

## Tracking and Confessing Childhood Atrocities: Emotional Abuse and Neglect in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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**Abstract:** Virginia Woolf once said, "I want to write a novel about silence. The things people don't say."<sup>1</sup> What people do not say or what they cannot say, what people usually hide and what most writers refrain from dealing with is known as atrocity. Atrocities are usually concealed, kept hidden and rarely voiced either by those who witness them or those who are their targets. Judith Herman declares "[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable" (1). Atrocities are the taboo of humanity nevertheless in her last novel, *God Help the Child* (2015) Toni Morrison skillfully tracks the childhood atrocities of her characters in an attempt at healing. Voicing childhood abuse is not Morrison's first attempt to speak about the "unspeakable". However, in *God Help the Child*, Morrison is more intent at warning people from the drastic outcome of childhood abuse. The current study aims to apply Trauma Theory to Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from Judith Herman's perspective in an attempt to show the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect on adult victim's psyche. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman not only depicts the devastating impact that childhood trauma can have on people but also gives guidelines to means of recovery. This can clearly be applied to Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* in which the author shows how most of the characters suffer from, what Herman designates as "psychological distress symptoms"(1) due to the "chronic" injury resulting from either witnessing or being a target of one or more forms of child abuse. Though "[e]motional abuse and neglect is an under-recognized, but actually common, form of child abuse"(Glaser 697), Morrison's focus on depicting the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect on her protagonist reveals her recognition of its long-term effects. Morrison uses the device of flashback in tracking unwelcomed childhood atrocities once triggered by new stimulus. While highlighting how her protagonist managed to "stitch" her "chronic" bruises through dissociation, Morrison skillfully leads her protagonist to confess those buried atrocities in a successful attempt at her protagonist's recovery.

**Key Words:** Judith Herman – Toni Morrison – *God Help the Child* – Trauma – Atrocities – Childhood emotional abuse & neglect – Dissociation – BPD

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<sup>1</sup> Woolf, Virginia. *The Voyage Out*. Chapter 16.

According to The World Health Organization, “[c]hild abuse or maltreatment constitutes all forms of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power”(Butchart et al. 9).

In her last novel, *God Help the Child*, Morrison clearly recognizes the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect within the framework of childhood abuse. She shows that though childhood physical and sexual abuse is still pervasive, the need to recognize and give voice to the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect is crucial. The current study aims to apply Trauma Theory to Toni Morrison’s last novel *God Help the Child* focusing on the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect of the protagonist. In this novel, Morrison shows that all forms of childhood abuse are still pervasive by depicting how most of her characters suffer what Herman defines as “psychological distress symptoms”(1) due to injury resulting from either witnessing or being a target of one or more forms of child abuse. Though Morrison skillfully represents the impact of the different types of abuse on different characters, she focuses on the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect on her protagonist. Voicing childhood trauma is not Morrison’s first attempt to speak about the “*unspeakable*”. Nevertheless, in *God Help the Child*, Morrison is more intent on warning people from the drastic and devastating impact of childhood abuse which leads to “chronic” psychological problems as they grow up. The study also shows that though Morrison offers her protagonist an effective and healthy environment for healing, she does not recover until she confesses her “stitched” childhood atrocity. Hence, this study focuses on tracking the protagonist’s childhood atrocities showing Morrison’s successful attempts at healing through confession.

In “Emotional abuse and neglect (Psychological Maltreatment): A Conceptual Framework”, Danya Glaser focuses on exploring the place of emotional abuse or psychological maltreatment within the overall context of child abuse and neglect. Glaser states that “[e]motional abuse and neglect is an under-recognized, but actually common, form of child abuse”(697). Glaser defines emotional abuse and neglect as “a carer-child relationship that is characterized by patterns of harmful interactions, requiring no physical contact with the child. Motivation to harm the child is not necessary for the definition. Unlike sexual abuse that is a secret activity, these forms of ill treatment are easily observable” (Glaser 697).

Hence, emotional abuse is “any abusive behavior that isn’t physical, which may include verbal aggression, intimidation, manipulation, and humiliation, which most often unfolds as a pattern of behavior over time that aims to diminish another person’s sense of identity, dignity and self-worth, and which often results in anxiety.”<sup>2</sup> While child neglect is another form of child abuse, defined as the shortage (inability) to meet “a child’s basic needs, including the failure to provide adequate health care, supervision, clothing, nutrition, housing as well as their physical, emotional, social, educational and safety needs.”<sup>3</sup> In one of their practice guidelines, the American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC, 1995) states that “[p]sychological maltreatment means a repeated pattern of caregiver behavior or extreme incident(s) that convey to children that they are worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted, endangered, or of value only in meeting another’s needs”(702).

Glaser depicts how “[i]t is now increasingly accepted that emotional abuse and neglect cause significant harm to the child’s development and that this harm extends into adult life” (698). Glaser further adds that psychological maltreatment is “more strongly predictive of subsequent impairments in the children’s development than the severity of physical abuse. Beyond the physical injury that can result from the various forms of child abuse . . . all forms of abuse and neglect affect the child’s psychological, emotional, and behavioral development”(698 – 699). In “Treating Adult Survivors of Childhood Emotional Abuse and Neglect: A New Framework”, E. Hopper, F. Grossman, J. Spnazzola & M. Zucker, all point out the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect by referring to the 2012 policy report produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics “naming psychological maltreatment as ‘the most challenging and prevalent form of child abuse and neglect’”(Hopper et al. 86). Furthermore, they peculiarly point out the similar or even worse impact of childhood emotional abuse and neglect on adult victims.

