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Colorism and the Mimicry of Colonial Gaze in Toni Morrison's Sweetness

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Abstract

The study analyzes Toni Morrison's short story *Sweetness* by combining insights from postcolonial and race theories to explore the linkages between mimicry and the colonial gaze. Morrison develops an elaborate depiction of internalized racism and colorism as techniques that sustain colonial power while revealing that some Black people end up supporting their suppression. Through its examination of the disturbed bond between *Sweetness* and her Black daughter, Lula Ann, the paper demonstrates how Black communities adopt white supremacist color hierarchies into their cultural practice of racial capitalism survival. The performance of white values through mimicry provides no actual power because it creates emotional detachment while prolonging agonies passed from one generation to the next. The paper interprets *Sweetness*'s failure to love her child without condition as a symptom of pervasive colonial logic, which influences both present-day racial attitudes and intimate relationships among African Americans. Hence, through *Sweetness*, Morrison delivers a robust condemnation of colorism that demonstrates how the colonial outlook disrupts Black identity from inside and maintains racial value systems.

Keywords: Colorism, Racism, Black literature, Mimicry, Postcolonialism, Toni Morrison

Introduction

Postcolonial literary narratives showcase the well-connected relationship between colorism and colonialism because they focus on identity and race aspects along with perception. Toni Morrison's *Sweetness*, a short story that navigates the inner turmoil of a mother confronting her daughter's skin tone, is a potent site for exploring how colorism functions as a residual expression of colonial hierarchies. Alice Walker first introduced the concept of colorism in 1982 to describe the discrimination of members from the same race who possess different skin tones through the adoption of light-skin bias. Colorism functions internally among racial groups rather than interracially like racism does because these communities demonstrate white supremacist beliefs (Walker 290). Dark-skinned African Americans descended from enslavers' children with enslaved women became the recipients of special privileges during the slave period and occasionally received educational opportunities and easier tasks (Hunter 237). This original slavery legacy produces ongoing practices that link light skin with upward mobility and attractiveness but view dark skin as taboo. As Margaret Hunter notes, "light skin and European features operate as forms of symbolic capital that can translate into social or economic advantages" (239).

Through colorism, society maintains a hierarchy, reproducing racial and valuation systems that developed during colonial times. The colonial system imposed a dual control system that established a connection between whiteness and rationality and civility and beauty and classified Blackness as exotic and savage and lesser than civilized (Said 7). Postcolonial theory associates the colonial gaze with the manner in which colonizers observed and depicted colonized subjects, mainly through a superior stance of domination. Through this gaze, individuals become objects, while the system of discipline brings them to represent different categories of otherness (Bhabha 116). In modern postcolonial areas, along with diasporic settlements, this evaluation process transforms into internalized beliefs of those who were colonized. Homi K. Bhabha describes this as mimicry, a strategy wherein the colonized subject imitates the colonizer, appearing similar but never fully identical: “almost the same, but not quite” (123). Through mimicry, colonial authority both weakens and strengthens itself because of how contradictory it appears to observers.

Through *Sweetness*, Morrison shows how subjugated populations learn to adopt colonial observation patterns that the colonized imposed on them. Through the character of the narrator in *Sweetness*, Morrison demonstrates how colonial standards of attractiveness and value persist to shape the relationships between Black individuals nationally. As Frantz Fanon argues in Black Skin, White Masks, colonial domination instills a “racial epidermal schema” that causes the Black subject to see themselves through the lens of white norms (Fanon 112). The character in *Sweetness* expresses this psychological breakdown when she chooses to separate from her daughter for the sake of connecting with social standards associating pale skin with good morals and refined behavior and general likability.

Hence, the story provides a critical lens for examining the imitation of colonial values, particularly the white-centric worldview. This imitation, coupled with Black

discrimination, undermines close familial bonds and contributes to systemic oppression. This study examines how Morrison demonstrates the psychological effects of colonialism using race theory, which explains colorism through pigmentocracy and racialized self-control, along with postcolonial theory and Homi K. Bhabha's discussion of mimicry. The story reveals that the colonial perspective thrives by being adopted and duplicated by those it initially sought to dominate.

