity between these patterns and their mentality. She is a blunt critic of cultural appropriation in both directions, believing in the authenticity of existence. Furthermore, in "The Bluest Eye" and "Sula," she delves into the psyches of socially weak ladies who are labeled as outsiders in their communities due to life circumstances or the choices they make. In one of her interviews, Morrison said,

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“There is no pain in being Black. But there was a pain in being Black next to racist systems and assumption”(Rasheed & Salahuddin, 2021). Sweetness by Toni Morrison is a touching story about a mother, Sweetness, whose daughter Lula Ann, born with an unusually dark complexion, is a backdrop for shame and concern for Sweetness, whose own fairer skin has allowed her to navigate the world with fewer difficulties. Sweetness fears the severity of a racist culture and believes that being severe and distant will prepare Lula Ann for the struggles that lie ahead. Sweetness looks back on her actions with pride and remorse as Lula Ann matures and achieves success. This story depicts a difficult relationship between a mother and her daughter, formed by racism, fear, and the urge to protect themselves within a terrible world. In her study, Rosyidi uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotics to analyze the symbolic layers of racial and cultural dynamics in Toni Morrison's "Sweetness" and analyzes "bittersweet cultural acceptance" as a representation of skin color differentiation. The study places "Sweetness" within larger discourses on structural oppression and internalized racism, drawing on important publications such as Fanon's insights on racialized terror and Rothenberg's investigation of racial and gender inequities. The study offers a detailed view of how Morrison challenges racial hierarchies and cultural biases through personal and familial ties by examining signs like Lula Ann's Black skin, distinct marriage rituals, and societal alienation. (Rosyidi, 2015) Many aspects of Black motherhood's have long been explored in African American literature. Morrison herself has explored the deep effects of racism and enslavement on Black mothers' experiences in her works like Song of Solomon and Beloved. The literary legacy of Black women arose from a conscious attempt to provide a platform for Black women's voices, underscoring the distinctive realities and experiences that set them apart from other groups of people(Mitchell, 1994). Moreover, A person's lived experiences are greatly influenced by their race, class, gender, and sexuality, all of which are essential components of identity(Crenshaw et al., 1995). Additionally, Collins emphasizes how important it is to include Black women's lived experiences in academic discussions about motherhood(Collins, 2016) .The social and cultural conceptions of motherhood have long been questioned by feminist critics. In her seminal essay "*Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution,"* Adrienne Rich exposes the possibilities for both joy and exploitation in motherhood, challenging the idealized conception of the role(Rich, 2021). Furthermore, In the Reproduction of Mothering, Nancy Chodorow uses a psychoanalytic perspective to examine how cultural expectations and gender roles influence how mothers act(Chodorow, 2023). A useful framework for analyzing the Black mother-daughter connection is offered by Black feminist theory. It highlights the importance of investigating the ways in which intersecting oppressions such as gender, class, and race significantly affect and shape the dynamics of the mother-daughter relationship (Hinton, 2004). According to Wade-Gayles, Black mothers work to give their children power, independence, and self-assurance. They need to simultaneously empower their girls to navigate a world that often devalues them (Wade-Gayles, 1984). Beverly Greene emphasizes how maternal influence affect’s identity and resilience as she examines the critical role African American mothers play in their children's socialization. The study draws attention to the difficulties African American mothers encounter in a culture that still practices racial discrimination. Greene looks at how these mothers help their offspring develop strength and agency while navigating societal, cultural, and familial demands. The significance of African American mothers in forming social consciousness and community is emphasized during study (Greene, 2014). In keeping with the spirit of Age: Beckett and Other Advocates of Existentialism, this study aimed to reflect on the concept of playwriting in the contemporary era, from Ibsen to Becket. The study paper reflected Beckett's literary approach to current drama by addressing modern literary trends. At that time, intellectuals, philosophers, and even ordinary people were puzzled by simple questions such as *"who am I?" What exactly am I? What am I doing here? "What will be the end of my existence?".* In the words of (Maikisch, 2021), literary representations of existentialist indicate the movement's effectiveness as a vehicle for ideological and personal study, particularly in relation to identity development, and growing concerns about modern society. Despite contrasts in genre, region, and time, H.P. Lovecraft and Fyodor Dostoevsky's writing heavily emphasize aspects of existentialism as a response to their cultural worries about modernity. In their various approaches to existentialist topics, they illustrate the complicated relationships between sociopolitical issues, philosophy, and literature.Black motherhood is complicated by slavery and systemic racism, as scholars like Christian, Collins and Crenshaw have examined, highlighting both Black women's resilience and the limitations forced upon them. Additionally, feminist theorists like Chodorow and Rich, who contend that social standards influence motherhood. Rosyidi investigated sweetness from the perspective of bittersweet cultural acceptability as Black and white skin identification as a representation of skin color differentiation.

