



## Benjaminian Dialectics of Fashion in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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### ABSTRACT

Critics, like Alice Hall, have identified beauty—the destructive impact of the beauty industry—as one of the central themes in Morrison's fiction. This essay looks at the interplay between fashion and commodification, consumerism, eroticism, sexuality and spectacle through the lens of Walter Benjamin's theory of fashion. Morrison establishes a dialectic relationship between her new black protagonist, Bride, and her forerunners like iconic black celebrities Grace Jones, Josephine Baker, and Iman, bringing them into conversation with each other through the Benjaminian register of contemporary sartorial expression evocative of the fashions of the past. Like Benjamin, Morrison views fashion as a pageant or spectacle despite the history of women's protest against the perception of them as subjects in relation to clothes. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison demonstrates the relationship between femininity and fashion that revolves around dresses, vestimentary choices and fashion accessories like jewellery and make-up. Cautioning against the uncritical lure of fashion, Morrison poses very serious questions, especially about the dangerous ability of clothes and fashion to distort the subject's self-image and erase their subjectivity.

**Keywords:** Dialectics of fashion, commodification, consumerism, femininity

Critics, like Alice Hall, have identified beauty—the destructive impact of the beauty industry—as one of the central themes in Morrison’s fiction. This essay looks at the interplay between fashion and commodification, consumerism, eroticism, sexuality and spectacle through the lens of Walter Benjamin’s theory of fashion.<sup>1</sup> Morrison establishes a dialectic relationship between her new black protagonist, Bride, and her forerunners like iconic black celebrities Grace Jones, Josephine Baker, and Iman, bringing them into conversation with each other through the Benjaminian register of contemporary sartorial expression evocative of the fashions of the past. Like Benjamin, Morrison views fashion as a pageant or spectacle despite the history of women’s protest against the perception of them as subjects in relation to clothes. She examines the sartorial fashion of black women and how it informs her formulation of the new black women. Fashion is fundamental to issues of black racial and social mobility and in terms of interpreting the influence of the dominant culture through women’s garments. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison demonstrates the relationship between femininity and fashion in terms of what Heidi Brevik-Zender refers to as an “exclusively feminine universe” that revolves around dresses, vestimentary choices and fashion accessories like jewellery and make-up (8). Like the fetish for high-heel shoes which features at least in part, as symbolic of fetters and slavery in *A Mercy*, Morrison views garments and Bride’s unconscious celebration of white-only clothes and accessories as a form of slavery of the senses which forces her not only to wear white but eat and think white.

Cautioning against the uncritical lure of fashion, Morrison poses very serious questions, especially about the dangerous ability of clothes and fashion to distort the subject’s self-image and erase their subjectivity. She does this through her characterisation of Bride and her complex relationship with her fashion designer or design consultant, Jeri, by highlighting the danger of wearing white-only clothes, especially when instead of enhancing the wearer’s subjectivity, they operate to subdue and suppress her personality and individuality. Through Bride’s unquestioning embrace of Jeri’s white-only choices, Morrison warns against internalising fashion: What does it mean when the subject internalises fashion so much that his/her body’s relationship to clothes and other accessories becomes

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<sup>1</sup>The theme of fashion in this novel can also be examined with the help of Barthes’s theory on fashion, most notably with the help of his important books, *The Fashion System* and *The Language of Fashion*, dealing with the history and semantics of fashion. Although Barthes seems to write about the subversive nature of fashion in its “refusal to inherit,” he does acknowledge the mythical potential of fashion and its symbiotic relationship with historical context. It is in this sense that Barthes seems to concur with Benjamin on the transhistorical power of fashion. Barthes is also in sympathy with Benjamin’s notion of jewellery, of how gemstones, pearls and diamonds are symbolic of the human relationship with the inorganic.

fetishistic and somatic? Morrison exposes our attachment to *stuff* and its harmful impact by pointing out the core of the modern problematic of the object (which is at the matrix of the exchange between Bride and her fashion consultant, Jeri): “the question of ornament and fantasy, of ornament as an emissary of fantasy; the organisation of libidinal economy through the commodity; the idea of the spectacle as the means to alternative materialities and femininities; and, last but not the least, the persistence of visibility as the organising principle of experience...” (Boscagli 84). She analyses fashion as “a site of female spectacle and of fantasy” and how the fashion industry creates this, by exposing a constellation of forces and institutions, in particular the male gaze as the organising principle behind the fashion’s experience, transforming the black body into a material object.

