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Politics of Polyphony in Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Letter of Recommendation

Shalikram Sapkota has accomplished his thesis entitled “Politics of Polyphony in Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” under my inspection. He carried out his research from August 2017 to October 2017. I hereby recommend his thesis to be submitted for viva process.

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Letter of Approval

This thesis entitled “Politics of Polyphony in Morrison’s *God Help the Child*”
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Abstract

This thesis examines the polyphonic and dialogic nature of God Help the Child. The central objective of thesis is to observe the stories of six main speakers including Morrison herself. The protagonists share their different versions of realities belonging to the similar events from their own position. They mock of how they are being suffocated due to colorism, individualism, and commodification of human values. This thesis has been studied in the light of Bakhtinian notion of polyphony, dialogism, and carnival. I also discuss the concepts of Sue Vice on the comprehensive discussion of carnival. The main finding of this paper is to help the reader understand that in order to address the sentiments of the multicultural society; any oeuvre should not represent the voice of one group rather it has to represent plurality of consciousness by injecting multiple voices. So, people living there will identify themselves in it. It helps to build better humanitarian world. It becomes useful to the artist, sociologist, leaders, planners and developers if they are going to make some constructive programs in the multicultural society. It inculcates the significance of polyphony and why including the sentiment of multiple voices is essential.

Keywords: Polyphony, Dialogism, Carnival, Colorism.

Politics of Polyphony in Morrison's *God Help the Child*

The study of polyphony in Morrison's novel is the discussion of hybrid American society in the light of 21st century. Morrison, an African-American Nobel Prize Winner of Literature in 1993, in her novel *God Help the Child* resembles the importance of diversities by the equal presentation of various characters belonging to different strata of society. In order to address the sentiments of "other", the author does not dominate her voice alone; instead each character speaks their perspective in each section. The novel getting published in the year of 2015 shows the "post modern ethics" of "other." It observes the things from the position of others. For this, Morrison laments on issues of racism, individualism, co-modification of human values and money psychology. Overall, being African-American author too, Morrison establishes herself as the humanitarian author by employing both the issues of white and black communities.

God Help the Child stands her eleventh novel sharing the multiple voices with plurality of consciousness. Yet, it is her first novel which is multi-focused and multiple themed. It focuses on the issues of children, race, trauma, and materialistic American life. The title is adapted from American Jazz singer Billie Holiday's popular song, "God Bless the Child" composed in 1939. This novel is divided into four parts. Each part consists of various subparts. Each sub-part has different characters to speak on telling their own version of realities. But Morrison's voice is not only dominant but as a narrator filling the gaps in narration.

In the year of 2015 when Morrison publishes her eleventh oeuvre *God Help the Child*, America was still a nation of terror, trauma, racial riots, materialism, individualism and money-mongering psychology. Being born in 1931 American society, Morrison herself witnesses and encounters numerous racial tensions and

bigotries. She also learns about The Civil Rights Movements (1963), mass lynching, mass shooting and bullying of women by the heavy weight personalities. In the presidential election camp (2015-2017), the terrible white supremacist statements by Donald Trump and due to events like this, Morrison was worried about the future of American children and she thought children were not safe in America. Furthermore, though America had already elected one African-American president Barack Obama, still America had the hangover of racial legacy, the curse of the past, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, and its hold on the present, through the phenomenon of colorism. In order to make the mockery of those evils, with help of children and female characters belonging to both races, Morrison employs plurality of consciousness and carnival in *God Help the Child*.

By the year of 2015, America becomes already a nation of hybrid communities. In the hybrid world, there appear hybrid truths. To reveal such multiple truths, Morrison has to be more practical in representing the world around her. For this, one voice could not have been useful. Therefore, she sets multiple characters bearing the huge resemblance to American life. Besides, 21st century does not admit one voice as the “finalizability” of everything, by considering such facts in mind; Morrison presents *God Help the Child* in polyphonic nature.

The plot goes around a twenty three-year-old, black lady, Lula Ann Bridewell. Her childhood is poverty-ridden and devoid of love of her own mother, who is a light skinned lady, because she is, "Midnight Black," and nobody in her, "family anywhere near that color"(1). She even becomes the seed of her parents' split life because her father abandons her and her mother simply because she is born black and he never touches his own daughter. He thinks that his wife cheats upon him so that his daughter is “Sudanese Black.”

Bridewell comes as the protagonist of the fiction. There are four parts in the novel. Total nine subparts of part one, in four subparts alone, stories are told from her point of view. She resembles how she becomes the victim of racism. Before she becomes a successful woman she is despised and chased away from the family. Getting feared with historical condition of racism of 1990s, the mother of Bridewell tells to call herself “Sweetness” instead of “Mama” or “Mother.” Because if she owns her black daughter, the society denies her renting rooms and jobs to survive on.

In the name of getting a little love by her mother and people around her, Lula Ann Bridewell speaks at the courtroom to accuse Sophia Huxley, her primary teacher to test her guilty in the accusation of Child molester which she had never committed. Here too, there are different versions of realities.

In the rotation of life Lula Ann Bridewell, she drops “Lula,” “Ann” and “Well” from her name to be recognized as “Bride,” by her self-empowerment and motivation, such person succeeds to be a regional manager at cosmetic company (Sylvia, Inc.) leading fascinating life in her early twenties. But soon after, her boyfriend, Booker abandons her, psychologically split Bride heads to north California to find him who lives there with his aunt Queen Olive. She meets Steve, Evelyn, the husband and wife, plus Rain who is adopted daughter of Steve when she got accident on the way to Booker. The moment Queen dies due to the fire and sudden verbal and physical clash, Bride and Booker realize the importance of their mutual company. Hence, the novel concludes with happy ending Bride being the pregnant with Booker’s seed.

