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A REPRESENTATION OF CONSEQUENCES OF CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN *GOD HELP THE CHILD* BY TONI MORRISON

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Abstract

The study looks into Toni Morrison's most recent book, *God Help the Child* (2015), which explores the historical trauma and inherited family trauma of being black. It demonstrates how African American youngsters learn about white culture, black communities, and their own self-worth in Morrison's novels through the history of racial discrimination. In this study, intergenerational trauma and its effects on various African American generations are examined with reference to the Trauma Theory highlighted by Judith Herman in her book "*Trauma and Recovery*". This paper analyses the protagonists' horrific childhood experiences and how those events affected their decisions as adults. The research uses trauma theory as its primary theoretical framework to investigate the transmission of trauma and racial themes from one generation to the next. The focus of the plot of the work under discussion is on both individual and collective trauma, as well as its impact on victims who have experienced trauma, their roles as unhealed generations, and its transmission. It has discussed various sorts of child abuse, which affects both white and black children, and has described the traumatising experiences of black children's survivors in a modern American context. This thesis has shown that trauma has long-term ramifications that pose a serious threat to today's generations and the representation of black bodies in America, including the collapse of the individual psyche and the destruction of interpersonal connections. The research concludes by stating that racial beliefs continue to have harmful effects because they are constantly repeated yet never change.

Keywords*: Childhood Trauma, Racial Discrimination, Inherited Family Trauma, Childhood Experiences, Trauma Theory, Trauma And Recovery, African American Traumatized Society*

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1. Introduction

In light of Judith Herman's trauma theory, the current research project analyses how Toni Morrison's 2015 novel *God Help the Child* depicts childhood trauma. The study aims to investigate alternate ways of thinking about and acting with children while attesting to the physical and mental oppression imposed on them in the African American setting. It focuses mostly on the psychology of characters who have experienced molestation and abuse as children, taking advantage of their inability to develop healthy relationships with their surroundings and other people. The study explores Judith Herman's theoretical insights on the trauma phenomena, focusing on the idea of intrusion and the borderline personality disorder that can result from traumatic experiences.

One of the famous authors who discuss the difficulties and history of African Americans is the late Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison. Her writings have received widespread praise from the critics, and they are most recognised for revisiting the history of African Americans' injured bodies and souls and their protracted struggle against racial, social, and psychological oppression. *God Help the Child* is a gripping tale filled with anguish and misery. Morrison addresses difficult subjects in this book, including "colorism, oppression, inter-racial racism, childhood trauma" (Sullivan, 2015), and historical trauma. Due to its portrayal of African Americans who are divided between two identities, the novel, like all of Morrison's prior works, has been successful in drawing attention from both readers and critics. The tale primarily explores the timeline between two distinct eras of discriminatory American racial policies that were enacted against African Americans in the 20th century and the present. It highlights "the hardships that Afro-American communities face every day in contemporary America" (Collier, 1994, p.5) as well as the unseen racism that exists both inside and outside of those communities.

God Help the Child by Toni Morrison is centred on the traumatic experiences a black woman named Lula Ann Bride Well had as a child. Lula Ann, a black child of fair-skinned parents, is left abandoned by both her mother, who never shows her love and care, and later by her father, who does not regard her as his child. The cause of mother's harsh treatment of her daughter is her transmitted authoritative parenting style, which is based on detachment and dissociation and is inherited from her ancestors. Domestic racism and inter-racial violence have created toxic memories from the cursed childhood.

Morrison illustrates how traumatised generations pass on suffering to subsequent generations and how those generations survive in the modern United States through the character Sweetness, who is Lula Ann's mother. The plot of God Help the Child deals with complex details and racial themes. It displays the facets of the long-forgotten, seemingly

non-existent, yet nonetheless persistently present, racial past. This book is regarded as one of the key texts in the fields of critical racial theory, trauma, and black feminism. This study's main focus will be on how the trauma of slavery was passed down from one generation to the next and how it affected "black African Americans' psyche under racial ideologies" (Wardi, 2020) through both individual and social trauma. Inter-racial oppression, racism, and colorism are a few examples of these ideologies and problems. As a result, Morrison vividly describes the experiences of Bride and Booker, the characters in the novel, who are plagued by the aftereffects of trauma and post-memory. Although this depiction has some basis in fact, Morrison only addresses the African American context rather than attempting to dispute the global trauma and its implications on transmission.