Literature Review

Koritha Mitchell analyzes in her article "Reckoning with the Black Maternal in Toni Morrison's *Sweetness*" that the mother's narration shows her chaotic psychological state because protection resembles harmful actions. Through her works, she shows that systemic racism transforms normal maternal affection into punishing actions and silence. As an effect of racial bias, the main character displays harmful treatment towards her daughter through fear-based conformity to dominating social norms. Morrison presents a challenge to readers that requires them to examine hidden power structures that exist within the Black racial group. Understanding the past development of colorism within African American social structures remains essential for analyzing *Sweetness*. Kimberly Jade Norwood performs research showing that colorism developed through slavery when enslaved people with lighter skin obtained domestic work along with restricted privileges (Norwood 28). The inherited hierarchical structures continue to affect contemporary social relationships through their expression in Black family systems and societal value-based measures and economic systems. Through her narrative, Morrison illustrates how *Sweetness* both acquired traditional values from her past generation and transmitted some of them through forced reluctance to her daughter.

Several feminist scholars dedicated to Morrison's work have demonstrated that the concept of colorism establishes a connection with gender throughout her stories. According to Patricia Hill Collins, beauty standards behave as controlling images for Black women as they use familial structures to enforce them (Collins 89). Through *Sweetness*, the mother shows her contempt for dark skin because she fears her daughter will not develop into a desirable, feminine young adult who can navigate social life successfully. Through this tale, the author critiques both the racial social structure and how skin color prejudices manifest as gendered power dynamics. Studies have noted that Morrison selected to present a character whose view promotes colorist beliefs. Through her story, Morrison presents a morally intricate female character whose experiences reflect the effect of structural violence against Black women. As Melayna Williams notes, this narrative choice forces readers "to grapple with the discomfort of empathizing with a character whose views we might find reprehensible" (Williams 70). The brilliance of Morrison emerges from her ability to present *Sweetness* without ascribing either evil or victimhood to her character.

The "colonial gaze" refers to the power-laden act of seeing the colonized Other through the lens of the colonizer's values and aesthetics. In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon explains how colonized Black people develop a psychological split between racial appearance and their internal self because they treat whiteness as the ultimate standard, which causes profound disconnection from their roots (Fanon 12). Similarly, Homi Bhabha's

concept of mimicry suggests that the colonized subject is encouraged to imitate the colonizer, but always "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 86), producing a distorted self-perception and a form of self-surveillance. Valerie Smith, in her analysis of Morrison's narrative strategies, notes that *Sweetness* is a "voice of the assimilated, conflicted Black subject, haunted by white norms and terrified of deviation" (Smith 167). Through her restrictive ways of controlling her daughter's appearance, *Sweetness* displays the colonial gaze, which also manifests when she speaks through white respectability language by insisting on wearing proper clothing and hiding shameful activities. Her desire to pass or "blend in" socially aligns with Bhabha's argument that mimicry is a defense mechanism born out of fear and a longing for safety.

Throughout history and slavery Colorism emerged through the social status that white skin tones provided for survival during colonial rule. Scholars such as Alice Walker describe it as "prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color" (Walker 290). Through the narrator's prejudiced perceptions, *Sweetness* by Morrison portrays her negative evaluation of her daughter's dark complexion as something shameful and unwanted. Kimberly Jade Norwood explains that colorism, particularly within Black communities, is "a shadow of white supremacy cast inward," reflecting colonial legacies that valorize lighter skin (Norwood 30).

As Yaba Blay notes, colorism continues to operate as "a currency for privilege and access," shaping identities and relationships within Black communities (Blay 26). Morrison lays bare the intimate and psychological costs of this "currency." Fanon states in Black Skin, White Masks how colonialism forces Black subjects to try to become white through bodily conformity, like self-abandonment. The narrator shows her desire to become white normative by adopting racialized beauty standards alongside appropriate conduct and maternal capabilities, even though she wields emotional pain against her child. Through this performance, the narrator conducts self-regulation as well as overseeing others based on white supremacist standards. The daughter's transformation into "Bride" in God Help the Child further highlights the psychological rupture caused by such an upbringing. The process of renaming and transformation adopted by Bride serves as an active rejection of the identity mold created by her mother. According to Richard Schur, liberation and self-authorship emerge from the personal strategies forged by Morrison in her writings (Schur 147).