“[i]n our research and that of our colleagues, we have amassed considerable evidence verifying that victims of childhood emotional abuse and neglect exhibit equal or worse immediate and long-term effects than survivors of other forms of maltreatment and violence that have been much more the focus of clinical and research attention over the past four decades (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse, community and domestic violence)”(86-87).

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<sup>2</sup> “What defines mental abuse?” <https://www.joinonelove.org>

<sup>3</sup> “What defines child neglect?” <https://en.m.wikipedia.org>

Glaser concludes that though “[p]rofessionals in the field continue to find difficulty in recognizing and operationally defining it, and experience uncertainty about proving it legally,” the child’s development as a result of psychological maltreatment “is impaired in all domains of functioning”(697).

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman declares that: “[t]he ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*. Atrocities, however, refuse to be buried. Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work”(Herman 1). Herman states that the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. . . . When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom”(1). Herman claims that for traumatized people the presence of “psychological distress symptoms” indicates the existence of an “unspeakable secret”

psychological distress symptoms 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. The dialectic of trauma gives rise to complicated, sometimes uncanny alterations of consciousness . . . which mental health professionals, searching for a calm, precise language, call “dissociation.” It results in the protean, dramatic, and often bizarre symptoms of hysteria which Freud recognized a century ago as disguised communications about sexual abuse in childhood”(Herman 1).

Herman also depicts that, “[w]itnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic of trauma. It is difficult for an observer to remain clearheaded and calm”(1).

In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins agrees with Herman in considering that “[w]itnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself”(Edkins 4). Edkins states, “trauma takes place when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves

members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger”(4).

In her attempt to depict the damaging impact of repeated childhood abuse, Judith Herman compares the effect of repeated trauma on the personality of both adults and children. “Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation”(70).

Herman states that people “subjected to prolonged, repeated trauma develop an insidious, progressive form of post-traumatic stress disorder that invades and erodes the personality”(62). Herman clearly differentiates between the symptoms of a single traumatic event and that of prolonged or repeated trauma. “While the victim of a single acute trauma may feel after the event that she is “not herself,” the victim of chronic trauma may feel herself to be changed irrevocably, or she may lose the sense that she has any self at all”(62). Herman explains how “[t]he intrusive symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder also persist in survivors of prolonged, repeated trauma. But unlike the intrusive symptoms after a single acute trauma, which tend to abate in weeks or months, these symptoms may persist with little change for many years”(Herman 63). Herman states that the main “features of post-traumatic stress disorder that become most exaggerated in chronically traumatized people are avoidance or constriction. When the victim has been reduced to a goal of simple survival, psychological constriction becomes an essential form of adaptation”(63).

Hence, the person diagnosed with the condition of complex post-traumatic stress disorder c-PTSD “may experience additional symptoms” to those suffering post-traumatic stress disorder PTSD as Jayne Leonard depicts for PTSD is “generally related to a single event, while complex PTSD is related to a series of events, or one prolonged event”(1). The symptoms of c-PTSD “can be more enduring and extreme than those of PTSD”(1). Leonard names “some examples of trauma that can cause c-PTSD: experiencing childhood neglect: experiencing other types of abuse early in life”(1). Leonard states that “[p]eople with complex PTSD may experience difficulties with relationships. They tend to avoid others and may feel lack of connection”(1).

While Mathew Tull declares in “Links Between Trauma, PTSD, and Dissociative Disorders,” that there is “a connection between dissociation and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”(Tull 1) depicting that “[o]ngoing trauma, especially childhood physical, sexual, or emotional abuse and/or neglect is a very significant risk factor for the

development of dissociative disorders and is thought to be the root cause in at least 90 percent of people with these conditions”(1). Tull further states: “[i]n fact, dissociative disorders are associated with the highest frequency of childhood abuse and neglect of all psychiatric disorders” explaining the reason of his statement saying, “[i]n the setting of childhood abuse or neglect, dissociation is thought to be a self-protective survival technique in which a child (or adult) slips into dissociative state in order to escape fully experiencing trauma that is unbearable”(1). Tull maintains that “long-term trauma is a root cause of dissociative disorders, with dissociation occurring as a coping strategy that allows people to distance themselves from trauma that may otherwise be unbearable”(1). Tull finally points out the drawbacks of dissociation saying: “[w]hen dissociation continues when real danger no longer exists, however, it can prolong or even prevent recovery from abuse and neglect”(Tull 1).

Nevertheless, Herman states that in certain cases some children who are victims of childhood abuse cannot dissociate as most abused children do. “Not all abused children have the ability to alter reality through dissociation. And even those who do have this ability cannot rely upon it all the time. When it is impossible to avoid the reality of the abuse, the child must construct some system of meaning that justifies it”(Herman 75). Herman declares that

[i]nvariably the child concludes that her innate badness is the cause. The child seizes upon this explanation early and clings to it tenaciously, for it enables her to preserve a sense of meaning, hope, and power. If she is bad, then her parents are good. . . . then, if only she tries hard enough, she may some day earn their forgiveness and finally win the protection and care she so desperately needs. (75)

Herman depicts how the “profound sense of inner badness becomes the core around which the abused child’s identity is formed, and it persists into adult life”(76). Herman proceeds in showing how this

[m]alignant sense of inner badness is often camouflaged by the abused child’s persistent attempts to be good. In the effort to placate her abusers, the child victim often becomes a superb performer. She attempts to do whatever is required of her. . . . driven by the desperate need to find favor in her parents’ eyes. In adult life, this prematurely forced competence may lead to considerable occupational success. (76-77)

Nevertheless, Herman points out the devastating impact of prolonged abuse on the child in the violation of “her own moral principles”(60) as the worst damage.

