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**Research Paper**

**Childhood Trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*  
(2015)**

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the Requirement For a **Master Degree in English Language, Literature, and Civilization**

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GOD  
HELP  
*the*  
CHILD

*a novel*

TONI  
MORRISON

WINNER OF THE NOBEL PRIZE

## **Dedication**

I lovely dedicate this work to the most amazing people in my life; my beautiful parents, my sweet brother, sisters, uncles, aunts, cousins and friends.

## **Acknowledgement**

The greatest thank goes to the Almighty God (Allah) who granted me this chance to accomplish writing this humble thesis. Gratitude and deep gratefulness are attended to my parents who ingrained in me the love of studies and make it an inseparable part of my life. It would have been impossible for me to create this work alone without their encouragement and support and special, warm and great thank to my Mother who supported my moments of depression and overstress. Also, many thanks go to the most lovely teacher I have ever met, my dear supervisor Ms. Assia Mohdeb. I thank her for her care, her friendship and her handiness in supervising and guiding me. A special thank also goes to my maternal family who raised me and gave me the best education and support when I most needed it. Still, as a student I had an opportunity to meet honorable friends. Thus, I would like to warmly thank my best and beloved friend Badder Eddine for his encouragement and his belief in my capacities when I was down. I thank also my friends, Youssef and Diana for their share in creating a crazy and unforgettable moments during my five years at university. I also thank my English friend Sanifra for her confidence and saying 'you can do it Sara'. Thanks to everyone who has contributed in a way or another in the production of this thesis, specifically to all the teachers of our English department and Miss Slimi.

## **Abstract**

This present research work undertakes an analysis of the representation of childhood trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) by drawing attention to the characters' past experiences of distress and anguish and their weight upon the present. It mainly concentrates on the analysis of the psychology of characters subjected to childhood molestation and abuse, capitalizing their shortcoming in nurturing sound bearings with their environment and the people surrounding them. The work attests to the physical and emotional oppression worked out upon children all around the world and strives to investigate alternative modes of thought and behavior in dealing with children. The research dwells upon Judith Herman theoretical insights into the phenomenon of trauma focusing on the notion of intrusion and borderline personality disorder ensuing from trauma experiences.

Key words: Toni Morrison, God Help the Child, Trauma Theory, Judith Herman, Intrusion, Borderline Personality Disorder

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## General Introduction

“Do not ask me who I am and do not ask me to remain the same”

(Lisa Downing 1, the Cambridge Introduction to

Michel Foucault, 2008).

The present research is a reading of childhood trauma in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the child* in the light of Judith Herman’s approach to trauma theory. One point of focus in this analysis is the representation of the harrowing experience of trauma the novel’s characters endure and the strategies they espouse to get over it. Accordingly, leafing through the traumatic experiences the children characters have gone through in the novel and their long term effects on their psychological well being, the present work associates sanity and full personality development with sane childhood and presupposes that the child, to import William Wordsworth expression, is the father of man. Burdened by the phenomenon of childhood trauma, Toni Morrison’s authorial voice, as it will be shown throughout this analysis, reverberates to shake human hearts to refrain from the practice of childhood molestation.

African American literature battles to assert the black Americans’ history and identity that were dashed by the American whites. Prior to the American Civil War, this literature revolves around the topic of slavery explored in the common genre of slave narratives and manifested in the works of Oulaudah Equiano, Frederick Douglass, and Harriet Jacobs among others. The content of African American literature changes as the black history in America changes, especially, in the twentieth century when this literature is recognized and becomes an inevitable part of the American literary canon. During and following the decade of the Civil Rights Movement, African-American literature has treated the Blacks’ experiences of racism, segregation, and racial

prejudices in an unjust American society. Still, new themes such as childhood trauma which have emerged in the decade of the seventies and onward in the works of such eminent writers like Maya Angelou, Alice Walker, Walter Moseley, and Toni Morrison.

In African-American context and literature, the theme of childhood trauma has struck the attention of great deal of feminist writers who make this subject a serious focus of their works. Indeed, the concern with the topic can be accounted for by the writers' firsthand experience of trauma or their professional activist commitment to the social ills of their society and community. In her autobiography entitled *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1970), Maya Angelou recounts her childhood trauma of rape and neglect. Similarly, in her novel *The Color Purple* (1982), Alice walker tells mainly the incest story of her black protagonist, Celie, and her subjugation to many abuses, showing the phenomenon of childhood abuse circulating the black community and gaining ground among the black female figures.

Toni Morrison, though black political, social and historical issues take the lion part in her texts, is hampered by the theme of childhood and child abuse. She deals with this question profoundly that she makes it her mission to show the world how destructive this act of childhood abuse is to the victims' psyche as well as to the community's stability, steadiness, and progress. Indeed, from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *God Help the Child* (2015), Morrison endeavors to communicate the suffering of a hundred if not thousands of children under abuse and molestation. She strongly insists on the emergency of recognizing the devastating effects of this phenomenon at the same time requests protection to these children. Accordingly, her recent novel, *God Help the Child*, is a graphic painting of years of neglect and abuse inflicted in childhood.