Judith Herman defines Trauma in her book Trauma and Recovery, as "a state of distress and powerlessness resulted from the individual's experiences and subjugation to external atrocities or natural disasters" (24). Sigmund Freud, who was the first to connect trauma theory to psychoanalysis, first examined the area of study that is now known as trauma theory. This theory has been utilised by academics to investigate the roots and many facets of other theories, including those of Caruth Cathy and Judith Herman. The hypothesis is used in this study to investigate how the legacy of slavery and trauma link to the posttraumatic slave syndrome.

1.1. Research Questions

1. How the characters in *God Help the Child* are portrayed as Traumatized African Americans by Morison?
2. How does the life of the main character "the bride" is affected by trauma in *God Help the Child?*
3. How intergenerational trauma impacts the psychology of the characters in *God Help the Child?*

1.2. Research Objectives

1. To analyse the effects of childhood trauma on the "bride" in God Help the Child by Toni Morrison
2. To explicitly represent the cause and symptoms of childhood trauma in God Help the Child
3. To examine the character development and behavior of the main character "the bride" with reference to trauma theory**.**

1.3. Significance of the study

Through a consideration of childhood trauma's causes and symptoms as they are overtly depicted in Toni Morrison's fiction, the paper is significant in seeking and examining the effects of childhood trauma. The study is also significant in analysing Bride's actions and character development in light of *Trauma and Recovery* by Judith Herman. The significance of this research is also present in its representation of the consequences of childhood abuse and trauma and how it affects the adulthood decisions.

2. Literature Review

Much has been remarked about Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, which uses trauma as a major theme. In her dissertation from 2015, *What Do you Do to Children Matters*: *Toxic Motherhood in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child*, Manuela Lopez Ramirez tackles the topic of child abuse by examining how motherhood affects the development of trauma. She also considers how parenthood failure motivates her duty. She writes:

"Sweetness, with her ironic name, rears Lula Ann in a patriarchal authoritarian way; Lula Ann grows up bereft of affection and love, which destroys the mother-daughter bond" (Lopez, 2015).

Furthermore, R.M. Prabha analyses how the main characters' traumatic childhood experiences were influenced by abuse and how this added a grief mood to the book in her thesis, "*Child Abuse in Toni Morrison's Fiction*." She argues that

"Morrison portrays many child victims to intensify the gloomy mood in the novel" (Prabha, 2016).

She portrays Toni Morrison as an "Author for children" (prabha, 2016, p.27) because the central focus and the a serious matter of attention is "child abuse" in her book and is able "to bear a good responsibility to protect vulnerable children" (prabha, 2016, p.27).

Elizabeth Hodge-Freeman contrasts Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* with *The Color of Love* (2015), which she wrote about in "*Musings on Toni Morrison's God Help the Child*" (2015). She examines trauma in both texts, asserting that

"in direct dialogue with Morrison's idea, my book, *The Color of Love* offers a sociological and theoretical analysis of the themes, relationships, and family dynamics that have always been part of Morrison's repertoire since her first book, The Bluest Eye. What is different is that I explore the resistance and reproduction of racism in black families in Brazil…" (n.p).