Terror, intermittent reward, isolation, and enforced dependency may succeed in creating a submissive and compliant prisoner. But the final step in the psychological control of the victim is not completed until she has been forced to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments. Psychologically, this is the most destructive of all coercive techniques, for the victim who has succumbed loathes herself. It is at this point, when the victim under duress participates in the sacrifice of others, that she is truly “broken.”(Herman 60)

In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins declares that, “[f]or the child, abuse involves betrayal by the person the child should most be able to trust”(Edkins 4). Edkins agrees with Herman on the damaging impact of prolonged abuse on the child,

Our existence relies not only on our personal survival as individual beings but also, in a very peculiar sense, on the continuance of the social order that gives our existence meaning and dignity: family, friends, political community, beliefs. If that order betrays us in some way, we may survive in some way, we may survive in the sense of continuing to live as physical beings, but the meaning of our existence is changed. . . . Any illusion of safety or security is broken. (4)

Adult victims of childhood abuse are known to suffer psychological symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder. Borderline personality disorder “is a mental illness marked by an ongoing pattern of varying moods, self-image, and behavior. These symptoms often result in impulsive actions and problems in relationships”<sup>4</sup>. Leonard points out an overlap between complex PTSD and Borderline Personality Disorder BPD explaining that “the conditions may also have differences. . . . people with complex PTSD had consistently negative self-conceptions, while people with BPD had self-conceptions that were unstable and changing”(Leonard 1). BPD “is a personality disorder that typically includes the following symptoms: Inappropriate or extreme emotional reactions. Highly impulsive behaviors. A history of unstable relationships”<sup>5</sup>. The most common BPD triggers are “relationship triggers. Many people with BPD have a high sensitivity to abandonment

<sup>4</sup> “NIMH Borderline Personality Disorder,” <https://www.nimh.nih.gov>.

<sup>5</sup> “What are the traits of borderline personality disorder,” <https://www.psycom.net>

and can experience intense fear and anger, impulsivity, self-harm, and even suicidality in relationship events that make them feel rejected, criticised or abandoned.”<sup>6</sup>

Herman depicts the difficulties that patients with borderline personality disorder BPD suffer in close relationships.

Interpersonal difficulties have been described most extensively in patients with borderline personality disorder. Indeed, a pattern of intense, unstable relationships is one of the major criteria for making this diagnosis. Borderline patients find it very hard to tolerate being alone but are also exceedingly wary of others. Terrified of abandonment on the one hand and of domination, on the other, they oscillate between extremes of clinging and withdrawal, between abject submissiveness and furious rebellion. They tend to form “special” relations with idealized caretakers in which ordinary boundaries are not observed. (Herman 90)

Herman shows the destructive impact of childhood trauma on adult's life saying, “survivor's intimate relationships are driven by the hunger for protection and care and are haunted by the fear of abandonment or exploitation”(80). Herman explains that when “[i]nvariably, however, the chosen person fails to live up to her fantastic expectations. When disappointed, she may furiously denigrate the same person whom she so recently adored. Ordinary interpersonal conflicts may provoke intense anxiety, depression, or rage. In the mind of the survivor, even minor slights evoke past experiences of callous neglect, and minor hurts evoke past experiences of deliberate cruelty”(80-81).

Herman considers a healthy relationship a perfect means for the recovery of victims of childhood trauma.

The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others. Recovery, therefore, is based upon the empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy. Just as these capabilities are originally formed in relationships with other

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<sup>6</sup> “Recognizing BPD “triggers,” <https://www.borderlinrintheact.org.au>

people, they must be reformed in such relationships.  
(Herman 94)

Hence, Herman concludes saying, “[t]he first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery. Others may offer advice, support, assistance, affection, and care, but not cure”(94).

The aim of this study is to apply Judith Herman’s trauma theory to Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* in which Morrison clearly acknowledges the devastating impact of emotional abuse and neglect on victims of childhood trauma. In this novel, though Morrison represents the impact of different types of abuse on different characters, she focuses on the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect on her protagonist. The study also shows that though Morrison offers her protagonist an effective environment for healing, she does not recover until she confesses her childhood atrocity. Hence, the aim of this study is to track the childhood injuries that have been kept hidden or “stitched” by “dissociation” in an attempt to lead victims of childhood abuse to the confession of those “unspeakable” atrocities in order to begin their recovery. Judith Herman declares, “[w]hen the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom”(Herman 1). Hence, this study focuses on tracking the protagonist’s childhood atrocities showing how Morrison succeeds in offering her protagonist an effective environment for healing and a means to confession.

Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child* (2015) has been studied from the point of view of “child abuse and aesthetic relativism” by Manuela Lopez Ramirez. In “‘Racialized Beauty’: The Ugly Dickling in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” Ramirez reveals how in *God Help the Child*, Morrison “devaluates the myth of racialized beauty and materialism, stressing the need to find your own definitions and self-worth”(Ramirez 173). While in his other study “‘Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over’: Child Abuse in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*”, Manuela Lopez Ramirez points out the fact that “child abuse, racism and long-standing victimization, both domestic and communal, have been dealt with extensively in Morrison’s oeuvre”(147). Concluding that Morrison echoes her earlier work in emphasizing “the need to tackle the appalling phenomenon of child abuse, so it can be prevented”(146). The novel has also been studied as a representation of the different types of childhood abuse in *Childhood Trauma in Toni Morrison’s God Help the Child* by Sara Ramtani.

In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison represents the drastic impact of the different types of abuse on different characters. Nevertheless, she focuses on the damaging impact of emotional abuse and neglect on her protagonist. As the novel begins, Bride, the protagonist is already a successful independent woman, nevertheless, a trivial argument with Booker, the man she loves, ends their relationship and Booker leaves her. Booker's abandonment reveals another side of Bride's character; she appears to suffer as a result of her childhood atrocities. As a victim of childhood trauma, Bride has successfully managed to hide all her injuries through dissociation. The time she has spent with Booker serves as a good environment for Bride to start her recovery. Through flashback, Morrison depicts how Bride tells Booker everything about herself. Moreover, she begins to voice her "stitched" childhood injuries resulting from atrocities she has never voiced before. Nevertheless, the sudden unexpected disappearance of Booker hinders Bride's steps in the process of healing and deprives her of the proper environment for recovery. Booker's abandonment triggers in Bride deep feelings of rejection as a result of her mother's emotional abuse and neglect. Again through a series of flashback, we get to know the real burdens that Bride has buried deep in her mind. Finally, Morrison manages to lead Bride to the confession of her real trauma, the one that she could not stop blaming herself for in spite of all other injuries. Tracking and confessing her childhood atrocities finally leads her into recovery.

The novel begins and ends with the mother revealing Morrison's belief in the vital role of the parent on the child's psyche. The author's use of shifting narrative allows different characters to confess their deep feelings and thoughts. The novel begins by the mother's confession of emotional abuse and neglect of her daughter on account of her color. She then claims that it was not her fault, declaring that she had no other choice. "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 me more than an hour after they pulled her from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black"(Morrison 3). Her shuttling between feeling guilty then justifying her reaction to the color of her daughter, makes the reader wonder about the sort of treatment the mother gave to this baby as it grew up, if this was the first encounter between them. Moreover, the mother's testimony, coming in the first few pages of the book, prepares the reader to identify symptoms of c-PTSD in the daughter who is now an adult victim of emotional abuse.

The mother, “light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann’s father”(3), declares the reason behind her flawed feelings saying, “[a]in’t nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don’t go with the skin. It’s different – straight but curly like those naked tribes in Australia. You might think she’s a throwback, but throwback to what? You should’ve seen my grandmother; she passed for white”(3). The mother’s fear of having a colored child is quite clear, “I hate to say it, but from the very beginning in the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me. Her birth skin was pale . . . but it changed fast. I thought I was going crazy when she turned blue-black right before my eyes. I know I went crazy for a minute because once – just for a few seconds – I held a blanket over her face and pressed”(4-5).

The mother’s rejection was so deep that she could not nurse her child. “All I know is that for me, nursing her was like having a pickaninny sucking my teat. I went to bottle-feeding soon as I got home”(5). The mother’s denunciation is profound for she asks her daughter to call her by name. “I told her to call me ‘Sweetness’ instead of ‘Mother’ or ‘Mama.’ It was safer”(6). The mother also confesses her clear attempts in her stern upbringing of her single daughter saying, “I . . . had to be careful. Very careful in how I raised her. I had to be strict, very strict. Lula Ann needed to learn how to behave, how to keep her head down and not to make trouble. I don’t care how many times she changes her name. Her color is a cross she will always carry. But it’s not my fault. It’s not my fault. It’s not”(Morrison 7).

The mother confesses her temporary feelings of guilt towards her daughter saying, “[o]h, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about Lula Ann when she was little. But you have to understand: I had to protect her. She didn’t know the world. . . . a world where you’d be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn’t know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh or tick her”(41).

The mother also admits her awareness of injuring her only child. “I wasn’t a bad mother, you have to know that, but I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges. At first I couldn’t see past all that black to know who she was and just plain love her. But I do. I really do. I think she understands now. I think so”(43).

As the mother declares, the father’s attitude towards the color of his daughter was not better. “He wasn’t a cursing man so when he said, ‘Goddamn! What the hell is this?’ I knew we were in trouble. That’s what did it – what caused the fights between me and him. It broke our marriage to pieces. We had three good years together but when she was born he

blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was a stranger – more than that, an enemy”(5).

Like the mother, the father rejects touching the black skinned child. “He never touched her. I never did convince him that I ain’t never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness must be from his own family – not mine. That’s when it got worse, so bad he just up and left”(6). The father’s abandonment of his family on account of the mother’s accusation reveals his belief that it is shameful and humiliating to have colored roots in his family. Both parents prefer to hide behind a fair skin, both felt exposed by the birth of a colored child hence both could not cope with the baby. The color of their child entailed all the humiliation they managed to escape in their life. Both parents rejected the child. After the father’s departure, the mother states, “it was just us two for a long while and I don’t have to tell you how hard it is being an abandoned wife”(Morrison 6).