The present study interprets *God Help the Child* through using Judith Herman's trauma theory as explained in her book, *Trauma and Recovery* (1992). The present analysis looks into *God Help the Child* as an embodiment of Judith Herman's ideas on the role of childhood trauma in structuring adult life. The aim of this investigation is to show how childhood trauma influences adulthood choices and the building of human identity. In this way, this research foregrounds neglect and sexual abuse as two categories of childhood trauma clearly delineated in the text under study and shows how they affect the characters' psychological stability and social relationships.

The choice of this research stems from a personal interest in trauma theory and reading Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, where the experiences of Morrison's two black children Beloved and Denver greatly affected me. Furthermore, I believe that literature is a socially committed action against the evils and ills of society. So, moved by the phenomenon of child abuse and children's theft which has recently gone unchecked in our Algerian society and still underway, I find it necessary to look into and investigate the theme of childhood abuse and trauma in contemporary literary texts. Moreover, having a strong interest in Africa and African-American history and literature, while discussing *Beloved* with a social network group, I have been introduced and handed a copy of *God Help the Child* which I chose to be my case study of the phenomenon of childhood trauma. With *God Help the Child* in hand, the following questions crossed my mind: can the fictional characters' experiences of trauma in the text be embodied in real life? Can childhood experiences affect adult life?

## **Review of Literature**

Despite its recentness, Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* has received a considerable amount of criticism. The critics involved embody various positions

on the critical spectrum. In an article entitled, “Musings on Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*” (2015), the sociologist Elizabeth Hordge-Freeman argues that the novel is about skin color privileges and childhood traumas, writing “What is only more disturbing than the traumas that she (Morrison) wrenches us through is the possibility that the heinous traumas that she portrays might be real”(online). Freeman also compares *God Help the Child* to her first text *The Color of Love* released in the same year (2015) , analyzing the theme of trauma typical of the two texts, suggesting “in direct dialogue with Morrison’s idea, my book, *The [Color of Love](#)* offers a sociological and theoretical analysis of the themes, relationships, and family dynamics that have always been part of Morrison’s repertoire since her first book, *[The Bluest Eye](#)*”. What is different is that I explore the resistance and reproduction of racism in black families in Brazil...” (online) Freeman thought that this literary piece from an author like Morrison could mean only one thing “the kiss of death to my book”, thus, calling Morrison a “thunder”, because according to her Morrison has easily communicated in 150 pages what she could not finish in 350 pages (online).

Additionally, in her thesis entitled *Child Abuse in Toni Morrison’s Fiction* (2016) a research scholar R.M Prabha analyses *God Help the Child’s* major characters’ traumatic experiences with childhood abuse which breed the atmosphere of gloom and grief in the novel, declaring that “Morrison portrays many child victims to intensify the gloomy mood in the novel” (25). Prabha names Toni Morrison an “Author for children” (27) because child abuse in her fiction becomes dangerous and calls the reader “to bear a good responsibility to protect vulnerable children” (27).

Though this essay refers to the most important points related to childhood abuse in the analysis of *God Help the Child*, my thesis differs in that it is concerned with

investigating the phenomenon and its damage of the characters' social and intimate relationships using Judith Herman's trauma theory.

In another thesis entitled, *What You Do to Children Matters: Toxic Motherhood in Toni Morrison's God Help the Child* (2015), Manuela Lopez Ramirez analyses the theme of child abuse in *God Help the Child* by looking into the phenomenon of the abusive mothering impact upon children. Ramirez describes the black mother's (Sweetness) failure in her task as a mother to Lula Ann in the novel and how that affects the protagonist adult life in the long term. Ramirez writes that "Sweetness, with her ironic name, rears Lula Ann in a patriarchal authoritarian way; Lula Ann grows up bereft of affection and love, which destroys the mother-daughter bond" (113). She also shows Morrison's commitment to overcome this issue by envisioning a hopeful future in the young protagonist's (Lula Ann) mothering.

Still, in a PhD thesis entitled, *Polyphony of Morrison's God Help the Child* (2016), Jihan Zayad makes a structural analysis of the novel relying on Mikhail Bakhtin's parameters of polyphony. She claims that the novel is multi-voiced and identifies each character's childhood trauma showing how "Morrison has woven in one tale of the protagonist, Bride, many other stories that are reverberating with too much human life. The characters in Bride's life have their own pain, trauma, death, cheat, love, and losses" (37). Zayad comes up with the idea that Morrison builds an optimistic result for the trauma history relating this same idea to Bakhtin's says that "[T]rauma can be overcome, scars can mutate into beauty spots, life can be remade." As Bakhtin, Toni Morrison confirms that truth is not fixed but varies according to perspective" (41).

As the author Jihan Zayad has demonstrated, the novel is multi-voiced and the children characters in it have undergone many horrible abuses, but the most important thing that should be highlighted is what these traumas caused to the characters' psyche

and how it shook their lives, an issue that will be analyzed more through Judith Herman's psychological ideas on trauma.