Bride’s consumption of fashion, her addiction and attachment to *stuff* is material and somatic. It reflects her desire for materiality linked to her need to succeed which can be understood through Benjamin’s critique of fashion and materiality. In *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin writes about the technologically driven mass production of representational art which has resulted in “the birth of modern technically produced fashion industries as well as modern image-plus-text advertising” (Pensky 121). This fantasy imagery is based upon the fetish character of the commodity inseparable from the advertising of it (126). This kind of advertising “generates utopian wish or dream images through the very act of representation,” and it has the capacity to reflect back to the consumer the dream of the collective or the unconscious fantasy of the consumer (124, 128). Jeri conjures up a similar world of exotic images which seduce Bride into buying the power of images to sell. Jeri’s creation of dream images and fantasies make Bride believe she is in control of her identity and the material condition of her existence without realising that her love for white materiality makes her a slave to fashion, white-only accoutrements and accessories—all symbolic of white ideals and standards of beauty. Benjamin’s understanding of fashion “reclaims Materiality from consumption’s logic, [outlining] a new Concept of subjectivity” which signifies the effective erasure of subjectivity (Boscagli 38). Kathryn Stockton shares a similar opinion on the power of material *stuff* like clothes as objectifying the human body. According to Stockton, there is a certain sense of shame or debasement attached to clothes when instead of simply adorning, enhancing beauty, protecting the body or being a source of empowerment, they can become a source of denigration making “the wearer of beautiful garments a martyr to clothes” (42). A person becomes a martyr to clothes when s/he gives in to the cultural imperative to wear a certain type of clothing, which can

become the cause of suffering, humiliation or inflict psychic wounds and distort subjectivity (42). Clothes can operate within “debasement aesthetics” especially when women become willing slaves of fashion, reducing their subjectivity to mere sexuality. Bride’s compliance with Jeri’s imperative white-only makes her a martyr to clothes, a slave of colourism, which Morrison describes as the enslavement of the senses and appearance. Morrison cautions against such a self-denigrating and unnatural use of clothes, ornaments, and other accessories which can result in feminine degradation. Bride’s use of white clothes and accessories has a double function—anaesthetic as well as sublimating. Clothes and accessories display the subject’s relationship to materiality as a spectacle of the sexual and the erotic, which the fetishism of commodity evokes. Clothes take on this particular aspect of materiality, and as aesthetic objects, they are “charged with intimacy and thus occupy a synesthetic position in regard to the subject” (Boscagli 38). Fetishistically invested, they become objects of desire and fantasy. Bride’s attempt to compromise her identity in terms of her appearance reduces her to an object, which becomes one of her most aggressive/transgressive acts.

Benjamin’s dialectics of fashion anticipates the symptomatic story of Bride— a successful woman of fashion— and her cunning designer “sartorial manipulator” Jeri. Jeri as Bride’s fashion designer constructs the black female corporeality of Bride in the image of the new black—a successful entrepreneur in the fashion industry. As a successful design consultant, he makes sure that Bride’s blackness sells (Akhtar 48). Bride consults him to manage her self-image and advance her career. He appraises her body on the occasion of her second interview for Sylvia, Inc., the interview which eventually launches her career as the CEO of *You, Girl*: “You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time” (33). White attire on a black body also affirms contemporary notions of female beauty and its exotic appeal, which, according to Margo Natalie Crawford, “is embedded in any desire of the exotic” (98). Jeri imposes white only choice because he wants to enhance the exotic appeal of Bride’s “licorice skin,” and because “black is the new black” (33). The significance of wearing white only is not lost on Bride. She rightly interprets Jeri’s mantra of whiteness as part of his efforts to make her appear outlandish and look like an Oreo. Tongue-in-cheek, she dismisses Jeri’s white-on-black logic by comparing his analogy to being an “Oreo”. She understands how the logic behind the white-only clothes operates on the principle of debasement aesthetics rather than the enhancement of her beauty. According to Kathryn Stockton, “Material meant to decorate, seen as an aesthetic enrichment for the body, can visit debasement upon the wearer, even as