Patricia Hill Collins, who serves as one such Black feminist critic, demonstrates how colorism specifically impacts Black women disproportionately because Western society elevates white and feminine features (Collins 89). The narrator in *Sweetness* worries about her daughter Lula Ann's dark skin appearance due to her concerns about her future odds of desirability and womanhood potential. These fears are shaped by what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham calls "the politics of respectability," where Black women adopt white middle-class norms to counteract negative stereotypes (Higginbotham 185). The mimicry within *Sweetness* combines racial elements with gendered and class-based expressions.

Most scholarship studies the narrator's behavior from psychological, sociological, and historical viewpoints but does not explore how *Sweetness* functions as a postcolonial analysis of mimicry and the colonial gaze. Postcolonial scholars need to devote more attention to studying how the mother behaves as a person who mimics others while also exhibiting

mimicry behavior. There is still a lack of academic research on how Morrison changes colonial identity by using African American mothers as tools for postcolonial and Black feminist analysis.

Theoretical Framework

This research implements Critical Race Theory (CRT) for colorism analysis alongside Postcolonial Theory with Homi Bhabha's visual concept of mimicry to investigate how the narrator portrays the colonial gaze within their perspective. CRT emerged within legal scholarship before expanding to literary and cultural studies for analyzing how social structures and ideologies integrate racism and race (Delgado and Stefancic 3). CRT recognizes colorism exists beyond racial impact because it functions as an autonomous system of racial hierarchy that grants position to white-like appearances. The lives of Black women become understandable through Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory because *Sweetness* illustrates how race overlaps with gender and skin tone structures that affect Black femininity (Crenshaw 1242). Morrison's narrator is complicit in upholding the standards of white beauty and superiority, punishing her daughter, Lula Ann, for her "blue-black" skin "too black," as she repeatedly laments (Morrison 3).

Postcolonial theory employs the analytical framework of mimicry, according to Homi Bhabha, to interpret *Sweetness*'s conduct. Through mimicry, the colonized person attempts both verbal and sartorial but also cultural adaptations of colonial norms, which extend to their understanding of reality as well as actions and philosophical beliefs. This imitation is "almost the same, but not quite," often exposing the absurdities and contradictions of colonial ideology (Bhabha 86). The adoption of white-centric values by *Sweetness* represents an act of mimicry that manifests through her emulation of the white gaze. *Sweetness* uses discipline as a life-preserving method due to her conviction that adopting white standards functions as the sole way to survive. Through this process, *Sweetness* has become the carrier of colonial observation, which she now perceives as internal to her rather than an outside force. As Fanon argues in Black Skin, White Masks, the colonized subject internalizes the gaze of the oppressor, leading to "epidermalization," or the psychological colonization of Blackness itself (Fanon 11). *Sweetness* shows such thorough assimilation of whiteness that she feels disconnected emotionally from her daughter. Her wish for her daughter to achieve white norms demonstrates how colonial thought continues to affect minds in supposedly postcolonial situations.

In *The Location of Culture* Homi K. Bhabha presents a theory of mimicry that helps understand how colonial discourse gets internalized. Mimicry, for Bhabha, is the process by which the colonized subject imitates the colonizer, producing a subject that is "almost the same, but not quite." The imitation practice maintains dual sides as it creates a sophisticated theatrical act filled with uneasiness and multiple contradictions. Colonial values find their reproduction through this method, but the presentation also exposes their superficial nature. Postcolonial analysis demonstrates how *Sweetness* portrays the psychiatric torn nature and moral confusion that emerge when colonized people embrace colonial beliefs. Morrison depicts *Sweetness* as a tragic character whose roles emerge from historical forces outside her control, helping readers understand how colonial power sustains itself beyond formal colonial rule.