Kick (1999) highlights Morrison as an artistic creation concerning sufferings, memory, nd racial trauma and anxieties. She further explicates:

"The beauty of Toni Morrison is that it points a reader just becoming acquainted with Morrison's works in numerous directions, ensuring recognition of the complexity and diversity of Morrison's scholarship. For those already steeped in Morrison's works, especially those who like Matus herself are teaching the novels, the dimension of racial trauma will unquestionably engage them more profoundly in Morrison's vision." (p. 284)

The main character Bride becomes traumatised as a result of her woes and sorrows, and she also feels a profound existential emptiness. Despite her trauma, she works through it and aspires to become stronger. In this regard, Raubolt (1999) in his article 'Trauma, Regression, and the Intensive Group Experience', talks about this trauma:

"Trauma is a series of experiences that overwhelms the individual. The events or experiences are horrific and overwhelm the person's ability to cope. Trauma becomes pathological when there is no opportunity to speak about the event or experiences. The experience instead is met with denial, rejection, induction of guilt feelings, hypocrisy, or repeated trauma by important others."(p.158)

Sullivan (2015) evaluates Morrison's book against the backdrop of racism's pervasive psychological effects on black people as a horror and their attempts to flee such wicked practises through re-documenting theoretic elements through critical acting out and healing from trauma. Through her book, Morrison gives the voiceless a voice to improve their situation. He further admits:

"God Help the Child takes up classic Morrison themes: beauty, violence, racism, American blackness and its ghosts of personal and communal trauma, the consumption of bodies—The novel tells the story of Bride, a young, dark-skinned black woman whose life has been shaped by her body's failure to meet the norms of consumable womanhood. As a 'blue-black' child, she is rejected by her 'high-yellow' mother, Sweetness, who refuses to touch her for most of her girlhood... Bride's father, too, vanishes without touching her." (pp. 13- 14)

Morrison's books are referred to as quest tales because the protagonists are searching for a secret symbol that will help them overcome terrible interactions with people of colour and help them find their identity. Through her works, she investigates blackness. She wants the readers to interpret her books alongside her. With the labels of their racial and gender alienation, she presents characters that have been driven to the periphery of society. In most of her works, she also examines the core of African-American reality, notably that of an African female and female estrangement, which leads to racial

suffering on a large scale. She also examines how black people fight to find their identity and how they fail to do so. Morrison defines herself as a radical thinker, writer, editor, and critic who, through participating in the African-American literary legacy, acts as a steward in changing the American literary landscape.

God Help the Child explores a number of Morrison's well-known themes, including racism, brutality, and beauty. In today's American society, having a black body is considered as a rejection or a sign of social isolation. The scars of societal trauma and repressed desires are visible on black bodies. Such bodies experience an identity crisis and go through active transitional periods to undermine or fight the domination in an effort to maintain their self-respect. The bride is compelled to examine herself for any signs of self-pride because of the prevalence of such racial division, even in the backyard.

2.1. Research Gap

Unexpectedly, *God Help the Child* has drawn a lot of attention from reviewers, who typically believe that the story has just one main topic, namely childhood trauma and different types of child abuse and maltreatment. The topic of intergenerational trauma, however, is barely broached. In other words, the trauma that the bride experienced as a child was brought on by racial trauma that has been passed down through African American generations since the days of slavery. Due to physical characteristics, she might be any black person who has internalised trauma. As a result, the I choose to use this interpretation in my paper to fill in the gaps and investigate the idea that trauma is more complex than just a problem of remaining ashes from the past. However, it causes a traumatised individual to be plagued by their history.

3. Research Methodology

This research is qualitative and follows the MLA format. The data is collected through primary and secondary sources. Internet is used to avoid any intricacies. As far as the research Methodology is concerned, it is descriptive and argumentative. Primarily it is an exploratory and interpretive textual analysis-based research. It is used to gain an understanding, opinion, motivation for an underlying reason. The research begins with the identification of objectives of the research, according to which the problems of research are formulated.

4. Theoretical Framework

The research is conducted using Trauma Theory. Trauma, according to *The Center for Treatment of Anxiety and Mood Disorders*, is a psychological and emotional reaction

to a deeply upsetting and stressful event or experience. Such occurrences or experiences can include getting sick or hurt, losing a loved one, or getting into an accident. People who encounter trauma frequently go through traumatic events that result in psychiatric problems. When two persons encounter unpleasant circumstances, one person may experience trauma, while the other person may stay vigilant.

