



Exploring Domestic Violence and Child Abuse in Select Novels of Toni Morrison

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Abstract

Violence against African American females, young and old, is an irresistible concern in the novels of Toni Morrison. Her best fictional pieces, 'The Bluest Eye', 'Beloved', and 'God Help the Child' are the vibrant spotlight of domestic violence and child abuse in variegated natures. Toni Morrison has dealt profusely with all sorts of child maltreatment in her oeuvre.

In many of her narratives, Morrison weaves a tangled web of childhood trauma stories, in which all the characters have suffered some kind of abuse like racial discrimination, neglect, witnessing domestic violence, emotional and psychological abuse, molestation, sexual exploitation, verbal abuse, etc. She shows how the child's exposure to traumatic experiences has far-reaching negative effects on adulthood, such as psychological, emotional, behavioral, and social. Morrison explores the curse of the past, the legacy of slavery and its aftermath, and its hold on the present, through the sociocultural phenomenon. Racism and intra-racial discrimination based on skin color result in childhood trauma. The sexual abuse of Pecola, the girl desiring the bluest eye by her drunken father has been very vividly picturized in the backdrop of racial conflict in 'The Bluest Eye'. Morrison's 'Beloved' fictionalized the gruesome murder of an infant with a jigsaw by her mother, Sethe only to avoid escaping a slave. God Help the Child chronicled the ramifications of child abuse and neglect through the tale of Bride, a black girl with dark skin being born to light-skinned parents. Moreover, magic realism, socio-political aspects, and Toni Morrison's lucid narratives provide ultra energy promoting her vivid message.

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Domestic violence, Child abuse, Magic realism, Childhood trauma, Racism, Discrimination, Exploration

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to comprehensively explore the portrayal of domestic violence and child abuse in specific novels by Toni Morrison, including *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *God Help the Child*. It seeks to delve into the profound effects of these traumatic experiences on the personalities and identities of the victims. Additionally, the study endeavors to raise awareness and cultivate empathy by conducting a focused analysis of Morrison's literary works. By doing so, it aspires to make a valuable contribution to the ongoing scholarly conversation surrounding the critical issues of domestic violence and child abuse.

Literature Review

An extensive study from different sources like published books, theses, journals, web pages, blogs, etc. has been undertaken for the smooth conduct of the research. There is no direct way to walk upon and no shortcut answer to decide about *Exploring Domestic Violence and Child Abuse in Select Novels of Toni Morrison*. However, the following resources are reviewed eliciting material for this study:

Domestic Violence towards Women Characters as Seen in Toni Morrison's The Bluest Eye by Ichwati Yuliana, Fabiola Dharmawanti Kurnia, Ali Mustofa has researched Domestic Violence towards Women Characters as Seen in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* and specified some issues that can illuminate my work. Another research has been commenced titled *Beyond Subjective Violence: A Zizekian Reading Of Toni Morrison's Beloved* by Fazel Asadi Amjad, Najlaa Atshan Kalaf Al musawi of Kharazmi University, Iran. It has been published in the Journal of Archaeology of Egypt/Egyptology 17(5), 1254-1261. ISSN 1567-214x. The study too shows different types of violence in *Beloved*. Research has been made on a modern feminist standpoint titled, *Objectification Theory: The Themes of Violence and Diverse Sexualities in Beloved and The Bluest Eye of Toni Morrison* by Dr J.P Aggarwal & Ms. Vinisha Sharma. Some very crucial observations have been focused on modern feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Irigaray have expressed their opinions on the negative impact of objectification of the female

body. Morrison wrote her novels to depict the themes of the sexual oppression of women and their marginalization. All her women characters, Sethe, Pecola, and Denver are trapped in a situation leading them to dehumanization and degradation. A research work on Domestic Violence in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* by Dr. S. Horizan Prasanna Kumar is conducted and published on Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 18:3 March 2018 Dr. T. Deivasigamani, Editor: Vol. II Black Writings: A Subaltern Perspective Annamalai University, Tamilnadu, India. This study shows *God Help the Child* from different angles of violence and childhood scars.