The interwoven analysis of postcolonial theory's concept of mimicry with CRT's understanding of colorism creates a strong representation of internalized oppression in *Sweetness*. This story reveals the societal structures that shape the maternal prejudice by allowing it to appear as proper maternal care. The story depicts *Sweetness* as someone terrified of social rejection because she believes Lula Ann faces this discrimination due to her dark complexion. Through her survival strategies, which she presents as disciplinary rules, she confirms Bhabha's theory about mimicry as a strategy that exposes dominant power structures while subverting them (Bhabha 88). Through her employment of a personal confession style, Morrison makes it challenging to identify the boundaries between victimizers and victims. Through her colorist ideals, the mother experiences victimization yet transmits them to her daughter, making her simultaneously victim and perpetrator. The conflicted nature of human existence stands as the key component for both CRT and postcolonial theory since these theoretical frameworks choose to examine complexities instead of absolute categories.

Discussion and Analysis

Toni Morrison reveals, through the chilling response of the narrator in *Sweetness*, how internalized racism and colonial beauty standards manipulate maternal feelings and self-image toward darker skin complexions. The confessional statement reveals the narrator's terror because of her: "She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison 3) description. Through her reaction of fear, the narrator exposes that colorism as psychological violence has been integrated through history into her psyche. The comparative reference to "Sudanese black" not only evokes an exoticized and racialized otherness but also aligns with the colonial gaze that associates Africa and blackness with savagery, extremity, and deviation from aesthetic norms. Morrison examines both formal racial structures outside families and the understated internal mechanisms of racism that exist between families and within their communities. The fear triggered by Lula Ann's "midnight" skin tone is not merely personal but emblematic of a colonial inheritance that casts the darkest Black bodies as objects of abjection. Morrison reveals the destructive effects of white supremacist values on postcolonial and African American societies when she illustrates colorism through maternal terror. This situation transcends its role as a discussion about external beauty while functioning as an eerie manifestation of how colonial perspectives remain active even in safe locales designated for romance.

Through her narrative "I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow," Morrison shares a cultural position that African American society assigns high worth due to its perceived white attributes (Morrison 3). Black self-worth, together with social group placement, continues to be shaped by colorist hierarchies that started in colonial and antebellum times. The phrase "high yellow," a colloquial term often used to describe very light-skinned Black individuals, carries with it a fraught history. In racially segregated settings, proximity to white appearance produced actual as well as imagined privileges for African Americans and other people of color.

Moreover, the emphasis on "good hair", a term coded to mean straight or loosely curled hair, furthers the colonial standard that devalues Afro-textured hair. Morrison employs this language to illustrate how the narrator adopts the colonial viewing habits that support

white characteristics while reducing black skin tones and textured hair. The narrator's pride in her lightness and "good" hair masks a deeper anxiety about racial identity and belonging, and it manifests in her inability to accept her own daughter's darker skin. Morrison reveals how postcolonial subjectivity retains colorism both through its personal effect on individuals and as a historical legacy inherited from colonial rule. In her narrative, Morrison puts forward the wounded Black woman only to investigate this character's disastrous outcome from harboring internalized racism, which developed from colonial oppression and was sustained by cultural repetition. This tale explores how colonial beauty standards continue to live on after colonial institutions disappear while entering the bonds between family members and the care systems mothers develop.

Morrison explores how colonial aesthetics and power became internalized when the narrator tells, "You should've seen my grandmother; she passed for white, married a white man..." (Morrison 3). Through this moment, we see how adopting a white appearance serves both personal protective needs and motivational purposes for individuals surviving racially segregated communities. The grandmother's ability to "pass" and her marriage to a white man exemplify the deep entanglement of racial identity with social mobility, a legacy of colonialism wherein assimilation into whiteness is perceived as a means of safety and privilege.