A notable psychologist and author named Judith Herman has authored multiple volumes outlining the causes, varieties, symptoms, and effects of childhood trauma. She provides numerous illustrations of the effects of childhood trauma and suffering on adults throughout her book, *Trauma and Recovery*. Herman explains the stages of healing that assist the traumatised person in adjusting to their experience. According to her, speaking about childhood trauma is the primary factor that contributes to healing and inner serenity.

"Trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness" (Herman, 1992, p.70).

Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman is one of the ground-breaking books on the subject. Part I is titled "Traumatic Disorder," while Part II is titled "Stages of Recovery." Herman's writing focuses on how people individually experience the pain of violence. She argues that the connection between those who suffer, political and societal violence, and the sense of captivity that is ingrained as a result of battering and attack experience is what creates a traumatised victim. This demonstrates how trauma ties to both sexual and political violence.

Due to the frequent occurrences of these situations in Blacks' lives, trauma continued to play a significant role in their lives. In spite of all the African Americans' efforts to win freedom and eradicate the legacy of slavery, racism and white supremacy still exist today. Because of this, African Americans began to internalise racism and started to feel inferior to their former rulers. This is because internalised racism is a psychological framework that reinforces the deep-seated belief in white superiority among people of colour. This led to the development of interracial oppression, which is a "conflict between two races based on traits like skin tone, nose size, eye colour, and lip shape." (Stave, 2020)

In the field of psychoanalysis, research on how trauma is passed down from one generation to another is still in its infancy. The transmission of trauma, however, has been the subject of numerous theories. First, there is "Empathic Traumatization," which is connected to the emotional transmission of trauma from parents to children. When a

youngster tries to comprehend or relate to their parents' gruesome wartime memories and experiences, it happens. The Intergenerational transmission of trauma

"occurs when the traumatized parent implants his or her emotional instability into their Children" (Coetzer, p. 03).

Trauma has consistently been a major theme in African American literature that deals with memory and post-memory recall problems. Recollections of the transatlantic slave trade were rekindled in the 1830s. It became known as Transatlantic literature because it included painful occurrences and the generational transmission of their meaning (Thamarana, 2015).

5. Discussion and Analysis

It is God Help the Child. Toni Morrison's brilliance was successful. Wrath of Children was the intended title at first, and Morrison herself favoured it. The entire piece serves as an example of content that exemplifies the elements of trauma theory. Morrison shows various forms of racism in this book, including domestic abuse, brutality, intra- and inter-racial violence, and prejudice, through the telling of African-Americans' horrifying memories of slavery and its consequences. Morrison therefore stresses the consequences of the tragedies and terrible events of the Holocaust of African Americans. She specifically examines how racial disparities and racial ideas that have persisted in post-racial America across decades are still present. Interesting insights regarding intergenerational trauma and interracial prejudice can be found in her book God Help the Child.

One of the key topics of *God Help the Child* is "childhood trauma and its effects." (Gallego, 2020) Bride, the protagonist of the book, has a psychiatric condition as a result of her parents' rejection of her due to her skin tone. The majority of the other characters were also victims of racism, abuse, molestation, or parental neglect as children; as a result, the majority of them carry psychological, behavioural, and personality wounds into adulthood.

Morrison explains in *God Help the Child* that the primary character, Bride, experiences psychological distress symptoms, as described in Herman's book. It is:

"[s]ymptoms of traumatized people simultaneously call attention to the existence of an unspeakable secret and deflect attention from it. This is most apparent in the way traumatized people alternate between feeling numb and reliving the event"(Herman, 1992, p.1).

The book explores how childhood trauma caused by abuse can linger into adulthood and effect children, as well as how victims can find self-realization after pursuing their sense of identity and inner peace.

Bride, a dark-skinned girl and the offspring of two light-skinned people, is the main protagonist of *God Help the Child.* When Bride is born, her father is so horrified by how she looks that he never even attempts to touch her. He abandons his family because of the daughter's skin tone. He even think that his wife is responsible for bringing such a “disaster” (Morrison, 2015, p.5). She almost disowns her kid as a result of her shock by insisting that the child call her "Sweetness" rather than "mom" or any other title for a mother.