the wearer may think she's being praised" (64). Bride understands how wearing white denigrates her as a stigmatising skin, turning her inside out as an Oreo. According to Touré, an Oreo is a person who rejects his/her blackness (33). For Mark Anthony Neal, to be Oreo is to be "effectively "queered" by both white and black communities for being unauthentically "black" or "white" simultaneously" (111). To be an Oreo is a pejorative and stigmatising expression used for those African Americans with the physical appearance of black on the outside but who are white on the inside. However, the metaphor of the Oreo also captures the predicament of "Benjamin's problematised personification of fashion as a woman" (Brevik-Zender 5). To be an Oreo is to be queered by fashion. The imposition of white-only clothes on Bride's "midnight black, Sudanese skin" works as a poultice that reflects her desire to duplicate white skin. The dress exposes, as it were, the whiteness within by reflecting the tension that exists between how she feels and how she appears, an Oreo—an artificial and inauthentic being—a reflection or consummation of Jeri's grotesque imagination. Oreo also emerges as a classic du Boisean metaphor for Bride's double consciousness, outlandish appearance and split personality. It captures the essence of the "conversion" which constitute for Benjamin, the supreme principle of dialectics and co-appearance of the sublime and the debased, capturing the fetishistic experiences of the commodity world (Markus 29-30). The fetishisation of the subject has the capacity to convey his/her incoherence and fragmentation (Markus 28). Bride conceives herself as a commodity fetish through the projected imaginary of Jeri. By packaging herself as an Oreo, she embraces her conversion—her Oretised identity. Bride's use or abuse of clothes and ornaments grants her a hybrid identity which destabilises the categories of subject, gender and materiality making them unstable, fluid, shifting. In fact, by embracing Jeri, she endorses the reliability of the regimented authority of the male gaze. She becomes the object of Jeri's voyeurism, which places the spectacle of her femininity in the debased field of the fetish. In her desire to achieve the femininity or materiality she desires, she becomes a site of the objectification which exists as a male fantasy. She accepts white beauty standards in fashion or what Paul C. Taylor calls as "white-oriented somatic aesthetics" (67) in order to maintain her personality within the norms of a socially acceptable life style. She understands that she can achieve social privileges with the help of her tar black body—her best pathway into social mobility—without realising that the imperative of white only clothes and accessories hyper-interpellates her subjectivity into the Benjaminian debates of fetishism, exoticism, consumerism, objectification, femininity, and sexuality.

Jeri renders Bride one-dimensional by exposing her inner whiteness. Not only white clothes; he even advises Bride how to choose her accessories and make-up carefully. According to Jeri, Bride should wear only white pearl jewellery. It is the white female signifiers, like jewellery and other accessories, which heighten the contrast when appropriated or worn by the black body. As Lisa B. Thompson observes with reference to Condoleezza Rice and her choice of carefully selected pearl jewellery, “Many white women also wear these items, but it is the presence of a black female body that changes how they signify and resonate” (7). Jeri’s imperative of white-only eroticises Bride and makes her hypervisible. By accentuating her blackness and bodily features, he exposes Bride’s attempt at passing and hence her race. In order to access mobility, prestige, safety and status, African Americans had to wear certain styles of clothing and footwear. From history, we learn that African-American women who wanted to dress like ladies, especially with white accoutrements “were viciously attacked by those who aimed to keep them in their place and thus on the outside of respectable society” (Willet “Trayvon Martin”). Traditionally, white dresses symbolise femininity, innocence, sexual purity or virginity (as associated with white women). All these ideals evoke puritanical and Victorian values. However, the appropriation of this symbolism by a non-white like Bride, to enhance her sexual appeal and desirability or eroticisation, reveals the inverse side of white clothes when worn by a black woman. Instead of being symbolic of their innocence, of literally being brides (consider the author’s intended pun on the name Bride, also reminiscent of the new “brides” of pop culture like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera and Beyoncé (Hobson 53)), white clothes on black women reveal the sexual nature of black women hidden under their white clothes (Ziegler “Black Sissy Masculinity”). Jeri is an image-maker. He induces Bride to discipline her life according to the strict measures of the white code and white imaginary. Draping Bride’s body in white only heightens the contrast between whiteness and blackness. It exaggerates her blackness by the fetishism of whiteness (Crawford 4). Whiteness serves as “the chromatic default,” which heightens the racialized contrast and features of Bride’s jet-black body (Fleetwood, *On Racial Icons* 63). Thus, Jeri creates a colourist hierarchy by staging Bride’s difference through her clothing and the reification of whiteness. According to Fleetwood, “Colorist hierarchies depend on a mythic conception of whiteness as the standard of measurement and a totalising blackness as its depraved opposite” (Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision* ch.2). Asking Bride to only wear white reveals Jeri’s desire to bleach her black body by draping it in white or by putting on an add-on white skin. Clothing, especially white clothing in the

present case, is nothing more than a “fabricated, secondary skin” (Stockton 44). Its root is the old English word *clitha*, meaning “a poultice,” applied to sooth the skin as a protection again sores or inflammation (43). Jeri assumes the authority to know what best suits the black body of Bride. He calls himself a “total person,” which shows that he believes he has the power to decide her image.