Despite this, limited research has focused on illuminating the existential dimensions of motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sweetness.

Theoretical framework

Existentialism emphasizes individual freedom and the ability to shape one's own existence through choices, as summarized by the principle "existence precedes essence." It explores themes like nihilism, alienation, and autonomy, with roots in 19th-century thinkers like Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky and later developed by Sartre and De Beauvoir. Sartre's belief in personal agency rejects reliance on external forces, paralleling the mother's existential dilemma in Sweetness, where she navigates identity, societal pressures, and institutional prejudice. Camus' notion of the absurd and De Beauvoir's critique of socially constructed gender roles further highlight the complexities of her maternal decisions, blending burden with agency.

Research Objectives

1. To analyze motherhood as an existential choice in Toni Morrison's sweetness influenced by social oppression.
2. To analyze intersections of gender, race and identity in shaping maternal relationships.
3. To provide a theoretical framework using existentialism and feminist criticism to examine implications of motherhood as an illustration of conflict and agency in literature.

Research Questions

1. How does Toni Morrison's sweetness portray motherhood as an existential choice influenced by social oppression?
2. How do gender, race and identity intersect each other in shaping maternal relationship with her daughter?
3. How can existentialist and feminist theories help in understanding the portrayal of motherhood in Sweetness and its broader implications in African American literature?

Problem statement

In Toni Morrison's Sweetness, Motherhood is depicted not as a biological imperative but as an existential choice fraught with anxieties and societal pressures. Despite this, inadequate research is found to illuminate the existential dimensions of motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sweetness. Therefore, the current study aims to highlight the layers of existential dilemma of motherhood and redefine the maternal identity in a way that challenges conventional stereotypes in Toni Morrison's Sweetness.

Research Gap

Inadequate research is found to illuminate the existential dimensions of motherhood in Toni Morrison's Sweetness.

Aim of the study

The current study aims to highlight the layers of existential dilemma of motherhood and redefine the maternal identity in a way that challenges conventional stereotypes in Toni Morrison's Sweetness.

Significance

The current findings are an addition to the fields of African American literature, Feminist criticism and gender studies. Moreover, these findings open awareness for future research for analyzing the intersections of race, gender and agency paving ways for further studies on similar themes in literature. These findings can also promote a better comprehension of how social norms and systematic racism influence interpersonal interactions and identity development. This understanding can aid in advancing further discussions about equality, social justice, and the need to break down gender stereotypes related to motherhood and women in the modern world.

Limitations

This research specifically focuses on the analysis of Toni Morison's *Sweetness* and does not include other works of Morrison for more understanding as well as this study draws on existentialist and feminist

theories, it does not incorporate other critical theories like psychoanalysis. This research also focuses on specific culture and race and does not engage readers with varied racial and cultural backgrounds.

Organization of the study

There are five sections to this study. The topic of the study is introduced in the first section, and the relevant literature on Toni Morrison's Sweetness and the existentialist and feminist perspectives is reviewed in the second section. The theoretical framework and research method are covered in Part 3. The analysis of sweetness is presented in Part 5. The closing section wraps up the research by providing a summary of its key findings.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative research method, integrating feminist criticism and existentialist theory as its theoretical framework. This approach is particularly suited to examining the interplay of social oppression, gender, and race in shaping the protagonist's identity and choices as a mother in Toni Morrison's *Sweetness*. Feminist criticism provides a lens to analyze how patriarchal and societal norms constrain maternal agency, while existentialist theory delves into the protagonist's quest for self-definition and meaning in an absurd and oppressive world. The research relies on textual analysis to uncover narrative techniques that illuminate the complexities of motherhood and cultural acceptance. Key elements such as tone, symbolism, and characterization are meticulously examined to reveal how Morrison portrays the protagonist's internal struggles and external conflicts. For instance, the symbolism of race and its intersection with motherhood is explored to highlight how societal expectations and internalized racism influence maternal decisions. Similarly, the narrative tone is analyzed to understand the emotional depth of the protagonist's experiences, while characterization is scrutinized to uncover the layers of her identity shaped by existential dilemmas. This methodology not only emphasizes the intersectionality of race, gender, and societal norms but also situates the protagonist's maternal journey within broader philosophical and cultural contexts, offering a nuanced understanding of her existential struggles and agency.