Since the novel sets in American context of racism and the predicament of materialistic life of early twenty first century, its primary audiences are American people who believe in “life,” “liberty” and “pursuit of happiness.” Secondly, the

novel is also applicable to any kind of multi-racial society where diverse voices come along. Analogously, the audiences of this thesis can be of any people who belong to a community where diversity of identities, races and ideologies can survive. Therefore, the major goal of this paper is to make my reader believe in the significance of multiple voices in a hybrid world in order to help the world a better place to live.

The novel encapsulates the life of post-modern, late twentieth and early twenty first century American society in the light of polyphony. The novel is split into four parts with each part divided into subparts. Each of these subparts has a character to drive the plot ahead. This offers shift in point of view within the novel. Part one opens with the monologue of Sweetness and then by sequence come the turns of Bride, Brooklyn, Bride, Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Bride and Sofia. Part two starts with Morrison's own wonderful voice followed by Sofia, again Morrison and then Rain. Part three belongs to Morrison alone. Part four begins with Brooklyn and continues to Morrison and lasts at Sweetness. Why does Morrison employ such multiple voices? What does she want to achieve by employing such polyphonies?

One voice cannot achieve what many voices can. Working with plurality of voices irrespective of any prejudices, Morrison addresses to the sentiments of multicultural society. A single voice does not represent all the people living in a hybrid world. By injecting plural narrators from the perspective of suppressed people, Morrison first and foremost attempts to place her as a humanist author. So Morrison mocks American beliefs such as racism, individualism, and commodification of human values by the multiple voices in order to impart the moral and practical insights so as to underscore responsibility and redemption of each individual irrespective of racial difference.

Morrison spends a good portion of her text playing with plural voices. Racism,

individualism monetary psychology and liberty hold the dominant position as parasite of American society. She makes critique of such beliefs by the interactions with distinct perspectives. Due to such issues, many people are being made the subject matter of humiliation, objectification, torture and trauma. Primarily, Morrison unravels the agenda of how American Children are being mistreated by their parent and make the would-be parents critical in the novel. *New York Times* book reviewer contends, “In the world of *God Help the Child*, there are few caregivers or true friends, no therapists or social workers, and so the adult victims cultivate thin shells of resistance and scrabble to seek justice” (Walker). Of course, like Walker argues Morrison reflects the social realities of American society in the light of 21st century. Morrison shows the declining faith of American people. She foregrounds the issues from the position of each character who are exploited by the situation. Eventually, she offers “poetic justice” to Bride. She also presents how a mother manipulates her own daughter (Rain) to get into the act of prostitution in the pursuit of making money.

Los Angeles Times book critic remarks, “Toni Morrison revisits familiar themes of family abuse in her 11th novel *God Help the Child*” (Ulin). In fact, Morrison encapsulates the theme of family crisis, at times; she enables the reader to be empathetic to such family-abandoned children and motivates to work for the enrichment of needy people.

In an online article by a BBC book reviewer shows *God Help the Child* as the echoes of her first novel *The Bluest Eyes* that, “Toni Morrison’s eleventh novel *God Help the Child* begins with the echoes of the writer’s earliest work. Pecola, the Child deemed “ugly” due to the darkness of her skin and raped by her father in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison’s first novel, is the precursor to the ill-fated baby born on the opening page of her latest book” (Scholes). Of course, it is echoes of Morrison’s first novel

where she has drawn the horrendous experiences of Pecola whereas in *God Help the Child*, she traces the terrible issues of Children including Bride and Rain.

As it is previously mentioned that this thesis analyses *God Help the Child* keeping the Bakhtinian concept of polyphony, dialogism, heteroglossia, carnivals and other some ideas at the centre. Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin's theory of polyphony and carnival turn to be the appropriate tool for giving justice to creativity of Toni Morrison. More importantly, I discuss the general tendency of the novel to disperse voices, and the use of different genres in the novel. The exploration of truth in the dialogues of many voices, the inclusion of voice of the "other" by various methods, the "unfinalizability" of truths, the multiplicity of meanings, the eclecticism that one finds *God Help the Child*, and the postmodern aspect of the novel.

Polyphony simply means it is a concept of representing the freedom of other. The idea of polyphony is related to the concepts of unfinalizability, of the self and the other(s). Bakhtin's conception of unfinalizability respects the possibility that a person can change, and that a person is never fully revealed or fully known in the world. Polyphony, in music, refers to a piece that has two or more different voices or melodies that become important in exploring a complementary theme. What is important here in this dissertation are that the different voices or melodies in polyphony are independent, fully valid and unmerged.

Bakhtin, in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* unravels that polyphony literally refers to "multi-voicedness" (276). Additionally, he opines that there was no existence of the term "polyphony" before Dostoevsky (*Problems* 34). It is stated that Bakhtin read thoroughly the novels of Dostoevsky which were precisely in polyphonic pattern. And he extends the significance of polyphony in representing multiple identities and truths of the world.

As Bakhtin notes, “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief character of Dostoevsky ‘s novels” (6). To simplify it another way, Dostoevsky’s novels comprise the multiple voices of various characters which do not get affected by the authorial veil. This is exactly what needs to be done in the form of fictions in order to represent the society, their distinct identities and existence of people living there.

