

Toni Morrison's Hope for African American: A Psychoanalytic analysis of *God Help the Child*, A Story of Trauma

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ABSTRACT

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison narrates a story of trauma with the strategy of magical realism, explaining how African American women survive in American and how they get along with folks, friends and lover in the face of race and patriarchy. Morrison also rests her hope on *God Help the Child*, where black values and African Americans do not concern their colour. This paper employs a descriptive research approach to study the trauma narrative and Morrison's hope. We accompany childhood trauma for a lifelong time, and we must resolve to balance life and the traumatic experience. After the eventful years, Morrison has settled her sternness and indignation in her later years, and she turns to a relatively mild tone towards the racial problems. In short, she hopes the African American could forget the former racial trauma and open a new chapter of life.

1. Introduction

God Help the Child is Toni Morrison's last published novel, which has been caught great attention among the academic circle. Toni Morrison, reputed as an extraordinary African American women writer, once awarded Nobel Prize for her renowned work *Beloved* (1987) that imprinted a significant impact on African American literature. Much attention has been drawn to her narrative strategies, the American patriarchal racism, sexism and classism demonstrated in her works. However, comparatively fewer researchers focus on *God Help the Child*'s psychoanalytic analysis.

The meaning of trauma in literary criticism differs from the one in the medical field. The trauma in Psychoanalytic criticism refers to painful experiences that traumatized us psychologically. In other words, Trauma describes an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, the uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth,1991, p.11). It includes our mental responses to several painful experiences such as rape, child abuse, accidents, family violence and so on, which is often written in terms of the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder. The impacts of the trauma are engraved in victims, and it is difficult for them to fight against its effects. The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced (Caruth,1991, p.17). In *God Help the Child*, main characters are victims of trauma. Sweetness and Bride are affected by the trauma of slavery, Booker is traumatized by the trauma of his brother's rape to death, and her painful childhood experiences also haunt the white girl Raisin. To some extent, they are heavily impaired by the influences of trauma.

Due to the influence of trauma, fear of intimacy is also demonstrated in how traumatized characters get along with friends, families and lovers. This feeling that emotional closeness will hurt us only by remaining emotionally distant from others. In a word, fear of intimacy can also function as a defence. To some degree, fear of intimacy can be seen as a byproduct of childhood trauma.

This paper attempts to analyze the impacts of trauma and how to conciliate with trauma in *God Help the Child* focusing on key notions such as fear of intimacy, trauma, and magical realism. Besides, In Toni Morrison's last novel, she also instills her sincere hope for African Americans and even those traumatized by painful experiences.

2. Trauma narrative in *God Help the Child*

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison emphasizes several childhood traumatic events that traumatizes characters repeatedly in their adulthood. Repeated trauma in adult life erodes personality structure already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality (Herman-Lewis,1992, p.94). Morrison also depicts different lives and painful experiences of the main characters: Bride and Booker.

Bride develops in the climate of being ignored by her mother since she bares "midnight black" or "Sudanese black" skin color. Sweetness even wants to smother her in babysit, even hates to touch her, and does not allow little Luna Ann to call her "mother" and "mama". The bride's painful memories haunt her from her childhood to her adulthood. "trauma may be transfigured into the sublime or the sacred, and the traumatized may be seen as martyrs or saints, notably in the case of victims of extreme violence or genocide" (LaCapra,2014). The trauma holds the feature of repetition. Since being not merely a purely psychological or individual phenomenon but being related to the social and political condition, trauma develops in the historical process. Traumatic memories may not correlate directly with historical facts (Felman,1992). However, he argues that this does not compromise the truth of those memories. In this novel, childhood abuse often disrupts her and has greatly influenced her life. "Sweetness's bedroom always seemed unlit" (Morrison,2015, p.32). when she thinks of her mother, the grey, dark feeling thrusts into her. She does not know the right thing to do in her mother's house. Besides, though being beaten by Sofia, she thought it is like sweetness's slap. Consequently, childhood trauma appears in the past, present and even future.