The mother’s confessions reveal her emotional abuse of her daughter.

If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn’t do or did wrong. I remember when she had her first period and how I reacted. Or the times I shouted when she stumbled or dropped something. How I screamed at her to keep her from tattling on the landlord – the dog. True, I was really upset, even repelled by her black skin when she was born and at first I thought of . . . No. I have to push those memories away – fast. No point. I know I did the best for her under the circumstances. When my husband ran out on us, Lula Ann was a burden. A heavy one but I bore it well. Yes, I was tough on her. (177-178)

Nevertheless, the mother could feel that her daughter is punishing her.

I guess I’m still the bad parent being punished forever till the day I die for doing the well-intended and, in fact, necessary way I brought her up. I know she hates me. As soon as she could she left me in that awful apartment. She got as far away from me as she could: dolled herself up and got some big-time job in California. The last time I saw her she looked so good, I forgot about her color. Still, our relationship is down to her sending me money. (177)

Here, the mother's inability to grasp the daughter's successful attempts at dissociation declaring her admiration of her daughter's new-look reveals the shallow bond between the mother and her daughter. "Last two times I saw her she was, well, striking. Kind of bold and confident. Each time she came I forget just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes"(43).

The author uses the mother as a mouth-piece of a significant confession in her warning against childhood maltreatment. "Taught me a lesson I should have known all along. What you do to children matters. And they might never forget"(Morrison 43).

As the novel begins, Bride, the daughter and protagonist is already an adult victim of childhood trauma. At the age of twenty-three, she displays symptoms of complex Post traumatic Stress Disorder (c-PTSD) as a result of the prolonged emotional abuse she faced as a child. The protagonist is at the stage of "constriction" the third cardinal stage of PTSD which reflects what Herman describes as "the numbing response of surrender"(Herman 25). In her attempts at dissociation, the protagonist first shortens her name from Lula Ann Bridewell to Lula Ann at the age of sixteen then to Bride at the age of eighteen. "But Lula Ann Bridewell is no longer available and she was never a woman. Lula Ann was sixteen-year-old-me who dropped that dumb countryfied name as soon as I left high school. I was Ann Bride for two years until I interviewed for a sales job at Sylvia, Inc., and, on a hunch, shortened my name to Bride"(Morrison 11).

Bride admits her successful steps towards dissociation, "thinking, 'How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?'"(11). Bride totally changes her look following Jeri's advice who calls "himself a 'total person' designer"(33). Bride obeys Jeri's intent advice concerning her outfit before her interview at Sylvia, Inc., "You should always wear white, Bride. Only white and all white all the time. . . . Not only because of your name. . . . Makes people think of whipped cream and chocolate soufflé every time they see you. . . . Or Oreos?"(33). Jeri maintains "don't forget: no makeup. Not even lipstick or eyeliner. None"(34). He finally recommends, "[n]o jewelry at all. Pearl dot earrings, maybe. No. Not even that. Just you, girl"(34).

Bride declares, "I took his advice and it worked. Everywhere I went I got double takes but not like the faintly disgusted ones I used to get as a kid. These were adoring looks, stunned but hungry"(34). Jeri insists that "[b]lack sells. It's the hottest commodity in the civilized world"(36). Bride declares that his advice "[t]rue or not, it made me, remade me. I began to move differently – not a strut, not that pelvis-out rush of the runway – but a stride, slow and focused"(Morrison 36).

Moreover, Bride confesses, "Jeri had given me the name for a product line. YOU, GIRL"(34).

Though Bride successfully dissociates herself from her childhood atrocities, she clearly suffers symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD) after receiving a new blow from the man she loves; this triggers her childhood atrocities of being unwelcomed and rejected. Booker's abandonment after a petty argument triggers in Bride memories of unwelcomed past injuries. Suddenly the reader discovers that Bride's dissociated image conceals "stitched" childhood injuries of past atrocities. Bride meditates how "her life was in shambles because of him. The pieces of it that she had stitched together: personal glamour, control in an exciting even creative profession, sexual freedom and most of all a shield that protected her from any overly intense feeling, be it rage, embarrassment or love"(79).

Booker leaves the place in the middle of a silly argument claiming that Bride is not the woman he wants. Bride's injury at his abandonment after six month of a warm relationship is clear, "I'm scared. Something bad is happening to me. I feel like I'm melting away. I can't explain it to you but I do know when it started. It began after he said, 'you not the woman I want'"(8).

Booker's words as well as his sudden unexpected disappearance awaken in Bride unwelcomed feelings of rejection, insecurity, and humiliation that she suffered as a child. Moreover, the injury of his humiliating words as misunderstood by Bride to be insulting also stimulate her past feelings of the unworthy black child she has been trying to hide deep under the guise of success and prestige.

Booker's abandonment arouses in Bride similar feelings of rejection as a child, hence, recalling childhood atrocities. "Without him the world was more than confusing – shallow, cold, deliberately hostile. Like the atmosphere in her mother's house where she never knew the right thing to do or say or remember what the rules were. . . . What were the rules and when did they change?"(Morrison 78). Bride complains about his cruelty, "[h]ow could he? Why would he leave her stripped of all comfort, emotional security?"(79).