Bakhtin further points out that there does not exist the singular objective truth in today’s dynamic world rather, “a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with his own world” (*Problems* 6). In addition, he asserts, “Dostoevsky’s major heroes are, by the very nature of his creative design, not only objects of authorial discourse but also subjects of own directly signifying discourse” (6-7). It can be said that Dostoevsky’s heroes stand beyond the authorial control, rather they are supposed to make their own wealth of wisdom independently.

As the “creator of polyphonic novel” (*Problems* 7), Dostoevsky believes that polyphonic novel combines both the author’s world and “with the full and equally valid voices of other characters” (*Problems* 7). For this Bakhtin reveals, “The consciousness of a character is given as someone else’s consciousness, another consciousness, yet at the same time it is not turned into an object, is not closed, does not come a simple object of the author’s consciousness” (*Problems* 7).

In another context, Bakhtin embodies that novels are in dialogic form. It means there is the possibility of many dialogues in the novel. It establishes the relationship between the author and reader/ listener. It also connotes the sources of knowledge. That’s why all the polyphonic novels are dialogic in nature. The author prepares a fictional world as if he is being asked many questions and it feels that the author is addressing them all. Michael Holquist remarks, “Dialogism is a way of

looking at things that always insists on the presence of the other, on the inescapable necessity of out-sidedness and unfinalizability” (*Dialogism* 190). The phrase such as “the inescapable necessity of outsidedness” refers to the “other” who identify themselves without being offended while reading the text. And “unfinalizability” suggests that the dialogic novel does not enforce a single final understanding of the world, rather they are prone to change, and they leave things in unfinalized way and in multiple ways.

Stepping upon the Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony, in a journal Joffrey T. Nealon quotes, “‘Voice’ becomes such as attractive concept because it is not tied essentially to one point of view, rather, one must learn to find one’s own voice and to bear the voice of the other within a common social context” (131). Indeed, understanding of other and their point of view comes as one of the predominant qualities in today’s social context. There are multiple people belonging to multiple ethnicity, religion, language and profession. In order to maintain social and economic harmony between them, one has to “bear the voice of the other” while we make any kind of public concerning project.

For Bakhtin, monologic novels cannot represent the world as it is represented by a dialogic or polyphonic novel. In his view, a monologic novel holds the single voice, authorial interference, and recognizes only itself and its object and does not include other people’s voice, while polyphonic novels offer equal importance between the “self” and “other”. Characters become independent to represent their world-view (*Problems* 185-87). That’s way; Bakhtin explains the polyphonic text:

excludes all one-sided or dogmatic seriousness and does not permit any single point of view, any single extreme of life or thought, to be absolutized. All one-sidedness . . . is handed over to the heroes, but the author who causes them all

to collide in the “great dialogue” of the novel, leaves that dialogue open leaves no finalizing period at the end. (*Problem 165*)

Hence, Bakhtin believes that monologic novels promotes a single truth whereas polyphonic novels celebrate the pluralities being dialogic in nature.

Bakhtin loves polyphonic novels because he assumes it is the only democratic and liberating genre of all. No matter what caste, what religion, race and class one belongs to they get a parallel space in the projection of their thoughts, feelings, emotions and truth about them in the novel. This can also be internalized in the journal of Qian Zhongwen, he quotes, “Bakhtin honors ‘polyphony’ and belittles monologue. In his opinion, it was through ‘polyphony’ that Dostoevsky succeeded in discovering ‘man’ in human beings” (784). Obviously, discovering a “man” means finding real human beings or to put it differently, to make the reader a better human being is only possible through polyphonic literature because there is no hierarchy and manipulation of the characters. By going into such art people will be biased-free which is equivalent to a real “man”. This is the way a “man” in the crowd of other human beings is born to help the world make a better place to live.

Bakhtin shows the connection between “polyphonic” novel and a “dialogic” novel. In *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, he mentions, “The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through” (40). This way, Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony is analogous to the notion of dialogism. Therefore, in this thesis, I explore “polyphony” and “dialogue” interchangeably and a polyphonic novel should necessarily be dialogic and vice versa.

In the tyranny of monologism, Dostoevsky begins writing polyphonic novel believing that it is the best form of representing all kinds of people. That’s why, Bakhtin praises his contribution painstakingly. As per Bakhtin’s studies, Dostoevsky

originated “a fundamentally new novelistic genre” and carried out in “constructing a polyphonic European novel” (*Problems* 8). And, most probably it is told earlier too, the nobility of such polyphonic novel is that the characters are merely free from the authorial surveillance. The point of view of author is never manipulative and the characters reveal themselves into the great joy of freedom. Each character holds the respectable position in polyphonic novel in terms of delivery of ideas. His position is as important as that of author.

As mentioned previously, the novel as the genre of plurality and liberating, it employs a character or many narrator from which everything could be seen and felt, that is why, Henry James notes, the house of fiction has “not one window, but a million” and therefore, there are countless ways to tell a story (*The Critical Muse* 485). James explains “one window” promotes the singularity of consciousness while “a million” definitely engage the identities and truths of millions people. Thus, the novel has to be told in plurality of consciousness.

Bakhtin remains almost crippled if we leave behind his notion of “carnival.” In general, carnival is an occasion or festival in which people from all class of society join the process of merrymaking and expressing their thoughts to bring the authorities of the state into the question to better the lives of needy people. Bakhtin contends that the carnivalization of literature:

proved remarkably productive as a means for capturing in art the developing relationships under capitalism, at a time when previous forms of life, moral principles and beliefs were being turned into ‘rotten cords’ and the previously concealed, ambivalent, and unfinalized nature of man and human thoughts was being nakedly exposed. (*Problems* 166)

Nevertheless, it is precisely obvious that people make the critique upon the evils of

society during the moment of carnival which is forbidden before. Those prejudiced beliefs which offend to particular groups of people is mocked and drawn out among the mass to help the oppressed, live a better life. This is how, carnival helps to better the society by drawing the attention of concerned authority.