As a cultural agent, Jeri insists Bride display her black body by exhibiting it dressed all in white (33). He reconstructs the black body of Bride as an image striped black-and-white, a new style or cultural symbol evocative of very dark-skinned black female superstars like Grace Jones, whose appearance was fluid and quite often bordered on the androgynous (Crawford 1). White attire on a black body also affirms contemporary notions of female beauty and the appeal it carries. As bell hooks observes with reference to black fashion celebrities, like Iman, who shine in white on the cover pages of fashion magazines, like *Vogue*, “when flesh is exposed in attire that is meant to evoke sexual desirability it is worn by a non-white model” (*Black Looks* 72). In other words, expressions of exotic beauty and eroticism are always inscribed and enhanced when projected on the black female body (Thompson B. 20). Falling victim to sexist/racist mythology, black models like Iman become “the embodiment of the best of the black female savage tempered by those elements of whiteness that soften the image, giving it an aura of virtue and innocence. In the racialized pornographic imagination, she is the perfect combination of virgin and whore, the ultimate vamp” (hooks *Black Looks* 72). According to hooks, “Postmodern notions that black female sexuality is constructed, not innate or inherent, are personified by the career of Iman” (*Black Looks* 72). Jeri’s representation of Bride, too, embodies similar notions of postmodern or the new black identity in dialogue with racial icons like Iman, Ross, Jones, which captures the Benjaminian repetition or transhistorical moment in the “now-time” of fashion.

According to Benjamin, fashion references “the dress of the past” (*Time and Style* 31). It has the ability to establish a relationship between the latest and oldest trends through its ability to reconfigure past styles into the latest looks, which is a perfect metaphor of modernity and for Morrison, a metaphor for the new black. Fashion embodies Benjamin’s dialectical image of the “tiger’s leap into the past” capturing the zeitgeist of the moment in relation to antiquity. In the words of Benjamin, “Fashion has the capacity to establish an affinity between the dress and costumes of the past and the present. It does this by allowing for a form of repetition (*Time and Style* 33).” In this sense, fashion can have a transhistorical manifestation or the ability to transcend by drawing from the past

in its representation of the present and in its power to create something “new”. By wearing only white clothes and accessories, Bride presents a phantasmagorical link to her precursors like Josephine Baker and Grace Jones, who made multiple iconic appearances in white costumes. Jeri compares Bride to images of a tiger and black panther with “wolverine eyes,” evocative of Benjamin’s poetic metaphor of ‘tiger’s leap’ in the capacity to refer to the dresses or attire of the past while anticipating those of the future and commenting upon those of the present. This dialectic encompassed by the ‘tiger’s leap’ captures the relationship between previous and present senses of fashion and “the ‘projected’ inherent to the sartorial objects that [Bride] so carefully selects” (Brevik-Zender 12). Bride’s inherent ‘tiger’s leap’ represents the transhistorical connection that exists with her precursors through her choice of white clothes and accessories. The connection is evocative of iconography and fashion’s power to recreate the past, especially in relation to iconic black fashionistas like Grace Jones. The reader can see how past icons and fashionistas influence the evolution of Morrison’s new black icon, Bride, in her Benjaminian transhistorical moment of fashion which shapes “the new in the context of what has always already been there” (qtd. in Brevik-Zender 14). The animal iconography Jeri deploys or conjures up from his cultural archives or repertoire stereotypically recreates Benjamin’s “tiger’s leap into the past. Only to find itself in an arena in which the ruling class gives the commands (Benjamin *Style and Time* 29).” The image of black corporeality comes through the controlling gaze of the master, who, like Jeri, belongs to the ruling class and occupies a position of authority. His subject position as Bride’s consultant designer makes him the arbiter of her blackness as he successfully advises her how to sell it. His subject position also betrays his racial inclinations and identity aligning him with other male artists whose gaze upon their muse embodies the earliest examples of the exploitation of women’s bodies. White men take the position of authority, especially in looking relationships, i.e., the gazer and the gazed, the looker and the looked-at, the definer and the defined, the coloniser and the colonised, the master and the slave. Under the matrix of the power relations of race and the subject and object positions, the operative behind the dominant cultural gaze is discerned as a figure of white male authority. The fact that Jeri occupies a position of power to control and determine Bride’s public appearance and how she appears to herself sums up the Benjaminian incoherence, rupturing of black consciousness and the lived reality of the black experience, which are characteristic of racial domination and black subjugation. This is obvious from Jeri’s effort to relegate Bride to the level of the exotic to the degree