Unsurprisingly, *God Help the Child* has received much attention of great deal of critics, who all agree that the novel is all about child abuse. What is strange is that none of the analyses have reviewed the psychological ideas on the post traumatic relationships of the characters in the novel. Thus, I opt for this interpretation in my thesis to fill the gaps and demonstrate that trauma is not a simple matter of neglect and rape; rather, it is a wound that keeps burning all the life along.

In terms of structure, this thesis is divided into an introduction, three separated chapters and a conclusion. The introduction hems around the theme of childhood trauma in African-American literature, with a particular focus on Morrison's literary works. The first chapter entitled "Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*: Text in Context" relates the novel to its historical background and literary context. It encompasses the narrative techniques, the plot summary, and the historical context of the novel as well as the author's biography.

The second chapter introduces Judith Herman's trauma theory as a continuation of Freud's works in the field. It provides the reader with the new meaning and discoveries in the trauma studies and introduces more specified terminology associated with the field.

The third chapter entitled Reading *God Help the Child* through Judith Herman's Trauma Theory interprets childhood trauma present in Morrison's text relying on Judith Herman's analysis of the issue. The chapter, first, reviews the topic of child abuse in literature, then moves to its manifestation in African-American context and ultimately its graphic staging in Morrison's *God Help the Child*.

## Chapter One

### Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*: Text in Context

#### Introduction

“I will use what I have seen and what I have known but it’s never about my life” (Morrison, qtn. in Li Stephanie, xiii).

The black American history and cultural heritage are Toni Morrison’s primary source of inspiration. Her novels including *The Bluest Eye* (1970); *Sula* (1977); *Beloved* (1987); *A Mercy* (2006) among others reveal the author’s will to revisit and thus inscribe her race stories of inter and intra relationships, the narratives of slavery, and bigotry and the issues of deprivation and oppression the black community has always endured in white America. Her last novel, *God Help the Child*, published in 2015, foregrounds two important epochs in the American history; the first concerns the inter-racism characteristic of America in the times of slavery, represented in the novel through the character of Sweetness; and the second is the contemporary American society where blackness represents beauty, also represented in the text through the black protagonist, Bride. The present chapter entitled “Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*: Text in Context” studies Morrison’s *God Help the Child* by relating it to its historical and literary context. The chapter brings to light the major historical events the text is aware of or that may have influenced its writing and the different literary techniques the author

deploys to structure the narrative. Besides, it provides a short biography of the author and a short synopsis of her novel, *God Help the Child*.

## **1. Summary of the Novel**

*God Help the Child* is Toni Morrison's latest novel published in 2015. As a whole, the novel carries on a discussion on Morrison's major themes in her well-known works as racial bigotry, black skin color and center-periphery relationships. It is also, as the title indicates, about childhood and the way to confront childhood past ghosts to better reclaim the present and the future. The story of the novel revolves around Lula Ann Bridewell, Morrison's black protagonist, born to lightened skin parents, the father Louis and the mother Sweetness. As a dark baby girl, Lula Ann Bridewell was refused by her father and hated by her mother because of her black epidermal signs. Indeed, the child's dark skin embarrassed the mother to the extent that she obliges the daughter to tell her Sweetness instead of mom. She even tried once to kill her by pressing a blanket on her face, and withholds any kind of affection and love for her.

Years after leaving her mother's house, Lula Ann changes her name to Bride and works as a regional manager of "YOU GIRL", a line in a cosmetic company. She also entered into a romantic relationship with a guy named Booker Starbern who becomes the life for her. In the course of the story and through a series of flashbacks, we learn that as a child, Bride accused her innocent young teacher, Sofia Huxley, of child molestation at a court trial, and fifteen years later, to amend this terrible childhood lie, Bride has prepared many gifts and goes to visit Sofia Huxley who has just been released on parole. Yet, it is impossible for Sofia Huxley to welcome the person who once put her behind bars; her only relief is beating Bride until bleeding. Believing that Bride

sympathizes with Sofia Huxley, a child molester, Booker Starbarn, Bride's lover, puts an end to their relationships and leaves Bride alone.

The book becomes more challenging with the reference to another child character's story of molestation, named Adam. Adam is Booker's oldest and closest brother. When they were children, Adam had been sexually abused then killed by a man referred to in the text as 'the nicest man in the world. Booker was deeply touched by this incident and becomes obsessed by his brother's death. In addition to Booker's, Adam's and Bride's childhood ghosts, the narrative introduces other characters who suffered childhood trauma. These include Hannah, Rain and Brooklyn.

Feeling the absence of Booker, Bride sets out on a journey of search for him, which takes her from the urban city of California to a rural valley in an unknown forest. The journey was fraught with physical and emotional hardships; the protagonist broke her leg in the middle of her journey and took refuge until healing in a house owned by Steve and Evelyn. However, Bride carries out her search for Booker, and finally, to meet him in Whisky valley and together they rescued his aunt, Q. Olive, from fire. Booker and Bride reconciled and confessed to each other their past secrets: Bride confesses that Huxley was innocent and the lie she told was for some reason and Booker, in his turn, tells her that he has left her because he thought she forgives a child molester like the one who once abused and killed his brother Adam. Still, Bride makes another confession telling Booker that she is pregnant. The couple accepts the child to come to the world and plan for a better future. The novel closes by making references to the regrets Bride's mother, Sweetness, feels and suggests on the abandonment of children and the scars left in their memories.