Carnival exposes a topsy-turvy world where law and order does not function. Everyone feels free to say what they observe into their communities. It is the celebration of freedom devoid of law. In carnival all rules and norms turn mute. Particularly, this festival was famous in Medieval Period when there was no presence of media houses to speak against the injustice of the society. However, it still survives in various fictional works by raising the voice from the point of view of people who are in margin. In terms of the role of carnival, Sue vice remarks, “Carnival laughter is directed at exalted objects, and forces them to renew themselves, thus its debasing results in new life, and it is ‘ambivalent’” (“Carnival and the Grotesque Body” 346). Hence, the force of carnival is to reconstruct the exalted objects into more constructive and productive way.

The beginning chapter of this thesis introduces the novelist Toni Morrison and the novel *God Help the Child* in brief. I also look at the reception the novel and how Morrison is viewed by the world and how she seems different than other African-American authors. Most importantly, in the introductory chapter, it presents the statement of problems and objective for the thesis.

The following chapter presents the theoretical framework in detail. First, it examines the concept of polyphony from the Bakhtinian view point as it serves as the main focus of my thesis. What is unavoidable for my study is that polyphonic novels are highly democratic and liberating in nature representing the identities of the hybrid world. In my theoretical section it also supplies the dialogism, as it is the link that

brings author and reader/listener together. Bakhtin contends that the polyphony and dialogism liberate the world from everything by putting social realities at the center. Here, carnival is a motif which is called as the occasion for mocking towards the social evils in order to make the society a better place to live. Thus, it is carnival that also connects *God Help the Child* and its humanitarian message together. The theoretical section also discusses the concepts of heteroglossia (representation of social voice) and especially how it is slightly different from polyphony (representation of individual voice).

The analysis section studies the polyphonic and dialogistic elements found in *God Help the Child* in greater detail. It begins the analysis with a discussion of the dialogistic characteristics in Morrison's novel, which can be located throughout the novel. For example, the central *characters* frequently acknowledge the readers in their dialogues and independently put awful experiences caused by American notion of white supremacies, materialism, individualism and money-centric psychology. This then, in turn, leads to a different view of life. After this, it continues by presenting the carnivals in *God Help the Child*. The following section of the analysis explores the carnivalistic elements plus why such carnivals need for Morrison in both polyphonic and dialogic forms.

This paper analyzes Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* using a detailed examination of the Bakhtinian concepts of polyphony to investigate the points of mutual illumination and confirmation between Bakhtin's ideas and Morrison's novel. Therefore, the method of analysis is divided between a close study of *God Help the Child* and an equally close examination of Bakhtin's ideas. The Bakhtinian concepts that is studied in this paper are central to his idea of language and "Discourse in the Novel" from the text of *The Dialogic Imagination* and their analysis in *God Help the*

Child will reveal that while these concepts shed light on American beliefs such as race, individualism, and money psychology and thematic complexities of the novel.

Regarding the notion of polyphony Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* is incorporated. I show the mutual connection between Dostoevsky's hero and Morrison's hero in terms of enhancing their personal and professional liberty.

In addition, *God Help the Child* is also be seen in the light of Michael Holquist's book *Dialogism* and Bakhtin's *The Bakhtin Reader* in which they have expressed the major philosophical thoughts in relation to the central ideal of Bakhtin such as polyphony, dialogism, heteroglosia and carnival.

Carnival occurs as another significant concept evolved by Bakhtin. It is primarily concerned in mocking and parodying the people in power. I borrow Sue Vice's interpretation and signification of carnival from his essay "Carnival and the Grotesque Body" and some other related insights from *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* for better analysis of my thesis.

Moreover, the results of the analysis indicates two main points in which Morrison's novel and Bakhtin's ideas confirm and illuminate each other. The first point is related to Bakhtin's celebration of the novel genre for its capacity to include diverse elements, a celebration that finds its counterpart in Morrison's novel due to the novel's heteroglot nature and polyphonic structure. The second point is related to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism which emerges as a relational property common to his mentioned concepts. As this paper shows, Morrison's *God Help the Child* is a dialogic novel in this regard, with its foregrounding of dialogic relations between heteroglot languages, characters' voices and social classes.

This paper ends with a discussion pointing polyphonic aspects of Bakhtin's ideas and Morrison's novel, which include intertextuality, the problematization of

truth, and the blurring of boundaries between opposites.

The purpose of this paper is to see the *God Help the Child* in the light of Polyphony. There are five central characters performing the role of speakers and Morrison herself also fills the position of speaker in many places putting her point of views to balance the situation. Since these five speakers belong to various races, age group and economic class. For instance, Sweetness and Brooklyn represent white communities, Bride and Sofia Huxley belong to black communities whereas Rain represents the group of children being a part of white community. Though Steve and Evelyn do not speak but Morrison speaks from their point of view in order to reflect poverty of their life. In this way, when an art reflects the situations, issues, stories and identities of the various group of people living there, a society become more strengthened and progressive. One of the politics of Morrison for employing such multiple speakers in the fiction is to make American society more united and peaceful. When people living there identify themselves in the literature of their nation without being prejudiced between them, it strengthens the practice of democracy and significance of the hybrid world. This is what Morrison intends to do by this novel.