that she loses her sense of racial identity and subjectivity. She becomes the victim of Jeri's mastering, racist gaze. According to George Yancy, whites have always enjoyed the privileges of the gazer and all the power it brings, especially in the context of white racist societies (*Black Bodies* xviii).

Jeri's decision to portray Bride as the new black is comparable with the representation of famous black female women and their bodies in a male dominated society. Presenting these women as exotic animals reinforces the image of black exoticism, which feeds into Western cultural imaginary (Thompson B. 29); starting from the earliest example of the Black Venus and her relationship with her handlers like S. Reaux, who presented her black body to Europe as an "animal exhibitor," to that of Baker and Grace Jones. For example, Lisa E. Farrington observes that Josephine Baker's meteoric rise to fame fed the white fantasy of indulging in primitive libidinal desire when Baker performed—in New York and Paris—some of her famous enactments in "Chocolate Dandies, La Revue Negre, and the Folies Bergere" (73). In her French performances, Baker was topless and wore little more than her infamous "banana skirt." Acutely aware of her role as the personification of white fantasies about the primordial nature of blacks—particularly the myth of black female sexuality—Baker's performance included being "carried upside down, like a wounded gazelle, on the back of a robust Martiniquan dancer" to the delight of a frenzied white audience (Farrington 80). Models and performers, like Baker and Jones, adopted certain types of preferred body images and enacted their bodily performances according to these images. According to Katya Foreman, Jones is "a genuine force of nature" ("Grace Jones"). She further observes that in order to expose her "in-your-face sexuality," she "has always sought to further enhance her already powerful physicality through carefully chosen accessories" ("Grace Jones"). According to Foreman, Jones is "the spiritual godmother" of performer singers like Rihanna and Lady Gaga, just as she is in the case of Morrison's fictive, Bride, who is urged to enhance her physical appeal by her design consultant, Jeri. Foreman credits Jones for having "rocked a startling outfit or two in her time," courtesy of her handler and once-time partner, Jean-Paul Goude, who was captivated by "Jones' raw, prowling grace," and was responsible for projecting "the most powerful images of the singer" ("Grace Jones"). Amongst Jones' performances was the famous show-stealer "at New York Hammerstein Ballroom in 2009" ("Grace Jones"). Here Jones made a stunning appearance in a white headdress and "a white zebra-like tribal bodysuit" ("Grace Jones"). In fact, the white costume outlined her black body and enhanced the exotic appeal of her beauty. Looking at the body of Jones striped in black and

white from Jeri's perspective, and its similar projection onto Bride, her exotic sexual appeal and potential or in textual terms, her Oreoness, is revealed as it is for Bride.

There are affinities between Goude and Jeri in the way they acted as image-makers and how both Bride and Jones infamously demonstrated their bodies/sexuality according to these men's projected images. Both Goude and Jeri creatively deployed strategies to enhance the racial difference of their subjects to their clients, giving them the status of racial icons (Fleetwood *On Racial Icons* 57). Both image-makers reduced these women to objects. Goude confessed that he "was more interested in the virtual character than the real woman" (Foremam). Jeri too aimed at enhancing the virtual character of Bride by investing her body with images of racial excess and making her the object of his fantasy. He wanted to control and manipulate her image. As a handler, he wanted to aestheticise and exaggerate Bride's blackness by enhancing her racialized eroticism. Like Goude, he is vulnerable to the exoticism of Bride's blue-black body. His relationship with Bride exposes the fallacy of post-racialism as he continues to exoticise her body through animal images and makes her body/sexuality an object of desire which is deliciously consumable. Jeri's vocabulary stems from confectionery and zoology. For example, he compares Bride's black body to bonbons, which is a pun. *Bonbon* is French for sweet (evocative of sweet consumerability), but it is also a near anagram of bonobos—a primate most often associated with blacks and their sexuality—the popular conception of inordinate black (female) sexuality as lascivious and animalistic (Peterson 6). The comparison of blacks to simians, apes and other exotic animals like tigers, cheetahs and panthers is evocative of black iconography and its representations. The construction of racialized other as exotic animal continues to perpetuate stereotypical representation. For example, Baker's widespread popularity is attributed to her exotic appearance with a cheetah and nudity as her costume. The connection between Baker (because of the animal imagery), and other black models of beauty like Diana Ross and Jones (because of their white costumes) is repeated. One of Grace Jones' more outrageous performances was appearing as "an animal in a cage," as performance art designed by her French ex-husband artist, Jean-Paul Goude (Hobson 97). Jones' performance in the cage created an aura of extreme pastiche in its stereotypical links between black female bodies and bestiality (Hobson 97-8). According to Janell Hobson, presenting Jones as a powerful tiger would have appeared subversive, were it not for the long tradition of visually representing black people as animals (98). She further observed that "black female sexuality is