## 2. Toni Morrison's Biography

Toni Morrison is one of the influential African American writers in contemporary literature. Morrison intervenes in black-African American literary tradition and activates in worldwide American literature. She displayed an early interest in literature even before her formal school: Morrison's parents; George Wofford and Ramah Willis have ingrained love and respect for the black cultural heritages and values in their children telling them about Africa and Africans. Also, her grandparents, Ardelia and John Solomon Willis, introduced her to stories about Post-Reconstruction South and the great migration.

Toni Morrison, born Cloe Anthony Wofford 1931 in Lorain Ohio, attended Latin and English class in Lorain high school from where she graduated with honor in 1949. She then joined Howard University where she changed her name to Toni and graduated with a B.A in 1953. In 1955, Morrison completed her master's degree in English from Cornell University; New York, writing a thesis on works of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Morrison's graduation has been followed by a prestigious academic career. She taught in different universities as Princeton, Texas Southern University and Howard. She also worked as an editor in Random House in Syracuse. Morrison and her Jamaican architect husband, Harold Morrison, were met at Howard University. The couple married in 1958 and had two children Harold Ford and Slade Kevin, but divorced in 1964. As a result of this breakup and as a remedy to her loneliness, Morrison started writing more seriously to become a giant novelist in the American literary history.

Morrison has written and published eleven novels and has received several of highly and respected literary awards. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye*, published in 1970, tells the story of a young black girl, Pecola, who desires to have blue eyes. *The Bluest Eye* was followed by *Sula* (1973) which was nominated for National Book award. Morrison has

received The National Book Critic Circle and the American Academy Institute of Arts and Letters award for her 1977 novel, *Song of Solomon*. *Tar Baby*, another novel of hers, was released in 1981.

Morrison is the first African American and eighth American woman to win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993 for the historical novel that many consider to be her greatest piece, *Beloved* 1987. *Jazz* was Morrison's sixth novel appeared in 1992 and *Paradise* followed in 1997. Subsequent novels are *Love* in 2003 and *A Mercy* in 2008. Still, *Home* was published in 2012 which is thought to be Morrison's last work but the eighty fourth year old novelist has no intention of slowing down. *God Help the Child*, the author's newest novel set in our contemporary times, was published in 2015.

In addition to Morrison's eleven novels, a work of criticism entitled *Playing in the Dark: whiteness and the literary imagination*, was published in 1992. She had also edited a collection of essays and released several children books with her son Slade including *Who Got the Game?*, *Remember*; a journey of black students to School Integration published in 2004 and which won Coretta Scott King Book Award. She also wrote *Libretto* in 2005, an opera about the same story that inspired *Beloved*. Morrison has recently received a life time achievement award from the PEN American center.

### **3. Historical Context of *God Help the Child***

#### **3.1. The Middle Passage**

As an essential event in the history of African-Americans, the Middle Passage is a metaphor for the transplantation of African-Americans from Africa into America where their story of slavery and racial segregation started. On the surface, the expression, the Middle Passage, refers to the triangular trade through which manufactured goods and guns are transported from England into Africa, in return of vessels filled with African captives sold to white masters to toil the American lands and send the profits back to England. Indeed, for some

guns and luxurious goods, the African leaders of different coastal tribes contribute in the kidnapping and accept to submit their sons and brothers, and even women and children to the greedy European traders. The dark voyage to America is full of danger, pain, torture, abuse, suicide and death. During this voyage, Africans are kidnapped and put like sardines into shipboard, chained, tight and starved (Kachur 14 & 50). The most fortunate reach the Americas and enter into the life of slavery, working in the plantations under the cruel white masters' control, whereas the others die before, in the ocean and become the sharps' food.

In the early centuries of the slave trade, the Africans were sold to the Spanish and South American sugarcane planters. However, Black Slavery in the British thirteen colonies known today as United States of America began with the twenty Africans brought by a Dutch captain and sold in Jamestown; Virginia in 1619, and continued until the end of the United States' Civil War (1865). At the beginning, the black population was in slow growth; Slaves were expensive because the Dutch and the Portuguese dominated the Atlantic slave trade. In 1664 Britain won the war against the Dutch and annexed New York. It now controls the African slave trade (Davis, 124).

### **3.2. Slavery in America**

Racial slavery started about 1680's when millions of Africans were brought to America to recover the labor shortage faced the Southern plantations of the thirteen English colonies know today U.S, where they grow tobacco and later cotton fiber. Introspectively, with the political and economic stability followed the restoration of the monarchy in England 1660's; poor people needed no more to flee the religious persecution and risk the journey to America only to become servants to those who paid the voyage for them. However, the indentured servants who were already in the new world (America) claimed their rights of ownership and more freedom since they are whites like their European masters. For that reason and in order

to overcome the labor-shortage, the American Southern landowners looked elsewhere for replacements, and Africa and Africans remained the urgent and the only solution to the problem (Kachur 28&29).