Analysis

Sweetness by Toni Morrison depicts the mother-daughter bond between Sweetness and Lula Ann in a terrifying way, distorted by colorism and its pernicious hold on self-perception. This analysis explores the intricacies of their relationship, demonstrating how Sweetness' choices in motherhood turn into an existential crisis driven by fears, social pressures, and a warped sense of self.

Colorism's Poisoned Seed

Sweetness's perception of herself and her daughter is intertwined with their skin tones from the beginning of the story. In contrast to Lula Ann's dark skin, which is seen as a sign of shame and disadvantage, her pale complexion, which she described as *"she was so Black she scared me,"* is a symbol of social mobility in a racist society. *"I held a blanket over her face and pressed. But I couldn't do that, no matter how much I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color".* Her love becomes a perverted kind of defense as a result of this internalized prejudice, poisoning Sweetness's maternal instincts: *"She wasn't mine to love but mine to protect... from what the world, particularly men, would do to her because of how Black she was"* (Morrison, 8). Sweetness's replacing nickname *"Sweetness"* with *"Mama,"* her harshness, and her emphasis on *"good hair"* and *"pretty clothes"* are all desperate attempts to protect Lula Ann from the perceived harshness of a color-stratified society rather than acts of genuine concern.

Existential Burden and Identity's Fracture

Sweetness's motherhood turns into an unsettling burden, built not by her maternal instinct but by the existential fear of navigating a racist environment. Feminist theory informs us of the dual struggle of a mother and a woman living in a prejudiced culture. Her decisions, which range from preventing Lula Ann from interacting with other children of color to denying her the comfort of her own father, are desperate attempts to exert control over the uncontrollable and to establish a route for her daughter in a discriminatory environment. *"He looked at me like I really was crazy and looked at the baby like she was from the planet Jupiter. He wasn't a cussing man, so when he said, "God damn! What the hell is this?", "I knew we were in trouble."* Sweetness' identity is shattered by her constant fear and self-hatred, which separates her darker-

skinned daughter from her lighter-skinned self. She continues a cycle of internalized racism that separates her from Lula Ann and herself by clinging to social privileges while denouncing the Blackness ingrained in her own blood. "*I could have been the babysitter if our skin colours were reversed. It was hard enough just being a coloured woman."*

There is a quote from 1993 collections, The Fire Next Time in essay *"My Dungeon Shook—Letter to My Nephew on the 100th Anniversary of Emancipation,"* by James Baldwin

"You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and for no other reason. The limits of your ambition were, thus, expected to be set forever. You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being. You were not expected to aspire to excellence: you were expected to make peace with mediocrity. Wherever you have turned, James, in your short time on this earth, you have been told where you could go and what you could do (and how you could do it) and where you could live and whom you could marry. I know your countrymen do not agree with me about this, and I hear them saying "You exaggerate." They do not know Harlem, and I do. So do you. Take no one's word for anything, including mine- but trust your experience. Know whence you came." (Baldwin, 1998)

Haunted by History and Societal Echoes

The worries of Sweetness do not arise in vacuum. They are the remnants of social conditioning and past trauma. The narrative indicates the internalization of discriminatory beauty standards that have been passed down through the centuries, hinting at a past full of discrimination against her own darker complexion. Sweetness's twisted protectionism is fueled by the pervasive fear of white cruelty, the horrific murder of Emmett Till, and the ongoing social reminders of Black inferiority. Audre Lorde's in her essay *"Master's tools will never dismantle the master's house",* she describes master's tools as existing oppressive frameworks, ideologies and methods which will not bring liberation or dismantle the structures of power (master's house) because these tools are designed to distribute inequality (Lorde, 2023).

By projecting her own fears onto Lula Ann, she becomes a prisoner of her own fears and ultimately fails to provide her with the unwavering love and support that a child needs*. "With that skin, there was no point in being tough or sassy, even when you were right. Not in a world where you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired, and the first one fired."*

Psychological Impact of Colorism in "Sweetness"

Toni Morrison's "Sweetness" examines the psychological impact of colorism on the mother-daughter relationship between Sweetness and Lula Ann, using critical racial theory. Their relationship devolved into a battlefield, with anxiety, internalized racism, and self-hatred manifesting in catastrophic ways. Sweetness's feelings for Lula Ann become a distorted form of defense as a result of her own darker skin and the discrimination she faces in society. *"I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand I had to protect her."* Her harsh and distant attitudes are motivated by her fears, which stem from a fear of the world's hostility against dark-skinned girls.