Lois Tyson notes that "we are traumatized by it in childhood, is a principal organizer of our psychological experience" (Lois Tyson,2014, p.22). In addition to the repeated feature of trauma, Bride's fear of intimacy is found in *God Help the Child*. Victims of childhood abuse rarely resort to self-injury which refers to a way to relieve unbearable emotional pain by victims rather than suicide attempts. Morrison notes Bride's sexual behaviour. However, in Bride's opinion, these sexual desires are for fun. "but I never thought about that part of his life because what was important in our relationship, other than our lovemaking and his complete understanding of me, was the fun we had (Morrison,2015, p.38). She even has sexual affairs with stranger men. "Whoever he is I cannot face him to chat or fake after-se? cuddle, especially since I do not remember any of it" (Morrison,2015, p.31). In Caruth's book, he maintains that "Purging and vomiting, compulsive sexual behavior, compulsive risk taking or exposure to danger, and the use of psychoactive drugs become the vehicles by which abused children attempt to regulate their internal emotional states" (Caruth,1991, p.109). Bride attempts to obliterate her dysphoria and achieve comfort because of maternal love. And the reason why her boyfriends vary is that this behavior can protect her from getting close to the person. As a result of an abusive environment, she holds a sense of hopelessness and abandonment to make it difficult for her to trust in the individual. Perhaps changing boyfriends and different sexual affairs provide her with a sense of security.

Booker is another victim of trauma. "how childhood cuts festered and never scabbed over" (Morrison,2015, p.85). These words by Morrison pour out Booker's heart. Booker has experienced the pain of losing his brother. His brother was raped to death and his corpse wears no pants and shoes, even no penis. In the novel, Toni Morrison mentions "yellow" for four times. For one thing, Morrison narrates the story by color so that the reader deeply remembers the color of death that represents Booker's anguish. For another thing, the author put much stress on depicting the yellow color in order to illustrate that the trauma of losing brother has been ingrained in Booker's mind. Consequently, it paves the way for why he breaks up with Bride and why he is involved in gang violence.

As a result of trauma, Booker breaks up with Bride in so much that Bride begins to conciliate with her childhood trauma and has a rebirth. In other words, it is of vital importance to mention Booker's trauma. Which aspects show his traumatic influence?

On the one hand, Bride once framed a woman to jail to win her mom's praise and concern. Booker abandoned her until he knew the truth. The truth came out six years later when the murderer who killed Booker's brother was arrested. As the victim's family, Booker was eager to find the truth. On the contrary, Bride did not allege the murder but framed others so that the woman was sent to jail. This behavior irritated Booker. Since Booker once witnessed his brother's death, he must find a way to maintain a sense of trust and a feeling of safety. Once he knew Bride framed other, a feeling of being cheating and unsafety poured into his bosom. He raised unwitting vigilance to disconnect from the present and avoided meeting with Bride, then deciding between breaking up. This event leads to Bride's healing relationship and remembrance. As a result, the traumatic experiences contribute to novel's progress.

On the other hand, Booker once helped people in need. He picked and punched the rapist and saved the child from traffickers. Once he saw these injustices, he thought of her brother. He saved them and punched the perpetrator superficially, but it seems

to save his dead brother. He regretted that he could not save his dear brother. Saving other individuals compensated his guilty and torture by the motive of trauma. Both events develop the narrative.

How Bride conciliates with trauma?

Booker's leaving represents a turning point of conciliation with past experiences and trauma. Three stages can be divided. To begin with, Avoidance. Bride lies to Brooklyn. To win the heart of Sweetness, she once framed a female teacher into jail. Then, the exposure to trauma. After Booker's leaving, she begins to face terror, cowardice, the dark side in her heart and listen to Raisin's story. Bride reconstructs and is exposed to her painful experiences during this period. Truth-telling is of importance to relieve trauma. The novelist arranges talking cure for Bride to recognise the traumatic events. A heart-to-heart talk with Brooklyn and listening to Raisin's horrific rape violence are both ways to ease the impacts of trauma. Until Booker encounters, they undergo a bitter quarrel to body violence and their anguishing emotions are vented totally. Lastly, reconstruct herself. In taking care of aunt Queen, they taste the bliss of a couple. Queen's death makes their first half of life quench while a new life makes their afterlife light.