Methodology of the Study

The research *Exploring Domestic Violence and Child Abuse in Select Novels of Toni Morrison* employed a qualitative design, utilizing textual analysis to critically examination on how Toni Morrison portrays domestic violence and child abuse in selected novels, namely *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *God Help the Child*. These novels were chosen for their thematic exploration of research issues. Related data was gathered through a meticulous reading process, capturing relevant passages, character descriptions, and instances of domestic violence and child abuse. Some additional data was collected from various sources such as web pages, blogs, and social networking sites. The study was guided by theoretical frameworks, including Feminist Theory, Trauma Theory, Psychoanalytic Theory, and Critical Race Theory, offering lenses to comprehend the sociocultural, gendered, and racial dimensions within Morrison's works.

Introduction

The portrayal of domestic violence and child abuse is a recurring and deeply impactful theme in the literary works of Toni Morrison. Domestic violence occurs as a pattern of abusive and coercive behaviors. It concerns physical, sexual, and mental assault, as well as economic coercion that adults use against their intimate partners (Schechter & Ganley, 1995:16). Morrison's poignant narratives delve into the complexities of human relationships, exposing the painful realities of violence within the domestic sphere and the lasting scars it leaves on individuals, families, and communities. Morrison became blessed to be the first African woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.

Morrison's exploration of domestic violence and child abuse is deeply rooted in her commitment to giving voice to marginalized individuals and communities. Her characters are often confronted with the harsh realities of violence, whether it be physical, emotional, or psychological, and their struggles to navigate these traumatic experiences form the core of her narratives. This critical analysis aims to delve into the portrayal of domestic violence and child abuse in Morrison's works, focusing on selected novels such as *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *God Help the Child*. With a breakthrough exploration of Morrison's portrayal of domestic violence and child abuse, this paper recognizes the sensitivity of the subject matter and the importance of approaching it with empathy, respect, and a commitment to amplifying marginalized voices.

Analysis and Interpretation

Toni Morrison, in many of her fictions, paints her concerns about child abuse, domestic violence, and many unhealthy traumatic situations. Outlining the roots of this violence to the days of slavery that justified the inhuman treatment of blacks by their white masters, black women are seen to be the nastiest sufferers as they have been doubly oppressed because of their race and gender. Black female children face abuse in their own homes as well as from their community. Domestic violence in African American families can be traced back to the days of slavery and the inhuman treatment blacks received from their white masters. For both black males and females, slavery was a devastating experience. And yet, black women were doubly oppressed because of their race and gender, especially dramatic is the abuse black female children faced inside and outside their home.

Silent Trauma Echoes in *The Bluest Eye*

Violence of any sort can lead to the physical and mental collapse of a child. In some societies, women were traditionally considered the man's asset; he had the power to control and punish them and the children physically for instance beatings (Summers, 2001). Toni Morrison has shown the practical field of this theory in *The Bluest Eye*. Pecola Breedlove has to face a lot of turbulence due to this unhealthy family relationship; she has to pay with her life.

The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison is a powerful and thought-provoking novel that delves into themes of beauty, identity, child abuse, domestic violence, and the devastating

effects of racial self-hatred. Set in the 1940s in Lorain, Ohio, the story follows the life of Pecola Breedlove, a young African-American girl who longs for blue eyes and believes that possessing white skin and a pair of blue eyes would make her beautiful and valued in a world that idolizes whiteness.

Pecola grows up in a troubled household, experiencing neglect and abuse from her parents, Cholly and Pauline, who are victims of their own personal traumas and societal pressures. She finds solace in her friendship with Claudia MacTeer, a young girl who narrates parts of the story. As the narrative unfolds, Morrison explores the destructive impact of white standards of beauty on Pecola's self-esteem and mental well-being. Pecola's desire for blue eyes symbolizes her longing for social acceptance and her belief that conforming to white ideals would bring her happiness and escape from her painful reality.

Morrison also incorporates the perspectives of other characters, such as Soaphead Church and Geraldine, who exemplify the damaging effects of internalized racism and the perpetuation of oppressive beauty standards within the African-American community. Their narratives further emphasize the complexity of racial identity and the corrosive nature of societal prejudices. Being scorned in her daily life makes Pecola become silent, loveless, lost self-esteem, and unconfident girl. She grew up in a traumatic life. When she is at school, she cannot resist being ridiculed by her friends and teachers about the color of her skin.

“Her teachers had always treated her this way. They tried never to glance at her and called on her only when everyone was required to respond (Morrison, 1970:46-47)

She is harassed by her schoolmate and her teacher for being black and ugly. She receives verbal assault from her peers who humiliate her since she has having unattractive physical appearance.

“Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove! Bobby loves Pecola Breedlove!” and never fails to get peals of laughter from those in earshot, and mock anger from the accused.” (Morrison, 1970: 46)

Moreover, she is not only harassed by the white kids but also by her own race. Every day is miserable for Pecola. They bully her verbally by calling her ‘black e mo’ (Morrison,

1970: 62). Facing verbal bullying shatters her psychology. Pecola, too endures physical violence from her mother.

“Mrs. Breedlove yanked her up by the arm, slapped her again, and in a voice thin with anger, abused Pecola directly...” (Morrison, 1970: 85)

Violence becomes prominent in Pecola’s life. Almost every day, she accepts bad behavior and attitudes. Her parents become the perpetrators of the physical assault. Tragically, Pecola’s yearning for blue eyes intensifies to the point of madness, and she becomes pregnant after a horrifying incident of sexual abuse by her father. The community, instead of offering support and understanding, largely dismisses her suffering, deepening her isolation and despair.

Through *The Bluest Eye*, Toni Morrison raises important questions about the nature of beauty, the damaging consequences of racism, and the enduring legacy of exploitation. The novel challenges readers to confront the sad plight of a teenage girl who becomes the victim of incest, and severe ill-treatment, and ultimately dies a premature death. Morrison’s work exposes the destructive power of internalized racism and serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of embracing one’s unique identity.

Racial Aggression and Juvenile Mistreatment in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* explores the brutal experiences of slavery and their lingering effects on the characters. Set in the post-Civil War era, the story revolves around the character of Sethe, a former slave who escaped from a plantation called Sweet Home in Kentucky to Ohio. The novel is loosely based on the true story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped with her children and killed her infant daughter to prevent her from being captured.

The character of Sethe, a former slave, is haunted by the traumatic events of her past. Sethe’s life is marked by extreme violence and abuse, both at the hands of slave owners and within her own community. In *Beloved*, Morrison, “*unconstrained by nineteenth-century mores, . . . breaks open the taboo on speaking openly about sexuality and sexual abuse*” (Montgomery 55). Many characters in the novel experience traumas because of their past, which was filled with sexual assaults.

Sethe, the main character, is lucky to have the same father for all her four children. Yet, during her enslaved time at the Sweet Home, she faced a brutal assault, which

affected her as a mother. The physical abuse she went through symbolizes the hardships that slave mothers had to go through because the men, as she states, “took my milk” (Morrison 17). She was deprived of one thing that connected her to her children – her milk:

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk!”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison 20)

Sethe did not care about the fact that they beat her, she only cared about her milk, which was meant for her children. On the one hand, this shows her love for her children and the fact that they were of the utmost importance to her. On the other, she represents all enslaved mothers who struggled and were in enormous pain because they could not raise or nurse their children properly. Sethe would do anything to protect her children and her murder of Beloved proves that. In addition, she would do anything for her children, even selling her own body, i.e. this is how she manages to engrave Beloved’s tombstone.

Baby Suggs, too was raped several times and had different men father her eight children. This affects her life greatly as she struggles to connect emotionally with her children. The only child of hers whom she saw become an adult is Halle, Sethe’s husband. Just like other black women, she was exploited by men, both black and white. Most children were taken away from their slave mothers after they were born, but Baby Suggs was lucky to manage to keep at least one of her children with her, that being Halle: *“And He did, and He did, and He did and then gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn’t mean a thing”* (Morrison 23).

Another character who went through this despicable act is Ella, who does not want to nurse her child because it was conceived through rape and, consequently, the child dies. These are only some of the examples of how slavery sexualized and sexually abused women. White men had absolute power over enslaved people, and they could do whatever they wished to them, without facing consequences, which left many women with unforgettable traumas.

Slavery dehumanized Sethe's mother so much that she discarded all her children except Sethe: "*She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. . . . Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man*" (Morrison 62). This situation describes the level of pain women felt when raped: Sethe's mother got rid of her children because they reminded her of her rapist(s). Moreover, the usage of the word "threw" shows and emphasizes the lack of love Sethe's mother had for her other children. There was no connection between them. She only kept Sethe because she loved her father and her death might have been a way in which she wanted to protect her daughter.

The ghost of Sethe's deceased daughter, known as Beloved, appears later in the story. Beloved's presence represents the haunting legacy of slavery and the unresolved trauma that continues to shape the lives of the characters. Beloved's arrival causes a further exploration of the devastating effects of violence, both physical and emotional, within the community.