rendered with the power and allure of a tiger, perhaps alluding to what art critic Miriam Kershaw calls the “power iconography [of tigers and leopards] among the royalty in certain parts of Africa prior to and during European trade and colonialism” (98). Jeri utilizes the black female body of Bride to create racial and sexual myths, in much the same way as his predecessors, like Goude and Paul Colin, all of whom reduce the bodies of their models to stereotypes. Comparing black women to wild animals by their handlers involves objectifying their bodies through absolute animal idealisation on the one hand, and absolute feminization on the other hand. All these handlers, to use Morrison’s expression from *Tar Baby*, are perverse “purveyors of exotics” who appropriate their blackness by trivializing them into décor and presenting them as exotic animals. Instead of investing Bride with animal imagery, he should have worked, as Angela Harris argues, to dis-image or dismantle the “opposition between [...] animal and African” in order to promote a humanist “politics of respectability” (qtd. in Peterson 7). The creation of animal images for Bride finds parallels in historical representation of black women as animal-like, like the example of Baker performing with her pet cheetah and Jones performing as a tiger, grounded in a long tradition of visually representing black people as exotic animals (Hobson 98).

Jeri is a sort of animal exhibitor who draws upon animal imagery so heavily that he makes Bride look like “a kind of human-animal hybrid” (Peterson 17). His barrage of white-on-black imagery, which reduces Bride’s race to visible difference in skin colour, culminates in the trope of black and white animal a “panther in the snow” (34, 50). It is impossible not to find racial stereotypes or prejudices in his compliments. His ability to create images to project the black body means that he assumes a position of power and delivers the discourses that prevail and continue to construct the way we perceive the black body. For example, Jeri’s construction and representation of Bride’s body continues the archival violence of the fashion industry as he determines how best she can display her black body to her (dis)advantage. Jeri’s projection of whiteness onto Bride—in his effort to enhance her exotic beauty—is evocative of famous bodily representations by iconic Afro-American artists, stylists and models like Naomi Sims, Dianna Ross and Grace Jones, who were contemporaries of each other and representatives of the famous slogan black is beautiful, each in her own unique manner. Although the iconic, the mythical and the stereotypical representation of black female sexuality continued to proliferate, starting with Baartman, also known as the Black Venus or the Hottentot, in the nineteenth century and on throughout the twentieth century, its real-life embodiment came

through entertainers like Josephine Baker as the African American sex goddess, reincarnated and revived decades later by celebrities like Grace Jones. What is strikingly similar about the black professionals (and Bride) is the relationship between these black women and their exhibitors, handlers, and consultants, who were bent on displaying their bodies or their bodily representations as exotic animals, turning these women into spectacles for the male gaze.