The equation of Lula Ann's "blue-black" skin with shame and monstrosity reflects what Frantz Fanon describes as the colonial imposition of a "zone of nonbeing" upon Blackness; a dehumanized position from which the subject must struggle to emerge. The narrator shows no genuine intention to hurt her child when she almost smothers them but instead acts out an unconscious denial of her racial ancestry. The physical characteristics of her daughter function as a social threat that also undermines the narrator's constructed identity, which depends upon her connection to whiteness. This internalized loathing exemplifies Homi K. Bhabha's notion of mimicry, wherein the colonized subject performs a resemblance to the colonizer that is "almost the same, but not quite" (86). Through her fair complexion, the speaker gains limited advantages in white society until Lula Ann enters the world, clearly showing the signs of blackness and thus shattering the narrator's illusion of blending with white society.

The narrator remembers that she rarely showed Marjorie outside because people reacted with a mixture of shock and frowning expressions when seeing her black coloring (Morrison 2). The reactions of others both validate the narrator's colorist opinions and comments on how dark Black skin evokes discomfort and alienation in public environments. The public's strong negative response toward Lula Ann stems from her Black skin color that functions as an outward symbol of their aversion to the white supremacist depictions that mark her as abject and other. Bhabha explains that colonial power produces mimicry by requiring colonized subjects to present as civilized, although they will remain different from European ideals (86). The narrator shows her unease because she has not effectively mimicked the social expectations of being white in public situations. Through her fair complexion, the narrator passes into white ways of life, yet Lula Ann's complexion completely destroys that false notion. The reactions of others become a public acknowledgment that the narrator has failed to meet white social standards while trying to

elevate her position through imitation. Furthermore, as Cheryl I. Harris argues in "Whiteness as Property," whiteness functions not merely as a racial identity but as a form of capital—an asset with social, legal, and economic privileges (Harris 1713). The narrator shields her access to white privilege by restricting exposure of the darker skin tone that marks her daughter. The audience reminds both the woman and her daughter how location on the color line shifts when her capital status diminishes via association with darker skin. At this point Morrison illustrates how extensively the colonial view reaches mother-daughter bonds and personal spaces. The narrator stays indoors to protect her child from threats, but this behavior simultaneously represents how deep racial trauma manifests within her. Morrison creates a dramatic portrait of public humiliation aimed at the Black body to show how societal systems divide Black families along color lines.

The narrator's query: "I asked her to call me '*Sweetness*' instead of 'Mother' or 'Mama'" (Morrison 2) is more than an idiosyncratic choice; it is a calculated disavowal of kinship. Through her decision to reject family titles that usually create closeness, the narrator sets up a symbolic wall that separates her from her dark-skinned daughter, Lula Ann. Social survivalism together with racial shame justifies this renaming process, which eliminates the mother's maternal presence while also destroying Lula Ann's right to her mother. This disidentification aligns with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of mimicry, which suggests that colonial subjects attempt to perform likeness to the colonizer "almost the same, but not quite" to negotiate social power (86). Hence, the narrator's insistence on being called "*Sweetness*" underscores the disfiguring effects of the colonial gaze and colorism on maternal identity. Through her work, Morrison demonstrates that racial shame alongside hierarchy beliefs and performance of whiteness create profound damage within basic human relationships, which later affect future generations.

When the narrator reflects, "With that skin, there was no point in being tough or sassy..." (Morrison 2), she reveals a deeply ingrained belief that dark-skinned individuals must perform submission to ensure survival in a white supremacist society. The statement demonstrates that racial conformity measurements based on skin shade track onto Black body dynamics as a result of historical colonial control. The mother teaches Lula Ann to perform submissive acts as performative mimicry that represents acceptable social behavior through whiteness standards so her daughter can survive in such conditions.

The narrator observes, "Her color is a cross she will always carry" (Morrison 2), emphasizing the enduring weight of Blackness, particularly dark skin, as a form of societal punishment. This image of color as a "cross" reflects not just the physical presence of Blackness but its pervasive association with suffering, shame, and dehumanization. The metaphor of the "cross" in Morrison's story invokes not only the religious connotation of suffering but also the historical weight of Blackness as something "borne" rather than celebrated. According to the narrator, the black skin color represents a lifelong burden instead of simple skin complexion. The author establishes Blackness as a suffering condition, which upholds the racial view established by colonial systems. Ultimately, Morrison's portrayal of color as a "cross" reflects the deep-seated trauma caused by the intersection of colonial racism and colorism. Morrison uses the metaphorical cross to show the absolute magnitude of social condemnation that darker-skinned Black people face from external sources and from

their community members. The emotional burden handled by individuals throughout history develops through a long-standing practice of colonial power, which continues to shape Black identities.