At the peak of 1770's American Revolution, the slavery institution was legalized and totally accepted. Moreover, various laws were passed by the Southerners to limit the black lives; the slaves were not only torn away from their natal African families and societies, but they were reduced to properties sold and bought, and were subjected to torture and the threat of death. They were exposed to unlimited physical punishments as they were severely whipped for the smallest and sometimes no reason. Describing the ways the slave overseer Mr. Covey tormented him, Frederick Douglass writes "I was broken in body, soul and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died, the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed to a brute"(Douglass 55). Women were also sexually and physically abused. Children were deprived from their natural rights including mother tenderness as well as education. Black children were given to an old black woman to raise them from their early ages while their mothers were sent away to some plantations to work the land.

Yet, wherever there is war there is also resistance. Slave resistance started early in Africa when some African captives succeeded to run away from the greedy traders, and on board ships, some slaves revolted against the crew and forced them to change the destination; Creole and la Amistad ships incidents are two major examples of that kind of resistance (Davis 12). However, the very serious antislavery societies were created in the mid-eighteenth century. The idea of slavery abolition in the new world was first born and nourished in literary works of black and white writers, orators and reformers such as the slave narrative literature of Oloudah Equaino, Frederick Douglass and Harriet Beecher Stow besides the poetry of Jupiter

Hammon and Philis Wheatly. The most of them will later call themselves abolitionists, mainly the fugitives and free blacks whose literary works played a great role in raising the nations' consciousness about the peculiar institution of slavery.

After two hard centuries of slavery, the victory eventually rings the bells. Following the British efforts to end the African slave trade in 1808, white abolitionists appeared in the Northern parts of United States. The black consciousness rose and slaves started fleeing Northward where they joined the antislavery organizations, as it was the case of the fugitive Frederick Douglass who ran away and was helped by the white man, William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass later became a prominent political figure willing not only at illegalizing slavery but achieving political, social and economic equality between whites and blacks.

### **3.3. American Civil War**

The questions about slavery vacillating between the South pro-slavery and the North anti-slavery, and the diverse views about taking slaves to the new discovered areas Westward –all collided to transform to what is known The United States Civil War. The Civil War is the bloody confrontation between the Union North and Confederate South in the U.S battle fields. After many hostilities and confrontations between the two fronts, the war ended with the victory of the Union North in 1865. The victory was consolidated and aided by Abraham Lincoln Emancipation Proclamation of September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1862 as well as the thirteenth amendment that acknowledged all the slave must be set free. The end of the war was crowned with outlawing slavery not only in the United States but in the entire Western hemisphere. (Kachur 101)

### **3.4. Jim Crow Law (1877-1960s)**

After the Civil War was ended, the American country went reconstructing what the war had destroyed, especially in the South, but most how to preserve the rights of the blacks who are

set free and transformed from slaves to African-Americans. Many amendments were added to the American constitution, including the thirteenth (1865) which made the slaves freedom official, the fourteenth (1868) gave them the right of citizenship, equal protection, and, ultimately, the fifteenth (1870) granted the black males the voting right. Nevertheless, the Reconstruction South was of short period (1865-1877) as another face to slavery under the name of, racial segregation, rose in the years following the Civil War to haunt and disturb the night dreams of the black Americans again. (Kachur 102 & 103)

Jim Crow, a name of black fictional character performed in the American mid-nineteenth century theater by a white man wearing a black face makeup to mock African Americans, came in 1877 to signify the white social and legal racial segregation upon black Americans in the South of United States. Jim Crow law was a set of rules and laws issued by the Southerners to restrict the black freedom. It prohibited interracial marriages, deprived black from their right to vote, and it granted the whites all the power to beat, fire, hang any black tries to answer back to the segregation (Tischauer 1&2).

After Reconstruction, the white supremacy was imposed once again; states in the South have passed laws to enforce racial segregation and turn the black lives to a nightmare. Under the Jim Crow system everything was segregated; “White only” and “Colored” were signs put to separate public facilities including; water fountains, restaurants, restrooms, bus waiting areas, train cars, even public schools and theaters (Tischauer 3&4). African American who dared to face segregation was brutally killed by the ku Klux klan, the criminal group appeared in America at that time, or sentenced to arrest without trial. Jim Crow Law was different and crueler than any other form of segregation in America or other parts of the world because it was legalized by the Supreme Court in 1896. The African descendents in America endured oppression, racism, discrimination, abuse, racial prejudices, and inferiority complex just like their slave ancestors if not worst (Friedman21).