As the novel is split in four different parts, the characters like Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Sofia, Rain put their stories in their own ways. The five protagonists of the novel take turns in telling the story and each one of them has a unique voice. The protagonists comment on the endeavors and often have different views when it comes to the course of events in the novel. Thus, the novel could almost be seen as a dialogue between the characters and the reader. They show various ways of seeing life and truths. The same thing is perceived differently by the different speakers. Amidst they tell their stories it feels like they are talking to the readers. The readers or the

listener get completely enthralled and engaged to the different versions of stories.

That's why, Bakhtin writes, "The novel is the expression of a Galilean perception of language, one that denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language that is, that refuses to acknowledge its own language as the sole verbal and semantic center of the ideological world" (*The Dialogic* 366).

Like the way Bakhtin says there is the denial of singular and unitary language in *God Help the Child* because six speakers including Morrison herself present their different languages sticking to the different truths. Morrison believes that single speaker cannot represent the absolute finality of the world. Consequently, she has employed various perspective in each part four parts of the fiction. It is because one person has one kind of understanding of the world while the next have their own which never can meet a single pot. For instance, the first part begins with the monologue of Sweetness followed by the turns of Bride, Brooklyn, again Bride, Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, Bride and Sofia. Part two commences with Morrison's own authorial voice followed by Sofia, again Morrison and then Rain. Part three remains to Morrison alone. But Morrison's voice is not only dominant but as a narrator filling the gaps in narration. Part four begins with Brooklyn and continues to Morrison and lasts at Sweetness.

The feature of dialogism helps to strengthen the mutual illumination between the narrator and the readers of the novel. There is a wide range of dialogues throughout Morrison's novel, as all the protagonists have their unique voice. In addition, while taking turns on telling the story, the five central characters in Morrison's novel frequently talk to the reader. Out of the five characters, Sweetness, the light colored woman is the one who does it more than the others. However, this can be depicted throughout *God Help the Child*. E.g. when the novel opens with the

monologue of Sweetness, she approaches the reader as follows:

It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have 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. (03)

In the above quote, the story is told in a very personal manner as the reader is often acknowledged. A good example of this comes from another statement of Sweetness:

"I wasn't a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only Child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges" (43). In both of these quotes, Sweetness communicates to the readers.

Bakhtin's view is that everything which is said and expressed, is then located outside the "soul" of the speaker and, thus, does not only belong to him. He continues by stating that the word cannot be assigned to a single speaker and that "the author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener also has his rights, and those whose voice are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights" (*Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* 122). With such dialogic communication among the character and reader, Morrison tries to attack the prevalent notion of racism of the American society. Morrison's speaker Sweetness defends herself saying that she is "not a bad mother" simply because she abandoned her daughter to Childcare center, Sweetness as the light-skinned mother, bearing so black daughter was as matter of shame in her family. By this story of Sweetness whose "marriage broke to pieces" (5), Morrison implicitly critiques upon the awful practice of racism. With this novel, the author aims to reverse the mentality of all racist people by stating that "It's just a color . . . A genetic trait—not a flaw, not a curse, not a

blessing nor a sin” (143) to be ashamed of.

It is inherent, the existence of multiple voices or wills become possible in a polyphonic novel. In *God Help the Child*, the protagonist also contradicts one another or many occasions during the novel. As the six speakers take turns in telling the story, their depiction often disagree with each other and they often see thing in different manner. For example, the mother of Bride, Sweetness keeps the distance with her own daughter Bride when she was young, so that she keeps her in Child care center, tells her to call her “Sweetness” instead of “Mama” or Mother (06). For all this, Sweetness reveals, “Her color is cross” (07) because of it, she did those things but she still adds, “It’s not her fault” (07). In contrast, Bride has different experience she shares her childhood was ruined because of her mother, who did not offer her much love. That’s why she testifies against innocent Sofia Huxley to put her in jail for fifteen years, “so her mother would hold her hand!” (153).

In addition, there is different narrative between Bride and Sofia Huxley. Sofia was once a primary teacher to Bride. Bride, in the name of getting some affection from her mother, gives wrong testify against Sofia Huxley in the courtroom. At present, Bride stands in her early twenties, who is filled by the guilt psychology because she was the reason for Huxley’s spoiled life. On the other hand, Bride as the successful woman wants to help her former teacher; but Huxley assumes that Bride is one “Devil” or “Evil” (70).

Analogously, in the narrative of Morrison, when she describes a couple Steve and Evelyn, who, despite of being poor, they help Bride when she got accident on the way to Booker, North California where Bride’s lover lives with his aunt, Queen Olive. Moreover, the couple of Steve also rescues a girl called Rain from a rainy day. They believe they are kind-hearted. In contrast, Rain argues that “They stole me . . .

Because I didn't ask them to take me and they didn't ask if I wanted to go" (100).

Hence, there are distinctive realities and point of views seeing at the same thing by the different speaker. It is because a polyphonic novel is the combination of many wills or perspectives. For this, Bakhtin states that "If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in polyphony that a combination of several individual wills takes place that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded" (*Problems* 21).