Magical realism strategy is employed to narrate the trauma. Superficially, Morrison describes Bride's body changes. Initially, Bride also has a healthy physical condition, glorious and charming. After Booker's leave, her body changes dramatically and chronically. "It was when I got dressed for the drive, I noticed the first peculiar thing. Every bit of my pubic hair was gone" (Morrison,2015:7). "Christ. Now what? My earrings. They won't go in" (Morrison,2015:30). Her earlobes even become as chaste as she was born. "It was when she stood to dry herself that she discovered that her chest was flat. Completely flat, with only the nipples to prove it was not her back" (Morrison,2015:59) "When Bride called her back saying the jeans were too large to stay on her hips, Evelyn exchanged them for a pair of Rain's, which fit Bride perfectly. When did I get so small? she wondered." (Morrison,2015:59). Her public hair and earlobes are gone, her chest get flat and her body turns smaller. Does Morrison do narrate the superficial appearances? Virtually, these body alterations narrate the bride's psychological growth and the progress of coping with traumatic experiences.

3. "Black is the New Black": Morrison's Hope for African Americans

As the last work of Toni Morrison, *God Help the Child* attaches her deeply emotions for African Americans. Plenty of traces are left in this novel.

Bride's skin color has been mentioned and underscored occasionally. Bride is described as "a panther in snow" and intrigues much attention. Even the sweetness thinks her kind of bold and confident and forgets how black she is. When Booker rethinks the first encounter with Bride, he narrates, "Simply dumbstruck by her beauty Booker stared open-mouthed at a young blue-black woman standing at the curb laughing. Her clothes were white, her hair like a million black butterflies asleep on her head. She was talking to another woman—chalk white with blond dreadlocks" (Morrison, 2015:83). Bride evaluates being black as glory and this kind of blackness is treasurable, which is seen as a good thing.

Besides, the extramusical identification of the narrative persona operates in many ways. Paratextual verbal cues Evelyn sings a dumb old hippie song like "This land is your land, this land is my land" (Morrison,2015:56). Over the past few years, black Americans have been repressed to maintain cultural hegemony or dominance of white American. Among her former novels, Morrison is highly critical of the injustice of Black Americans and signifies their unfair treatments. In contrast to it, in *God Help the Child*, her attitude becomes tender. Her words are filled with warmth, love and peace. This song represents her hope of harmony in life between Americans and African Americans.

There is a doe pair, and her fawn nestles together while Bride listens to Raisin's rape violent experiences. The utopian scene that Morrison depicts represents her hope for African American mother and daughter. The writer expects that African American mother and daughter could get along with the real mother-daughter relationship no matter how the racial community goes.

4. Conclusion

The objective of the article is to study how the trauma in psychoanalytic criticism plays a role in *God Help the Child* and how Toni Morrison employs the trauma to develop the story. On the other hand, what is Toni Morrison's hope for African Americans.

Through the whole article, the author finds that in *God Help the Child*, Morrison builds a brilliant story of trauma, demonstrating how the main characters conciliate with childhood trauma and reconstruct themselves. The bride can finally accept herself for who she truly is and, in her love for Booker, she has an opportunity to be fulfilled. Moreover, Morrison's hope rest on this novel where black is the new black, where American African mothers and daughters are in concord with each other, where blackness is unique and treasurable.

Many scholars have made many contributions to the novel; however, fewer scholars study this novel from the perspective of critical theory trauma. The article explains the novel in a traumatic way and illustrates Morrison's purpose of creating *God Help the Child*.

However, the study has not gone through further because of limited information and materials. I expect future researchers to excavate the novel from various perspectives and find increasing meritorious conclusions.

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