### **3.4. Civil Rights Movement**

The legacy of slavery continued to influence American history and haunt the black Americans for nearly a century till the emergence of the Civil Rights Movement in 1960s. Despite of the ambitious results of the Civil War which culminated in the thirteenth, fortieth and fiftieth amendments, the previous white Southern slaveholders never accepted their former slaves to be as equal to them. Following the suppression of “separate but equal” doctrine by the Supreme Court in 1954 and considered the segregation of public facilities unconstitutional, a civil rights activity came into the stage officially. (Friedman 21&30)

The Civil Rights Movement or the so called freedom struggles has taken place between mid-1950s to late 1960s and drawn national and international attention to the African Americans’ plight. It is defined to be a pacific, non-violent protest and civil disobedience against the racial discrimination established in United States mainly in the Deep South. It was led by prominent black figures including Martin Luther King Junior, Rosa Park, Malcolm X and the white activists such as Andrew Goodman. The movement aimed at achieving racial justice in education, housing, employment and equal access to public facilities. The struggle sought to restore to African Americans the rights of citizenship and voting guaranteed by the fourteenth and fifteenth amendments but violated by the Jim Crow laws.

The emergence of the Civil Right Movement originated in the racism and barbarism inflicted against the blacks in the South. Yet, Rosa Park’s incident remains the main and direct cause which persuaded African Americans that they could no longer tolerate racism. On December 1, 1955 Rosa Park, a member of the National Association for The Advancement of Colored People, was arrested in Montgomery Alabama for refusing to give her front seat up to a white man; at that time there was a law dictating; back seats for blacks and the front for whites in public transportation. As a response to the arrest, African Americans have pointed the reverend Martin Luther king Junior to be the leader of the boycott of the city buses, which

lasted for nearly a year. This has marked the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement that achieved not only the desegregation of the city buses in 1956, but also gained the assistance of the federal government which sanctioned the Civil Rights Act (1964), and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as well as the supreme court intervention that outlawed discrimination in all places (Friedman 26, 35, 36, 54-57).

Remarkable events of the movement include the march on Washington on August 28, 1963 held by hundreds of thousands of black and white people when Martin Luther delivered his famous, committed "I have a dream" speech appealing the congress and the federal government to support desegregation and the blacks' right to vote (Friedman 43-45), and the Freedom Summer event (1964) organized by white and black students who went to the South to teach and organize voter registration when Andrew Goodman was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan criminals.

By the mid 1960s, the nature of the civil rights movement began to change as a radical group appeared in 1966, labeled Black Panther and called for Black Nationalism, refusing whites in the African American organizations. The group showed dissatisfaction with the political actions and emphasized social, economic equality. By 1960s many African Americans still suffer poverty, joblessness, chronic health problems and violence culminated in the assassination of King Martin Luther in 1968. Despite all these problems, the Civil Rights Movement had forever changed the United States law and politics. It had led to the birth of many laws that provide protection of the individual rights (Friedman 52-56). It also convinced the federal government to enforce those rights in the face of southern states opposition. It has encouraged the emergence of other voices speaking in the face of oppression, bigotry and totalitarianism; these include feminist movements, protest movement against the Cold War and Vietnam War and sexually protest movement of the lesbians and guys.

### **3.5. Inter and Intra Racism**

Inter racial oppression is a conflict between two different races , basing on some physical characteristics such as skin color, nose size, eyes color and lips shape. This can be extended to social class, caste and ethnicity. Intra racism or the so-called colorism is a kind of discrimination within the same racial group, believing, as in the African-American history and context, in the superiority of the lighter and the inferiority in the darkly skinned ones.

The practice of colorism began with slavery when the white slaves masters impregnate their black mistresses and, thus, give birth to children with lighter skin known as Mulattos. Though those mulattos were not legitimately recognized by their white fathers, they received better treatment than other darker skin slaves. Thereby, this preference led to division and hatred among blacks and because the darkly skinned were rejected and hated, many fairly skinned blacks have passed, under the phenomenon of racial policies, for white to avoid the segregation forced on blacks prior the Civil Rights Movement. Under the racist Jim Crow system, African Americans vacillate between assimilation or segregation; blacks and whites were separated in all public facilities, school, transport, churches and the black were given the dirtiest and they could not keep on self-worth without passing as white.

African American literature has been always engaged and endeavored to halt and eliminate the forms of inter and intra racial atrocities. Many black American writers have put the spotlight on the issue projecting the dangerous results of its practice. One of these authors is Toni Morrison who repeatedly speaks about inter and intra racial violence in her fiction and for her, “storytelling and the process of writing”, as Stephani Li wrote, “are the ways to explore the challenges of the human existence; how individuals both flourish and hurt one another, how oppression operates, how communities sustain generations” (xiii). Indeed, Colorism as a question of racism and origin of black families’ destruction is seen in many of

Morrison's works including *Beloved*, *Tar Baby*, *The Bluest Eye*, *A Mercy*, *God Help the Child* among others.