Bride's attitude to Booker's abandonment shows that she suffers symptoms of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). First her thoughts show lack of self-confidence. "What? I'm not exciting enough? Or pretty enough? I can't have thoughts of my own? Do things he doesn't approve of"(8). Then she states her feelings "when I heard the door slam I wondered for a split second if he was not just ending our silly argument,

but ending us, our relationship. Couldn't be"(8). Her switching mood is clear. "By morning soon as I woke up I was furious. Glad he was gone because clearly he was just using me since I had money and a crotch. I was so angry. I was so angry"(8). Bride describes the impact of his abrupt decision to leave on her, the severe injury of his words and the feelings they triggered. "How he hit me harder than a fist with six words: You not the woman I want. How they rattled me so I agreed with them. So stupid"(10). Here Morrison implies that the impact of verbal abuse on Bride is similar to physical abuse, triggering traumatic feelings of rejection.

Nevertheless, Bride's switching mood is clear; first she agrees saying, "[m]aybe he is right. I am not the woman. When he left I shook it off and pretended it didn't matter"(32). Then asking herself, "so why am I still sad?" and suddenly on an "impulse I open the medicine cabinet and take out his shaving brush. . . . I splash water and rinse my face. The satisfaction that follows is so so sweet. . . . when I feel depressed the cure is tucked away in a little kit where his shaving equipment is"(34-35). The action itself again reveals symptoms of BPD. The damaging impact of Booker's abandonment is clear, "I can't keep thinking about him. And I'm stir-crazy slouching around these rooms. Too much light, too much space, too lonely"(38).

Bride's confession about the nature of the relationship reveals again signs of BPD. "I told him every single thing about myself; he confided nothing. . . . I didn't really care"(11). Bride complains about Booker's abrupt leaving: "he didn't understand why I was so set on going the night when we quarreled about my promise, he ran off"(12). However, Booker's abandonment of Bride comes after she declares her decision to reconcile with Sofia, a reconciliation which he cannot understand in the context of his own trauma resulting from losing his brother because of similar atrocities.

The second serious blow that Bride receives is the physical abuse she gets from a woman called Sofia Huxley whose meeting was the reason for her argument with Booker. Bride goes to meet Sofia the day of the latter's release from prison. Bride contemplates the difference in attitude that Sofia displays once she learns that Bride was the child who testified against her at the courtroom. Sofia's violent attack resulted in Bride's severe physical injury. "She really was a freak. Sofia Huxley. The quick change from obedient ex-con to raging alligator. . . . I never saw the signal. . . . Nothing announced her attack on me. I'll never forget it, and even if I tried to, the scars, let alone the shame, wouldn't let me"(Morrison 29). Nevertheless, Bride recalls: "I wasn't the only witness, the only one who turned Sofia Huxley into 0071140. There was

lots of other testimony about her molestations. At least four other kids were witnesses. I didn't hear what they said but they were shaking and crying when they left the courtroom. The social worker and psychologist who coached us put their arms around them, whispering, 'You'll be fine. You did great.' Neither one hugged me but they smiled at me"(30). Though Bride remembers how the social worker and psychologist smiled at her, she cannot help recalling feelings of rejection and neglect.

Comparing the damaging impact of recent atrocities, Booker's abandonment and Sofia's attack, Bride bitterly meditates, "I'm not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave"(38). Bride's "response to physical attack was no less cowardly than her reaction to a sudden, unexplained break-up. . . . Both confirmed her helplessness in the presence of confounding cruelty"(79).

Bride is trapped in her memories and unable to act. Her childhood memories seem to form an obstacle in her process of recovery. She herself realizes that "[m]emory is the worst thing about healing"(29), revealing how far a recent injury results in recalling past injuries for victims of childhood trauma.

Though Booker's abandonment and Sofia's attack triggers in Bride the severe childhood injuries of her mother's emotional abuse and neglect that she has managed to hide through dissociation, Bride's relationship to Booker proves to be a good environment for healing. During the six months of their relationship, she confides in him and tells him everything about most of her childhood atrocities. She tells him about her mother's rejection and disgust. Bride's injury as a result of the mother's emotional abuse is clear. "Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth"(Morrison 31). Bride further states, "I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her mouth. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated – bed without supper, lock me in my room – but her screaming at me was the worst"(31).

Bride confides in Booker all her childhood atrocities. She recalls complaining about her mother's rejection due to her black skin, "she recalled an exchange she once had with Booker. Complaining about her mother, she told him that Sweetness hated her for her black skin"(143). Booker's comprehension and consideration soothes her. "'It's just a color,' Booker had said. 'A genetic trait – not a flaw, not a curse, not a blessing nor a sin'"(143). But when Bride refers to the racial aspect of the color, "Booker cut her off. 'Scientifically there's no such thing as race,

Bride, so racism without race is a choice. Taught, of course, by those who need it, but still a choice. Folks who practice it would be nothing without it”(143). Bride is pacified by his reasonable explanation she believes that his “words were rational and, at the time, soothing but had little to do with day-to-day experience”(143).

The damaging impact of childhood atrocities on Bride is clear. Not only does Bride suffer c-PTSD as a result of childhood atrocities of being a victim of emotional abuse and neglect from her mother due to her color, she also endures the burden of a silenced testimony of witnessing a child’s sexual abuse at the age of six as well as the burden of a false testimony at the age of eight.