“I told her to call me ‘Sweetness’ instead of ‘Mother’ or ‘Mama’. “It was safer” (2015, p.6)

One interpretation of Bride's psychological condition that emerges later in the narrative is that it is primarily caused by the mother's unfavourable views toward her daughter. The unpleasant feelings of "Sweetness" toward her kid in the beginning of Morrison's book can be seen as the root of Bride's "complex-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder." In *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman makes a distinction between individuals who have experienced a single trauma, which will continue to change them as a person through time, and those who have experienced multiple traumas, who will likely feel lost. Herman claims that a person has "complex post-traumatic stress disorder" if they experience "additional symptoms" as a result of a string of traumatic incidents, he or she encounters numerous challenges in his or her interactions.

It should be questioned whether detachment and skin color are the only sources of Bride’s trauma. Judith Herman defines trauma as “a state of distress and powerlessness resulted from the individual's experiences and subjugation to external atrocities or natural disasters” (Morrison, p.24).

To centralise the status of the Bride, definition tackles the trauma environment. Without a doubt, Bride attests to the phenomenon of parental neglect in her childhood and lacks the attachment from her carer due to her skin colour. This past trauma was caused by her parents' neglect. She was born to white parents who were both hostile to the fact that she was born a black girl from Sudan. In a chapter devoted to her, Sweetness provides an explanation for her harsh treatment and avoidance of her daughter. She narrates:

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. (Morrison, p.03)

Another incident that traumatises young Lula Ann is when she sees the landlord rape a young boy in their backyard.

"The boy's little hands were opening and closing, His crying was soft, squeaky and loaded with pain the man's trousers were down around his ankle"(Morrison, p.19).

Despite not directly experiencing it, this imprints on her interpersonal trauma. They all witnessed the boy's suffering and the rape scenes, nevertheless. Because the landlord might evict her and her mother from their flat, Lula Ann chose to remain silent about this incident. Therefore, Lula's incapacity to express herself is what puts her under the power of trauma, but as an adult, she was able to tell Booker about the suppressed memory of rape. He serves as Bride's primary associated figure as a result.

The main character of the novel is not just Bride, who experienced a horrific childhood as a result of her birth abandonment, maltreatment, and abuse. Bride and Booker aren't the only kids mentioned in the title, though. Actually, Booker's icy actions and flimsiness in his connection with Bride were caused by a concealed aspect of his narrative. It turns out that Adam, the sibling to whom Booker was so close, had a brother. The fact that his brother had been molested and had been discovered dead soon after going missing devastated Booker for the rest of his adult life. Other kid characters, primarily Rain (the youngster Bride meets as an adult) and her friend Brooklyn, were molested in addition to Bride and Booker.

6. Conclusion

God Help the Child by Morrison explores the connection between traumatic experiences as a child and psychological illness. The main characters in the book experience various forms of abuse, neglect, witness domestic violence, emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse throughout the course of a web of childhood trauma stories. Morrison focuses on her central character as a symbol of several mental illnesses, including Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (c-PTSD), Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD), and Dissociative Disorder (DD).

Morrison explains how traumatic events as a youngster have a profound effect on an adult's emotional, social, and behavioural issues. Trauma and Recovery by Judith Herman describes the pain of the trauma victim and the stages of his or her recovery. Morrison is able to convey the effects of childhood trauma and strategies for overcoming

it in God Helps the Child through the description of her characters and the use of many narrators.

The author discovers over the entire piece that Morrison creates a masterful tale of trauma in *God Help the Child*, showing how the major characters reconcile with childhood trauma and reconstruct themselves. The bride has the chance to find fulfilment in her love for Booker and can at last accept herself for who she really is. Morrison's optimism is based on this book, where black is the new black, American African mothers and daughters get along, and where blackness is special and priceless.

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