The protagonists always serve the authorial expectation in the polyphonic novel. However, the heroes are independent in their role but their job is to carry the voice of the author too. Every author has a social responsibility to make a difference in the world they belong to. In order to achieve this destination of "other" they employ certain characters who carry authorial voice to impart a lesson. For this, Bakhtin goes this way:

In Dostoevsky's works a hero appears whose voice is constructed exactly like the voice of the author himself in a novel of the usual type. A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds as it were, alongside the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters. (*The Bakhtin Reader* 89)

These features of Bakhtin's ideas are also matched in *God Help the Child* to some extent. In the novel with six speakers, Morrison as the author of the text is one; her underlying spirit of writing this novel is to help the world to be racism free, individualism free, commodification of human values free, and to promote humanism.

For this, Sweetness and Bride's role as a whole depict how the racism engulfs and breaks the families into pieces. Rain and Sofia Huxley bear the witness of commodification of their own life. Simply for the sake of money, Rain is exposed to prostitution by her own mother. By the role of Steve and Evelyn carry the message of humanism which Morrison aims to spread. Hence, the characters are bound to employ the authorial message; there is no other way around.

God Help the Child mocks at authorities with the money centric psychology. As we previously discussed, it is the prime motto of carnival to mock the people with evils in them. And money-centric psychology is also of one of the evils which can be attacked vehemently through the means of carnival. It enables the constructive change in their behavior. During the moment of carnival, people belonging to any class devoid of any bigotry join and say what could not be spoken previously against the injustices they go through. Therefore, carnival stands as the festival to bring changes in the lives of needy people. Sue vice, in his essay reports, "Bakhtin's study of "carnival"—a transgressive overturning of hierarchy in favor of normally oppressed people at the bottom of the society –reveals how popular folk culture and humour can be a politically subversive force" (343). This is analogous to Morrison's concept. Morrison also makes the mockery of those people who are money oriented to make herself stand by the side of "normally oppressed people". For instance, Sweetness, Bride, Sofia Huxley and Rain represent the oppressed character if we see from each of their perspective in the novel. One after another, turn wisely Morrison takes the side of each character as the part of the carnival.

To put it this way, Sweetness believes she is oppressed by the existing racism because it was the notion of racism which makes her away from her daughter. While Bride insists that she is oppressed by both the racism and her mother. Indeed, she was

often bullied in school simply because she didn't look like other white students. Plus she didn't get much affection and care by her mother in the childhood. Next, Sofia Huxley thinks she is oppressed by Bride who gave wrong testify to put her fifteen years in jail. Finally, Rain the little white girl who feels oppressed when her own mother employs her into the prostitution simply to make money. To all of these oppressed characters are backed by the love and thoughts of Morrison.

For example, in the first part of the novel, when Sweetness tells her story of how she was obliged and exploited by the racist American money mongering people. Sweetness unravels, "Mr. Leigh, the landlord, but I knew it couldn't be him because he was stern but not dirty. He demanded the rent be paid in cash before noon on the first day of the month and charged a late fee if you knocked on his door five minutes late" (54). This statement is a part of carnival where Morrison's speaker mocks upon the house owner regarding their covetousness to money. This criticism stands on behalf of all the oppressed people who stay in a rented room. Similarly, Bride's one statement also speaks about their excessive focus for money. How American culture and ideology is shaped by wealth, this can be easily studied by this quote, "Every girl I know introduces her boyfriend as a lawyer or artist or club owner or broker or whatever. The job, not the guy, is what the girlfriend adores" (62).

Major part of *God Help the Child* sets in California. Since it is one of the metropolitan city of America, people are indifferent, self-serving, and everything is reduced to money. Even human relationship is built on the basis of "how much" benefit s/he is going to bring. Morrison also makes the irony of such part of city life as the part of carnival. For instance, when Bride gets successful in her career as the manager of a cosmetic company, she gives a visit to her former teacher Sofia Huxley who falls in fifteen years long imprisoned life because of Bride's wrong trail. At the

moment, Bride feels sorry for what she did to her teacher and she wants to compensate by offering money to Huxley. For this Miss Huxley asserts, “I didn’t know what she was talking about or what she wanted until she threw money at me. She was one of the students who testified against me, one of the ones who helped kill me, take my life away. How could she think cash would erase fifteen years of life death?” (68-69). This has to be conceived as another example of carnival where Sofia Huxley as a speaker employed by Morrison makes the critique to all the materialistic people who reduce everything to the money. This statement occurs as the direct slap to those people who once hurt you and think that they can repay it by giving some pennies. Overall, this is also the mock to money minded people to impart a spiritual message that everything in the world cannot be bought by money.

Rain rises as a mysterious little white-decent girl in the novel whose story is also worth-telling. Once when she was thoroughly drenched in the rain, she was rescued by a kind couple of Steve and Evelyn. Actually, the couple didn’t know about the girl where she comes from, what her name was, so that her naming is eerie, simply because they get her in rainy day she is called as Rain. Later on, in her narrative she explores that she is also victim of American materialistic life and money centric psychology. Moreover, she clarifies that she wants to “chop her head off” (102) own mother if she finds her now. Furthermore, she adds that her mother used to employ her in the act of prostitution by taking some money with the sex-driven customers. One day when she misbehaves one of the customers of her mother, she is chased away from the house. For this, Morrison tells the situation from the point of view of Rain, “Some guy. A regular. One of the ones let do it to me . . . He stuck his pee thing in my mouth and I bit it. So she apologized to him, gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made me stand outside . . . She wouldn’t let me back in. I kept pounding on the door.

She opened it once to throw me my sweater” (101-02). In this carnivalistic statement, Morrison vehemently parodies the money mongering, too much cunt parents who employ their own young children in the sex business. This also makes the laughter of commodification of human values. Here, Rain is just a representative child mishandled by her parent; by this, Morrison has a broader goal of raising the awareness of all the concerned authorities to help the world a better place to live.