Sethe's act of killing her own children is an extreme portrayal of the devastating impact of slavery on an individual's psyche. Sethe's motivation for committing infanticide is driven by her belief that death is a preferable fate for her children than a life of slavery and the horrors they would inevitably face. In her own distorted logic, she sees the act as an act of love and protection, attempting to shield her children from the brutality and dehumanization of slavery.

Through richly layered storytelling and poetic prose, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* delves into the depths of human resilience and the complexities of freedom and redemption. *Beloved* serves as a powerful exploration of domestic violence and child abuse within the context of slavery. Through her poignant narrative style, Morrison calls for empathy and understanding in addressing the deep wounds of violence.

Family Strife and Child Maltreatment in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

In Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*, the themes of domestic violence and child abuse are explored, though in a more subtle and nuanced manner compared to some of her other works. The novel delves into the complex dynamics of family relationships, the impact of childhood trauma, and the search for identity and self-worth.

The character Bride, a young woman with deep skin and blue-black hair, experiences emotional abuse from her mother, Sweetness, throughout her life. Sweetness, who struggles with internalized racism and a belief in colorism, rejects and mistreats her daughter because of her dark skin. Bride's mother's rejection and emotional abuse profoundly affect her self-esteem and her understanding of love and relationships.

"It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened ... 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. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of." (Morrison, Part 1, Chapter 1, Page 3)-- Sweetness's disavowal of all responsibility for her mistreatment of her daughter is a classic example of child abuse verbally and emotionally.

While physical violence is not as prominently depicted in the novel, there are instances of child abuse that are referenced in the narrative. For example, Bride's childhood friend, Booker, carries the trauma of physical abuse inflicted upon him by his father. His experiences shaped his adulthood and his difficulties in forming healthy relationships.

God Help the Child highlights the long-lasting scars left by emotional abuse and childhood trauma. One of the important prominent matters in *God Help the Child* is the childhood dilemma and how it impacts its victim during adulthood. Bride, the root of her childhood dilemma lies with how she was used to sweetness. At first, she called herself as a Bride, but she was Lula Ann and was subjected to a childhood filled with disgust and neglect. She was fully affected by physical abuse and Lula Ann was denied consciousness and physical affection. Sweetness raised

Lula Ann is at a gap, not accepting her to grow close to her. Lula Ann compels her to navigate girlhood in a sexist earth with a mother who not only avoids her daughter but also strengthens misogynistic stigmas.

Significant memories in Lula Ann's life and girlhood development become the sources of hard memories. She has denied intimacy with her mom due to her color. *"I told her to call me 'sweetness' instead of 'Mother' or Mama'.*

It was safer. Being that black and having what I thought were too-thick lips calling me 'Mama'

would confuse people" [Morrison,6].

She was denied even referring to her mom as such due to her color. Lula Ann and many such black children were made compulsory to grow mature quicker than other children solely because of their skin color. They have many risks and expectations to follow as black children.

Lula Ann taught rules to remove falling victim to racism. Sweetness point of view Lula Ann's dark black color is a curse.

God Help the Child parades substantial hopefulness. There is no doubt that the psychological and emotional childhood scars that inhabit this narrative are somehow finally fixed. Most of the main characters, true survivors of child abuse, experience a purifying transformation in their lives. Rain finds in the hippy couple the possibility of growing up and healing from her childhood wounds. All the characters of Morrison one way or another, carry the burden of childhood pain: “*A set of connections, which extend from her [Bride] to Booker and on to a semi-feral girl named Rain . . . : a cycle of abuse, of molestation*” (Ulin, 2015). Morrison “*carefully explores the nature of victimhood and the consequences of domestic violence through a series of fascinating and believable narrators.*” (Iqbal, 2015)

Conclusion:

Through a deep examination of Morrison's key novels, *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *God Help the Child*, this research article has unmistakably emphasized that Toni Morrison's literary contributions extend far beyond storytelling. Morrison confronts readers with uncomfortable realities through her unique depiction of Cholly Breedlove, Sethe, and Bride, who endure various forms of abuse. Morrison's powerful prose narratives compel us to engage with the deep-rooted scars left by domestic violence and child abuse and to acknowledge the urgent need for healing and social change. Through her nuanced characterizations, Toni Morrison has underscored the power of literature to illuminate social injustices and inspire transformative conversations. Her fiction serves as a cautionary signal calling for immediate action, urging readers to recognize the impact of violence and work towards a future where every individual, especially the most vulnerable, can live free from abuse.

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