The upshot of colorism on African American women is one of the important themes in Toni Morrison's newest piece *God Help the Child*. Sweetness' family in the novel is the example of the transmission of racial ideologies. Sweetness, a light-skinned woman, hates the black standards because she knows enough what means to have "Negro blood running in the veins (Morrison 13)<sup>1</sup> under the racist Jim Crow policies when African Americans were defined according to the amount of the black blood they had, quoting from the novel in Sweetness' words, "some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color- the lighter the better- in social clubs, neighborhood, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to little dignity (14). Still, when she got married, Sweetness mother had to put her hands on the Bible reserved for blacks only, as the other Bible is reserved for the whites. However, thanks to her lighter skin, she had access to what other blacks have not; she tries on hats and uses the ladies' room in department stores. Still, as the text shows, Sweetness' grandmother has passed for white and cuts off all the ties with her black people and never answers her daughters' letters .Similarly, colorism made of Sweetness a toxic mother who drops her natural duty in nurturing love, compassion for her daughter, ignoring that by love mothers ingrain power and self-confidence in their children to confront racism and learn to love their dark appearance.

#### **4. Literary Context: Morrison's Literary Techniques in *God Help the Child***

As a feminist and a leader of African American literary culture, Toni Morrison challenges the hegemony of the white-centeredness in the American literary canon and has succeeded in moving the black American literature from the margin to the center, by denouncing the unspeakable horrors of race and segregation the blacks endured in America. Having an African heritage, Toni does not feel ashamed by the African American's past, rather her

career highlights the role of the past in the making of the present and the ennoblement of the black cultural legacy, identity and race. Her fiction is thematically rich. She wittingly interweaves black issues such as; colorism, racism, slavery, mother-daughter relationships, black child abuse, to produce a multicultural mosaic and come up with a unique literary piece. Still, Morrison creatively changes the narrative techniques to make her reader feel and react distinctively to each of her pieces, and in this context Harold Bloom says that “Morrison, like any potentially strong novelist, battles against being subsumed by the traditions of narrative fiction” (1).

Toni Morrison’s eleventh novel, *God Help the Child*, has an affinity with the techniques of modernist and postmodern literary tradition as it makes use of a flock of flashbacks and a stream of consciousness technique, which together cause the narrative to be disunited and discontinuous. It also uses the postmodern technique of minimalism, which strives to play down characterization and details to appeal to the readers’ interpretation and insights into the phenomenon being described in it. Moreover, *God Help the Child* is multi-voiced; the narrative is structured through different narration points of views which epitomize Michal Bakhtin’s polyphony and also solidify the fragmentation characteristic of the novel and the protagonist’s consciousness. The author’s choice for multiple narrative view points in the text, and even in the postmodern context, is significant as it subverts the traditional dominant voice of the omniscient narrator which represents truth or reality in an objective manner and from one single perspective. The multiplicity of views analyses reality from different perspectives and suggests that truth exists in the plural and not in a single form. More important than this, through these multiple view points, Morrison recovers and grants authority to the female voices silenced to be heard and narrate their stories.

Still, regardless of her political and social commitment, Toni Morrison, as shown in *God Help the Child*, uses magical realism through the reference to supernatural elements and

also some fabulous ideas clearly in evidence in the text. During the course of the novel's actions, Bride sets a guest in a white hippy couple house in an isolated forest described as being distant from contemporary modern society and times, and encounters witch-like character, Booker's aunt. After the break with Booker, Bride fantasizes about the degradation of her body and her breast and peculiarly stops menstruating; the reader is not sure if this is a reality or just comes from the protagonist's imagination that is haunted by depression because of her boy friend's absence.

Still, almost in all her texts, Morrison uses the storytelling technique, emphasizing the very practice of orality by considering the text as a story to be heard from the character's voice. Storytelling in African-American community has long contributed to one's self understanding one's identity building. In "Storytelling and Narrative Knowing," Sarah Worth contends that "The way we construct our narratives (fictional or non-fictional) is importantly tied to the way we understand, order, and construct our own reality and our own personality" (54). Indeed, stories about cultural roots, struggles through hardships, about victory and defeat—all together help build a coherent history of a person, tribe or a nation. The total of the characters stories of their childhood trauma are examples of storytelling technique In *God Help the Child*.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has roofed Toni Morrison's biography and a brief summary of her novel *God Help the Child*. It has also looked into the historical events and the narrative techniques that helped shape the text's overall content. As far as history is concerned, it has been shown that Morrison's text is aware of the black long and never ending struggle with color, racism and segregation by emphasizing the present day race issue and standards of beauty in contemporary American context. Then literarily, *God help the Child* aligns Morrison with the

writing of contemporary postmodern literary tradition for her use of multiple narration, flashbacks, and magical realism. The following chapter will introduce the theory that will be applied in the last chapter to read the main characters traumatic psyche.

## **Chapter II**

### **Judith Herman's Contemporary Trauma Theory**

#### **Introduction**

The present chapter explores and looks into trauma theory as elaborated by Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery*, published in 1992. It makes references to the beginning of trauma theory studies in the work of Sigmund Freud and then moves to the study conducted by Judith Herman, introducing deep understandings and insights into the phenomenon, moving away from the classical Freudian association of trauma with the unconscious to concentrate on the long term effects it causes and the possibilities for recovery and therapy. Still, as the chapter shows, Judith Herman enriches the field of trauma studies with technical terms such Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Intrusion, Borderline Personality and others.