Humanism remains at the centre of any good literature. It is also unavoidable asset of polyphonic novels. Polyphonic novels provide the agency in bringing out the voice of people belonging to various groups. Giving space in articulating the diversities of the world itself is a humanitarian work. More importantly, in the context of polyphonic novels it allows the presence of multiple speakers belonging to multiple truths, origin, and ethnicity. Its protagonists forget themselves when they help the “others”. That is why polyphonic novel stands far ahead in promoting humanism than any other form of literatures. Surrounding this context, Bakhtin unfolds, “And Dostoevsky’s heroes are indeed motivated by the utopian dream of creating sort of human community that lies beyond existing social form. To create a human community in the world, to join several people together outside the framework of available social forms” (*Problems* 280).

Of course, like the way Dostoevsky’s heroes function in the dream of creating utopian community, Morrison’s heroes also follow the similar spirit. Very meticulously, they mobilize themselves in rooting out the evils of the world, more particularly to American evils of individualism. Each and every heroes of Morrison carry some utopian thrust. Some come to eliminate racism, some to avoid money-centric life, and while some to wipe out the practice of individualism. For instance, Morrison employs a couple Steve and Evelyn who also fall under the category of

heroes. It is because they represent poor life, they have so many scarcities and limited resources. But they give their helping hands when Bride gets accidents and Rain was found in the rainy day. To make clearer, Morrison quotes:

Who are these people, wondered Bride, and where did they come from? They hadn't asked her where she was from or where she was going. They simply tended her, fed her, arranged for her car to be towed for repair. It was too hard, too strange for her to understand the kind of care they offered free, without judgment or even a passing interest in who she was or where she was going.

(90)

These statements of Morrison speak for themselves what her heroes try to achieve throughout the novel. As a matter of fact, they aim to make the utopian dream come true. Steve and Evelyn live in a remote part of the California; they lack decent life of themselves but still attempt to wipe out the tears of the needy people like Bride and Rain. As stated in the quote, without acknowledging the backdrop of Bride, who she is, where does she come from, but yet they serve her as their own family members simply considering the fact that she is like any other human beings. Bride had a broken leg. Without the hope of getting something in return, just to maintain the humanity in the moment of crisis, he calls a doctor naming Muskie in order to reshape it. It is believed that people have no materialistic feelings, they are equal, no sense of class, they work for collective benefit, they share common goal of serving afflicted humanity in the utopian world. This feature is also dominantly found in *God Help the Child* by mocking over materialistic life.

Similarly, couple of Steve also rescue and bring up Rain as their own child. Had there been the materialistic feelings in them, they would not have supported her in the time of crisis. Steve does not possess the fancy house. A quote by Morrison,

“Sleeping in a house of such deep darkness at night felt to Bride like being in a coffin” (92). Despite of being economically poor, they have wider heart for creating the utopian world. This has only become possible by Morrison’s heroes.

Morrison assumes a belief that America holds a position which can shake the world but it is mocked for white supremacists’ belief of racism. People living in America have to imitate the behaviors, cultures and life styles of dominant white people in order to make sure their better career. Most of the companies and their employers represent the white community, consequently, non-whites become obliged in finding some better survival technique which is appreciated by the white supremacist people. Revolving around this concept, bell hooks projects:

Within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the social and political context in which the custom of black folks straightening our hair emerges, it represents an imitation of the dominant white group’s appearance and often indicates internalized racism, self-hatred, and/or low self-esteem . . . black people’s obsession with straight hair reflected a colonized mentality . . . It was clearly a process that was about black women changing their appearance to imitate white people’s looks as possible, to look safe, is related to a desire to succeed in the white world. (329)

This concept is equivalent to the successful survival trick of Bride in *God Help the Child too*. Though hooks asserts the example of how and why black women straighten their hair, which is slightly different as compared to the Morrison’s novel. Bride as the black lady of early twenty first centuries in the USA even has to wear white clothes such as gowns all the time. It is because of the expectation of white supremacist world. Since every job giving companies belong to whites, non-whites like blacks had to impress the CEOs or managers simply following the dress up,

culture and life style they believe in. Here in *God Help the Child* too, Bride does the similar practice as told by hooks. When Bride was about to face an interview for a cosmetic company (Sylvia Inc.), her designer of the dress suggests something which Bride puts this way, “‘You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time.’ Jeri, calling himself a ‘total person’ designer, insisted. Looking for a makeover for my second interview at Sylvia, Inc., I consulted him” (33). Designer’s counseling was suitable in the white supremacist world. Eventually, so did Bride and she was given the jobs at that company. This is just an example that Morrison mocks at. By this, Morrison draws the attention of white communities and how the black women are being mentally colonized by the exploitation of their dominant culture.