Moreover, she demands *"good clothes"* and *"proper"* hair care not out of genuine concern but rather in a desperate attempt to hide Lula Ann's dark skin, which is seen as a signal of shame. *"But from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me."* Sweetness's rooted fear of losing her daughter to the very racism she internalizes is the cause of her controlling behaviors, which range from removing nicknames to excluding Lula Ann from other children with darker skin tones. Conversely, Lula Ann struggles with the psychological effects of rejection. Her self-esteem is severely damaged by the repeated reminders of "bad hair" from sweetness and the social norms surrounding beauty. Her sense of acceptance and belonging is destroyed when she sees her mother's embarrassment over her skin tone. Her confidence is undermined by manipulation and seclusion, which makes her doubt her identity and value. Her emotional health suffers greatly as a result of the internal struggle she has between accepting herself as she is and living up to Sweetness's high expectations.

The tragedy is that Sweetness's efforts to shield Lula Ann from discrimination only serve to strengthen it. Lula Ann contracts the same fears and insecurities as a result of her internalized self-hatred spreading like a virus. This reinforces the very system Sweetness so desperately tries to protect her child from, creating a terrible cycle of disgrace and rejection. There is a glimmer of hope for possible healing at the story's conclusion. In addition to being a rejection of Sweetness' twisted love, Lula Ann's departure with her own

dark-skinned child can also be seen as a step toward self-acceptance and self-discovery. It might signify a break from the pattern and an opportunity to create a future characterized by acceptance and self-love. *"Listen to me. You are e about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works, as, how it works, and how it changes when you are a parent. Good luck, and God help the child."* Through a study of the psychological effects of colorism on Sweetness and Lula Ann, "Sweetness" forces us to face the terrible results of ingrained racism. It reveals the ways in which self-hatred and anxiety can influence love and how we see ourselves and other people. In the end, the narrative is a sobering reminder of how critical it is to confront cultural biases and embrace our true selves for the benefit of present and future generations.

Textual Echoes and the Burden of Legacy

Morrison skillfully incorporates textual content into the story to highlight the effects of colorism and Sweetness's existential conflict. Her mother regarded Lula Ann's "deep, dark eyes" as "witchy.", *"Besides, she has funny-coloured eyes, crow black with a blue tint—something witchy about them"* symbolize repressed fears of sweetness. *"I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale like all babies', even African ones, but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes."* The drowning of the baby kittens and Lula Ann's baptism in water serve as reoccurring themes that hint to the emotional drowning that both characters go through. The idea that being a mother is an existential decision that is burdened with racism and disgust is furthered by this purposeful symbolic language. *"See, if I hadn't trained Lula Ann properly, she wouldn't have known to always cross the street and avoid white boys. But the lessons I taught her paid off, and in the end, she made me proud as a peacock."*

Conclusion

Sweetness' decisions are far from admirable but understanding them is critical. "Sweetness" is not a criticism of a bad mother, but rather a striking depiction of the consequences of internalized racism and the hardships of navigating a prejudice-filled environment. Using feminist criticism, the study demonstrates how patriarchal and racial conventions construct and confine motherhood in the story, yet existentialist theory illustrates how the protagonist's maternal position is an existential choice motivated by the desire for survival and self-preservation. The interaction of race, gender, and class, as addressed in African American feminist theory, highlights the larger systemic dynamics shaping maternal identity and agency. Morrison challenges traditional ideas of self-less motherhood while exposing the complex reality of Black women navigating love, identity, and survival within oppressive systems. This multi-theoretical approach highlights the story's importance in challenging structural inequities and furthering discussions on the politics of motherhood and systematic oppression. Moreover, the narrative leaves the future of their relationship uncertain. Lula Ann's departure, with her own dark-skinned child, might be interpreted as a rejection of Sweetness' warped love, as well as a potential for future connection based on acceptance and unburdened individuality. The story's power emerges from its study of motherhood as an existential choice packed with concerns and societal constraints, inviting us to confront the complex legacies of race as well as the possibility of healing and self-understanding. Finally, the story leaves us with a lingering question: can true love and acceptance grow in the midst of fear and manipulation?

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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