In *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Edkins agrees with Herman in considering that “[w]itnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself”(Edkins 4). Bride tells Booker about the burden of witnessing a child’s sexual abuse when she was six years old and that her mother warned her of ever speaking about it. “All about it. My hearing a cat’s meow through the open window, how pained it sounded, frightened, even. I looked. . . . I saw not a cat but a man. He was leaning over the short, fat legs of a child . . . . The boy’s little hands were fists, opening and closing. His crying was soft, squeaky and loaded with pain”(Morrison 54). Bride recalls her mother’s neglect of her feelings as well as her power of silencing the truth,

when I told Sweetness what I’d seen, she was furious. Not about a little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn’t interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment. She said, ‘Don’t you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word.’ So I was afraid to tell her the rest – that although I didn’t make a sound, I just hung over the windowsill and stared, something made the man look up. And it was Mr. Leigh. (54-55)

Bride also recalls the man’s verbal abuse when he discovered that she saw him. “The look on his face scared me but I couldn’t move. That’s when I heard him shout, ‘Hey, little nigger.....’”(55). Bride later understands the reason behind her mother’s attitude. “I know now what I didn’t know then – that standing up to Mr. Leigh meant having to look for another apartment”(54).

Unlike her mother, Booker understands and manages to reach out for Bride. “When I told Booker about it. . . . I felt my eyes burning. Even before the tears welled, he helled my head in the crook of his arm and pressed his chin in my hair”(55). Confessing to Booker that she has never

told anybody about what she saw after her mother's silencing, Booker reassures Bride that the more people know the truth, the better it is for the welfare of humanity. "Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand,"(Morrison 55). Booker offers Bride the support and encouragement she needs, "you're not responsible for other folks' evil. . . . Correct what you can; learn from what you can't"(55-56). Booker's declaration about his idea of memory reveals his insight: "[n]o matter how hard we try to ignore it, the mind always knows truth and wants clarity"(56). Bride's feeling after their talk reveals a step towards recovery. "That was one of the best talks we ever had. I felt such relief. No. More than that. I feel curried, safe, owned"(56).

Bride recalls the burden of her false testimony after Sofia's attack. In a flashback, Bride recalls, "I was only eight years old, still little Lula Ann, when I lifted my arm and pointed my finger at her"(30). Bride remembers the woman's shock at her testimony. "Mrs. Huxley stared at me then opened her mouth as though about to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But my finger still pointed, pointed so long the lady prosecutor had to touch my hand and say, 'Thank you, Lula,' to get me to put my arm down"(31).

Bride remembers people's positive reaction after the testimony. "Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me, and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up"(31).

Bride recalls the impact of her false testimony on her mother "I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before – with mouth and eyes"(31). After the testimony, Bride admits, "[b]est of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell"(31).

Nevertheless, Bride's recollection of the reason behind her false testimony reveals the devastating impact of prolonged childhood abuse on her. "When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved"(31-32). This recalls Herman's claim of how the "profound sense of inner badness becomes the core around which the abused child's identity is formed"(Herman 76) adding that this "[m]alignant sense of inner badness is often camouflaged by the abused child's persistent attempts to be good. . . . She attempts to do whatever is required of her. . . . driven by the desperate need to find favor in her parents' eyes"(Herman 76-77). Bride proceeds saying,

“[f]rightened as I was to appear in court, I did what the teacher-psychologists expected of me. Brilliantly, I know, because after the trial Sweetness was kind of motherlike”(Morrison 32). Hence, Herman’s declaration that the devastating impact of prolonged abuse on the child is clear. Herman states that the worst psychological damage of prolonged abuse on the child is “to violate her own moral principles and to betray her basic human attachments”(60) and that is psychologically “the most destructive of all. . . . It is at this point . . . that she is truly “broken”(60).

The mother’s reaction to the whole incident is different. Sweetness does not know that Bride lied in her testimony on the contrary, she is proud of the daughter’s performance at court. Moreover, she believes that her stern and stiff upbringing of Bride is an advantage that helped Bride to stand up and point at the criminal. “But the lessons I taught her paid off because in the end she made proud. . . . It was the case with that gang of pervert teachers – three of them, a man and two women – that she knocked it out of the park. Young as she was, she behaved like a grown-up on the witness stand”(41-42).

Before the testimony, the mother recalls how strained she was lest Bride would fail her. “I was nervous thinking she would stumble getting up to the stand, or stutter, or forget what the psychologists said and put me to shame”(42). Comparing her daughter’s testimony to that of the other children, the mother states, “[s]he looked scared but she stayed quiet, not like the other child witnesses fidgeting and whining. Some were even crying”(42).

After the testimony, the mother recalls her pride in the daughter’s performance. “After Lula Ann’s performance in that court and on the stand I was so proud of her, we walked in the streets hand in hand. It’s not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites. I wanted her to know how pleased I was so I had her ears pierced and bought her a pair of earrings – tiny gold hoops”(42-43).

Desperate after recalling her devastating feelings of childhood injuries, Bride bitterly recalls her helplessness all over her life and decides to show courage for once in her life. “Too weak, too scared to defy Sweetness, or the landlord, or Sofia Huxley, there was nothing in the world left to do but stand up for herself finally and confront the first man she had bared her soul to. . . . It would take courage though, something that, being successful in her career, she thought she had plenty of”(Morrison 79-80).