Every day appears new, every day comes as a lesson. That is what changes our life every single moment. What we are today will be no more like this tomorrow. Similar philosophy functions in the context of polyphonic protagonists. In a journal by Qian Zhongwen, it is mentioned that “Dostoevsky sought to depict the complex nature of man and his ‘possibility of being transformed.’ In the rotation of life, when an immoral man seeks normal and natural affection, he may suddenly become a good one” (785). This idea bears a huge resemblance to the characters’ life in *God Help the Child*. First, let us discuss on Sweetness. Back in 1990s when Lula Ann Bride was born so black (06), as a mother Sweetness being a light skinned mother, was ashamed of her daughter. She couldn’t love her daughter frankly simply because of discriminatory social beliefs of the time. She forbids her to a child care centre. She neglects Bride blaming on the discriminatory laws. Today, Bride becomes a successful manager of a company. She makes decent money. She often sends a little amount to her mother. Apart that, Bride has got a husband Booker and has conceived his baby. Soon she bears child being madly in love with Booker. After all this,

Sweetness has been also transformed into a better human being who becomes a moral by the end of her life. Now she has guilt and conveys her best wishes to her daughter. For this, Sweetness writes, “If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn’t do or did wrong. I remember when she had her first period and how I reacted. Or the times I shouted when she stumbled or dropped something . . . True. I was really upset, even repelled by her black skin when she was born” (177). This utterance has a lot to say of how much regretful Sweetness is at present. It is also a proof that Sweetness has a pride in her black daughter who has “turned out” to be “A rich career girl” (178). It means Sweetness’s ways of seeing her daughter has been transformed which is the central feature of the polyphonic novel.

At the same time, there has been a drastic transformation in the life of Bride too. Once she was abandoned by her own parents and had been frequently a prey of racial discrimination. Plus she was also broken to pieces when her boy friend Booker leaves her after “six months into bliss of edible sex” (135) accusing that she was “not the woman he wants” (08). But by the end of the novel, she gets everything back what she was longing for ever since she was a Child. She gets the affection of her mother back; she gets Booker back and soon bears his baby. Hence, her life also makes a U-turn from chaotic to a fascinating career girl. By this, Morrison enables herself to offer the poetic justice to the commonly suppressed people.

Morrison contributes a good portion of her life in the liberation of people at the bottom of society. So does her literature. Ever since the beginning of her first novel *The Bluest Eye* to *God Help the Child*, she shows a legacy of voicing from the point of view of people who do not have their own agency. Social injustices become her prime source of writing. According to a scholarly journal by Jeffrey T. Nealon, it

is highlighted that “For both Bakhtin and Levinas, it is ethics—answerability or responsibility—that is literally first philosophy: response to the concrete other comes first, before the thematic of abstract ontology” (133). This philosophy of “other comes first” also revolves around the *God Help the Child*.

Though Morrison belongs to African American origin, she includes the painful stories, issues and agenda of both White and non-Whites communities. For instance, two protagonists: Bride represents black while Rain represents white community. Morrison highlights how they are being victim of their own community people. For her, more than what race and class she comes from, she counts humanity first. So is the case in the context of *God Help the Child*. Morrison stands herself in a neutral position. More than provoking one group and embracing another group, she typically becomes issue-centric. By the role of Bride, Morrison depicts the real circumstances of black woman of how they are being treated in tyranny of racist world. Plus, she does not also argue that America is a white land so that all white people have comfortable life. To cut away such beliefs and to make herself even the author of white community, she establishes herself as the freedom fighter of white community. This can be obvious with the role of Rain, a white girl misled by her own mother to sex business. The kind of situation Rain comes from makes all the whites to identify themselves and aware them to correct themselves. This is how; this instance itself proves that how much Morrison worries about the humanity irrespective of any race, religion and class one belongs to. Like many other identity-based authors, she could have also raised the issues of her black community alone, but she denies it and rises herself as a true humanitarian author. In this context, David Patterson’s claim seems appropriate, “The novel is a polyphonic voice that responds to a world of voices, and not a mirror that reflects a standing reality. It is created through a process whereby an

“I” becomes “other,” through the collision and encounter between word and word” (137). This notion of “an ‘I’ becomes ‘other’” can simply be understood as the responsibility towards “other.”

The similar kind of role Morrison maintains in her novel. Though she employs several “I”s as the protagonist but they uphold their perspectives for the well-being of so many “other.” E.g. Sweetness, Bride, Rain, Sofia Huxley and Brooklyn say their stories representing the point of view of single “I” but the message they impart through the means of “collision and encounter of word and word” will liberate the lives of so many “other.”

To sum up, this thesis provides a Bakhtinian reading of Toni Morrison’s novel *God Help the Child*. In other words, this paper unfolds how the five main characters in the novel make their polyphonies in order to bring about a constructive change for the reformation in the beliefs of colorism, individualism and commodification of human values. In my reading of the novel, the concepts of the Russian theorist Bakhtin, the polyphony and dialogism together with the various elements of the heteroglossia becomes much useful. All these concepts engage in the analysis of *God Help the Child* as a polyphonic novel. In addition to explore whether the five main characters of *God Help the Child* live inside plurality of consciousness, this paper studies whether the novel is carnivalistic, a prominent feature in it. Lastly, it also analyzes the novel as a mockery of American materialistic life.

God Help the Child offers the reader with five seemingly rather different protagonists who take turns in telling the story and carry the story further. The novel, thus, is shaped like a dialogue, as the characters often address the reader, acknowledge the reader’s presence, and contradict each other as the story moves forward. In the plurality of ways, central protagonists draw the reader’s attention and,

share their agonies of how they struggle to get through money-centric American society. But their stories sometimes contradict since they have different experience of seeing at the same event.

Overall, Morrison balances the hybrid American world by providing the pluralities of consciousness to both whites and non-white communities. Furthermore, Morrison addresses the demand of pluralities of the truth by showing same things from the different perspective of each character. By incorporating the various carnivals related to racism, money psychology, commodification of human values, Morrison is guided by a broader goal of serving the afflicted humanities. For this, mockery and irony occur as the sharpest weapon to carve it meticulously. Eventually, Morrison intends to convey the message that we should try to fulfill our “responsibility towards other” to make this world a better place to grow happier.

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