Morrison mystifies Bride's relationship with clothes or fashion as a site of female spectacle. The perverse and unnatural use of clothes articulates new gender definitions and destabilises apparently fixed notions of reality and materiality. With the unnatural use of white only clothes and accessories, Bride subverts perceived notions of gender, social power and feminine propriety. Jeri's clothing of Bride's body with white successfully helps Bride to commodify her body because: "Black sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilised world. White girls, even brown girls strip naked to get that kind of attention (36)." The new black is presented as the new desirability. Jeri sells Bride's blackness as more desirable than whiteness, which used to be the epitome of desire. This is a shocking statement, evocative of "old stereotypes which make the assertion of black female sexuality and prostitution synonymous" (hooks 69). By "Black sells," he implies sex sells. The black as an object of sex, as a stripper, as a concubine, as a project chick, sells. Black bodies and their sexualities are commodities. Bride's blackness functions as a commodity because of what adorns her body rather than what is within it. Jeri envisages Bride as a stripper against whom white women and women of colour would have to strip naked to compete with Bride and get the attention she gets appropriately clothed in white; in other words, they would have to totally debase themselves. Jeri's misogynistic logic is equally offensive and debases both white women and women of colour. He places all women in a competition for male attention, negatively and stereotypically. Jeri circumscribes Bride's autonomy and obliterates her subjectivity by turning her into a commodity of the highest market value. It is ironic that Bride is quite willing to present her blackness as a saleable commodity and accepts Jeri's comparison to a stripper who puts herself "on the market" in competition with other women forced to compete for the attention of the male gaze. Jeri's allusion to girls of all colour having to "strip naked" refers to Bride's superior sexuality; and it is evocative of society's abjection of the prostitute. According to Benjamin, strippers or prostitutes are representative of art and culture, sex and decay. They also embody "pinnacles of stylishness" more chic than their socially more upstanding counterparts (Brevik-Zender 6). They have enjoyed more privileged status in the realm of fashion as trend-setters and

are able to be social mobile. Men as handlers and fashion designers have always objectified women and their bodies through their voyeuristic gaze by enacting their supremacy “in the exterior signs of feminine sartorial pageantry in order to satisfy or reinforce [their] own power” (Brevik-Zender 8). This is how Jeri has the “ultimate authority” by subjecting Bride to his voyeurism and by turning her into a spectacle. Bride is also voyeuristic as she is capable of accepting and managing her body as an object of desire and male fantasy. On the way to her interview at Sylvia Inc. she says, “I could see the effect I was having: wide admiring eyes, grins and whispers” (36). Bride’s adoption of white only clothes and her obsession with white accessories and white edible items show the readers the extent to which she has become a victim, or at least an image. Her love for white clothes is key to her love of modern material culture which turns her into a spectacle for the male gaze. Her social life seems to revolve around the acquisition of white clothing and accessories exposing her sartorial excess and fashion addiction or fashionista’s two themes “frivolity and death” (Brevik-Zender 17). Morrison demonstrates this through Bride’s shopping and dining white which shows the excess of her fashion addiction, for example, her food order in a restaurant:

“May I have a white omelette, no cheese?”

“White? You mean no eggs?”

“No. No yolks.” (81)

Another occasion reveals her shopping addiction as she is fascinated by the shades within whiteness, which represents Bride’s obsession with whiteness in terms of social aspiration and the desire to maintain her personality within the norms of a socially acceptable lifestyle:

At first it was boring shopping for white only clothes until I learned how many shades of white there were: ivory, oyster, alabaster, paper white, snow, cream, ecru, Champagne, ghost, bone. Shopping got even more interesting when I began choosing colors for accessories. (33)

As she adjusts her life according to the shades of “white whiteness,” she becomes a victim of internalised colourism, a prisoner of colour. Living her life according to shades of whiteness subjects her to a metamorphosis: “True or not. It made me, remade me (36)”. Passing for white does not lead her “into a better, truer self” (Hobbs 132). It offers her a life of economic success and social privilege, even a transformational opportunity for self-fashioning, but at a terrible price. Living according to the white imaginary reduces her to a mode of being unseen except as an object: “[N]one interested in what I thought, just what I looked like” (36). She internalises whiteness to such a self-denigrating degree that she becomes white in her appearance, mind and even daily habits. She wants to benefit from appearing white even at the cost of compromising her subjectivity. According to