The narrator's struggle to "see past all that black" demonstrates how colonial ideals shape her perception of her child, positioning Blackness itself as a barrier to love, empathy, and connection. The black skin of her daughter represents inalterable distinctions that the narrator fails to transcend. The “blackness” of her child is not simply a skin color but a marker of social and cultural distance that obstructs her maternal instincts. Her struggle to love her dark-skinned daughter reflects her attempt to conform to the colonial ideal of what is “worthy” of affection. The "blackness" of Lula Ann stands in direct opposition to this ideal, making her love seem not only socially unacceptable but also a violation of the racial codes she has internalized.

The narrator reflects, “I forgot just how Black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes” (Morrison 3). This suggests that Lula Ann, the narrator’s daughter, must manipulate her outward appearance; specifically, through the use of "beautiful white clothes," to navigate the colorist beauty standards imposed by society. Beauty and pureness guidelines established by colonial powers enable Lula Ann to gain power, yet she possesses no internal worth affirming her Black identity. Lula Ann’s use of a tactic that reflects the colonial desire to be “white-passing” or to conform to the beauty ideals associated with whiteness. Through her choice of “beautiful white clothes,” Lula Ann seeks to use clothing as a form of protective disguise that helps society accept her Blackness within a society that favors white features. The clothes symbolize a façade, a way of masking the “real” Blackness that the narrator can only “forget” momentarily. Red costumes allow Lula Ann temporary empowerment, but the power itself stems from her ability to temporarily perform whiteness within societal restrictions. Ultimately, Morrison’s depiction of Lula Ann’s use of “beautiful white clothes” serves as a poignant critique of colorism and the colonial gaze. Lula Ann’s attempt to “forget” her Blackness through the strategic use of appearance reflects the painful reality that empowerment, for many Black individuals, is often only possible within the limits of colonial beauty standards.

Conclusion

Through *Sweetness*, Toni Morrison brings to light the heritage of colorism because internalized racism and colonial gaze impressions result in continuous cycles of humiliation and detachment and psychological harm between Black people. Throughout *Sweetness*, Morrison presents a story where the title character expresses how she follows a racial social order shaped from colonial practices and white supremacy doctrine. The narrative demonstrates how these social ideas manifest within people through maternal separation and emotional separation from Black identity. She unflinchingly illustrates how colonial aesthetic standards of beauty and worth; light skin, "good hair," and the ability to "pass" is not only mimicked but defended as survival strategies.

Through her character Sweetness, Morrison explores how social pressures related to racial conditioning warp the natural expressions of maternal affection. The emotional estrangement between mother and daughter is exemplified when Sweetness chooses to be

called by her nickname rather than maternal terms, a linguistic severance that signals her refusal to be associated with the full implications of her daughter's Blackness: "I asked her to call me *'Sweetness'* instead of 'Mother' or 'Mama.'" This choice demonstrates mimicry, although it comes from her internalized sense of white identity and not from her actual colonial masters. Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry as "almost the same, but not quite" finds a cruelly ironic resonance here, where *Sweetness* mimics whiteness not to subvert it but to belong, to protect, to survive, even at the cost of love.

Moreover, self-failure forms just one element of *Sweetness*, which functions as a powerful examination of how racial inequality tears through Black identity together with interpersonal connections. Morrison shows how attempts at adopting the colonial gaze produce neither power nor emotional health since they cause intergenerational damage of the heart. The unconditional love that *Sweetness* fails to extend towards Lula Ann represents a wider colonial system that maintains control over racial distinction and Black value. Through this narrative, we question what sacrifices people must make when surviving within racial capitalism while being forced to face the permanent emotional wounds of colorism embodied in our familial and social systems.

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