Bride’s decision to look for Booker and confront him reveal her severe injury as a result of the damaging feelings that his abandonment triggered in her. “The reason for this tracking was not love, she knew; it was more hurt than anger that made her drive into unknown territory to

locate the one person she once trusted, who made her feel safe, colonized somehow”(78).

Bride's decision to track Booker and confront him is an attempt to confront all her childhood atrocities. “Except for Sylvia, Inc., and Booker, she felt she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life. Booker was the one person she was able to confront – which was the same as confronting herself, standing up for herself. Wasn't she worth something? Anything?”(98). Bride concludes her reasons for tracking Booker as to “force him to explain why she didn't deserve better treatment from him, and second, what did he mean by ‘not the woman?’”(80).

Bride's confrontation of Booker reveals a step towards healing. “You walked out on me. . . . Without a word! Nothing! Now I want that word. Whatever it is I want to hear it. Now!”(153), Booker's response is a direct hit on Bride's deep childhood atrocity. “First tell me why bought presents for a child molester – in prison for it, for Christ's sake. Tell me why you sucked up to a monster”(153). Her honest confession about her lying reveals her inability to continue hiding the heavy burden she silently suffered from all her life. “I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do any of that. I wanted to make amends but she beat the crap out of me and I deserved it. . . . I was trying to make up to someone I ruined”(153-154).

Bride's straightforward confession about the real reason for her false testimony is an effective step at recovery. She explains the reason for her lie saying, “[s]o my mother would hold my hand. . . . And look at me with proud eyes, for once. . . . She even liked me”(Morrison 153-154). As Herman points out the “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. . . . When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom”(Herman 1).

After the confession of her burden, Bride falls asleep in her chair “her chin pointing toward her chest, her long legs splayed. . . . Bride moaned, but did not wake”(Morrison 154-155). The deep and long sleep is a sign of Bride's recovery who “woke in sunshine from a dreamless sleep – deeper than drunkenness, deeper than any she had known. Now having slept so many hours she felt more than rested and free of tension; she felt strong”(161). By proclaiming her childhood atrocity, Bride has finally got rid of the burden of the false testimony she kept silent about all

her life. “Having confessed Lula Ann’s sins she felt newly born. No longer forced to relive, no, outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father”(162).

As Herman depicts, “[t]he first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor”(Herman 94). Bride’s final decision to tell Booker about her pregnancy reveals her empowerment and recovery. “Bride took a deep breath before breaking into the deathly silence. Now or never, she thought. ‘I’m pregnant,’ she said in a clear, calm voice. . . . I’m pregnant and it’s yours”(Morrison 174). Booker’s understanding and encouragement further empowers Bride after her recovery. “With just a hint of a smile he turned around to look again at Bride. ‘No,’ he said. ‘It’s ours.’ Then he offered her the hand she had craved all her life. The hand that did not need a lie to deserve it, the hand of trust and caring for – a combination that some call natural love”(174-175).

Judith Herman depicts the attitude of survivors of childhood abuse towards their children saying “the great majority of survivors neither abuse nor neglect their children. Many survivors are terribly afraid that their children will suffer a fate similar to their own, and they go to great lengths to prevent this from happening. (Herman 81-82). As “each of them began to imagine what the future would certainly be”(Morrison 175), it becomes clear how both Bride and Booker are determined on the sort of future they will offer to their child. “A child. New life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insults, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment, Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath. So they believe.”(175).

Unlike Bride and Booker, who have both managed to recover their childhood atrocities and are ready to offer their child a safe, healthy and nurturing environment, the mother’s bitter thoughts after reading Bride’s letter announcing her pregnancy does not reveal any sign of hope. “Now she’s pregnant. Good move, Lula Ann. If you think mothering is all cooing, booties and diapers you’re in for a big shock. Big”(178). The mother’s meditative advice seems to be directed to every mother or caregiver. “Listen to me. You are about to find out what it takes, how the world is, how it works and how it changes when you are a parent”(178).

Morrison’s final novel *God Help the Child* is a real warning that “[w]hat you do to children matters. And they might never forget”(43). In this novel, Toni Morrison clearly recognizes how the impact of emotional abuse and neglect of children is as damaging as other forms of child abuse. Though emotional abuse and neglect are difficult to prove, the harmful impact on the child and the damaging long-term effects that extend to adult life are severe. Morrison points out the devastating psychological symptoms of complex post-traumatic stress disorder (c-

PTSD) as well as borderline personality disorder (BPD) that the protagonist suffers as a result of her mother's treatment in an attempt to emphasize the role of the mother on the child's psyche. Her warning against the maltreatment of children aims to put an end to all forms of childhood abuse. Morrison clearly shows that all forms of childhood abuse are still pervasive regardless of gender, color or social class. Nevertheless, Morrison acknowledges the crucial but rarely studied form of psychological maltreatment in focusing on the emotional abuse and neglect of her protagonist revealing its long-term and damaging effect. Morrison, however, is not pessimistic for she offers her reader the effective means of her protagonist's recovery. By offering Bride a proper environment to heal and showing that the success in the process of recovery demands confessing real injuries, Morrison manages to reclaim her protagonist's future. Finally, Morrison ends her book with a prayer for every child. "Good luck and God help the child"(Morrison 178).

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