Fanon, when the black subject tries to adapt his/her lifestyle to the fashion and style of the white man, instead of being natural or authentic, it erodes and negates the personality in “an avalanche of murders” (Yancy 204). Benjamin links fashion’s “frivolity and death” by declaring that, through fetishism, fashion generates “the sex appeal of the inorganic” by connecting female body parts to inert substances such as precious stones (*The Arcades Project* 79). According to Benjamin “the parcelling out of feminine beauty into its noteworthy constituents resembles a dissection” and results in “the image of the corpse” (79). Brevik-Zender succinctly sums up the process of the Benjaminian degeneration of “the motley cadaver” or the fashionista’s spiritual demise. According to her, garments and jewellery cultivate the notion of replacing the flesh with non-living matter, thereby bringing the animate body closer to death (17). It is in this sense that fashion simulates a corpse by linking the human body to the lifeless. Bride represents Benjamin’s “parody of the motley cadaver,” a body clad in fashion that prefigures its spiritual demise. Bride’s Oretized sex appeal with the help of sartorial fetishes reflects Benjamin’s “sex appeal of the inorganic”, exposing the link between the female body and death (Brevik-Zender 18). Morrison makes this link between Bride and her spiritual death by showing how Bride literally consumes white, as her appetite shifts back and forth from drinking and dining white. As she shops for different shades of white garments and eats white, she degenerates into both a sartorial and dietary disorder which mimics Benjaminian “parody of the motley cadaver” thus becoming anorexic and willing to starve herself to death to maintain an appealing and fashionably acceptable self-image of her body. Jeri interprets Bride’s sex appeal through white fashion accessories which induce hunger in her male voyeurs and connect her to exotic animals. Thus, he compares her body to deliciously desirable or consumable objects like chocolate soufflé, bonbons and Hershey’s syrup (52). Like a connoisseur of taste, he uses a rich vocabulary of confectionery to underscore the black edible essence of Bride’s sexuality. It is not because her name is Bride (Morrison’s pun) that she should always wear white, but because of the charm it adds to her “licorice skin,” and as the new black she is “more Hershey’s syrup than licorice. Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see [her]” (33). Each time they see her it reminds them of something exotic and tasty. No wonder wherever she goes, she inspires desire through her performance, which sharpens the male appetite and produces hunger in the eyes of her employers who admire her with “stunned but *hungry eyes*” (emphasis added, 34). Bride’s impact is similar to how bell hooks recounts her encounter with a group of white people in a dining place, who

“burst into laughter” upon watching her enter, and “point[ed] to a row of gigantic chocolate breasts complete with nipples—huge edible tits” (*Black Looks* 61). According to hooks, the new black image caters to a cultural imaginary which reinforces the image of black women as sexual commodities (73). She adds: “This new representation is a response to contemporary fascination with an ethnic look, with the exotic Other who promises to fulfill racial and sexual stereotypes, to satisfy longings. This image is but an extension of the edible black tit” (*Black Looks* 73). Morrison makes a similar suggestion by projecting Bride as a woman of fashion symbolizing the voracious desire to consume luxury items and other exotic delicacies. According to Benjamin, confections like pastries and bosom biscuits are evocative of female breasts and infer the voracious dissection and consumption of the female breast. In this sense, the logical end or consumption of fashion is tantamount to the consumption or obliteration of the female body. Bride’s black body with its white garments titillates a perverted male fantasy of edible sex and excitement. Jeri’s manipulation of Bride’s body, with its Oretized excess of fashion and white accessories, is aimed at the viewer’s voyeurism. His manipulation of Bride’s body through fashion gives her the edge to excel in business, but his constant and excessive Oretizing heightens the contrast, making Bride exotic and grotesque as commodified and fetishistic object, stereotypically reproducing images of black sexuality in the voyeur’s mind. Clothes affirm Bride’s somatic, physical relationship to materiality by representing her black skin as a surface under which not only her fetishism takes place, but also the fetishism of her viewer. Clothes as over-inscriptors of her body cause her to look exotic through the very gaze with which the fashion industry represents her as a woman: “Fashion, under the aegis of excess, perverts the spectacle [...] so much so that glam, the unnatural use of clothes, always complicates and compromises the representation of the aura in its fetishistic register” (Boscagli 90). Bride’s unnatural use of clothes endows her with the aura she craves. According to Benjamin, aura fulfils the expectation that “the other will return ‘our gaze’” (*Art, Mimesis* 146). Draped all in white, Bride compromises propriety as a marketable commodity and wears her desire to achieve social success openly. Her self-staging invests her with exotic value but she falls victim to the commodification of her own image, as created by her fashion designer, Jeri, who does not tire of creating exotic self-images for Bride—his sartorial black muse. Bride’s constant self-fashioning according to Jeri’s advice opens up an endless process for Bride, which testifies to the dangers of being self-made. She knows, and lets the reader see, the process through which she is assembled as a commodity or a spectacle, that

it does not produce the homogenous and total self, Jeri suggests it would. The spectacle of Bride's body exposes the continuous and ongoing commodification of the female body and the dangerous power of clothes and fashion to signify the erasure of subjectivity in favour of conformity or uniformity. Bride's story carries a lesson for women to learn from her situation as an object at the turn of the twenty-first century, where the same "relentless intensification of the spectacle" (Boscagli 91) persists from the twentieth century.



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