#### **1. An Introduction into Trauma Theory**

Studies in trauma theory started with the classic works of Sigmund Freud, developed and outstretched by other theorists such as Joseph Breuer, Jean Martin Charcot and Pierre Janet. Sigmund Freud's science of psychoanalysis is the mother who gave birth to and paved the way for all studies on trauma. Indeed, Freud's philosophy and works remain the source of inspiration for the further breakthrough in the field mainly his relating trauma's experiences to mental disturbances, their burial in the unconscious and their manifestation or revival through unconscious acts, performances, or thought. Freud's studies on trauma have been related to the diagnosis of cases of women's hysteria and child abuse discussed in his abandoned seduction

theory in the beginning and later on adjusted to include the analysis of male patients' experience of war in the First World War. His studies as outlined in his works such as *Studies on Hysteria*, *Thought for the Time on War and Death*, *Mourning and Melancholia* and *Moses and Monotheism* reveal many of the similar characteristics as contemporary trauma theories, especially the common idea of 'belatedness' and the concepts of 'mourning,' and 'melancholia' (Kaplan 25-6).

Nevertheless, some scholars, who disagreed with Freud's psychological ideas, went beyond, into the creation of new theory that fits the current disturbances and comes to be referred to as contemporary trauma theory. As such, in the second half of the twenties century with the genocides of the, WWI, and the Holocaust as well as the Vietnam War, trauma studies cover the war veterans symptoms and experiences of tragedy and deal with psychological abuses such as domestic violence and sexual assaults. Thus, trauma, as an approach to literary theory, focuses on the interpretation of the individual and society's disordered and traumatic behavior resulting from an unsettling and disturbing experience. Trauma theory measures traumatized people in regard to the horrific events they experienced. For that purpose, professionals develop various diagnoses in order to distinguish between single and repeated, prolonged trauma symptoms and then provide the survivors with the appropriate treatment.

## **2. Contemporary Trauma Theory According to Judith Herman**

Judith Lewis Herman is an American psychiatrist, author and trauma specialist born in 1942. She graduated from Harvard University and finished her psychiatric studies at Boston University medical center. Herman worked as a university professor of psychiatry and a psychiatric manager at Massachusetts Somerville feminist mental health hospital. She wrote *Father Daughter Incest* in 1981 and *Trauma and Recovery* in 1992 as her major bookstore of her findings and investigations in trauma theory.

As a prominent and groundbreaking figure in contemporary trauma theory, Judith Lewis Herman endeavored to carry out research in the field and made revolutionary achievements in the theory. In her book entitled *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman gives a definition of the psychological trauma and suggests some remedies for traumatic experiences as the title indicates. The book is meant to restore the abuse history and provide individual's mind as well as society with calmness, balance, and safety.

Herman defines trauma as a state of distress and powerlessness resulted from the individual's experiences and subjugation to external atrocities or natural disasters. It is, as she states, "a feeling of intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation" (24). As a result, a chaotic state characterized by attempts at violence, difficulty at bodily and social integrity is typical of the phenomenon of trauma. Herman writes that "traumatic events overwhelm the human ordinary adaptations to life, then adds, involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or close encounter with violence and death (24). Still, Drawing on Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis, Herman emphasizes the importance of exploring and bringing out the repressed to consciousness then treat it suggesting that "Remembering and telling the truth about terrible event are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims" (1). She also explains that contemporary trauma theory considers not only survivors but the witnesses of a traumatic event as well.

According to Judith Herman's historical research in trauma studies, three times in the last century "psychological trauma has surfaced into the public consciousness, each time flourishing in affiliation with a political movement"; the first was hysteria and it has to do with the traditional psychological disorder of women introduced by Sigmund Freud that resulted from the republican anticlerical movement of the ninetieth century. The second was the combat neurosis appeared after the First World War and Vietnam War and the last one is

the recent study of sexual and domestic violence which, according to Herman, grew with the Western second wave feminist movement (Herman 5).

Judith Herman strongly opposes the American psychiatric association diagnostic manual's definition of the traumatic event as an "outside the range of the usual human experience" (24) and argued that sexual and domestic violence as well as the military trauma are so common in the lives of people, writing "only the fortunate find it unusual" (24). Herman's long career in the domain of trauma studies began with her first book *Father Daughter Incest* (1981) to reach to more focus on the role of childhood trauma in causing a troubling adulthood relationships or what she calls borderline personality disorder, introduced in *Trauma and Recovery*.

### **3. Forms of Trauma Theory According to Judith Herman**

#### **3.1. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

The American psychiatric association diagnostic manual has acknowledged officially the post traumatic stress disorder condition in 1980 after it had been seriously observed in Vietnam War veterans. Post traumatic stress disorder is the emotional, physical and mental changes that arouse long after having experienced or witnessed one single horrible event, being war combat, rape or natural disaster. The symptoms that accompany the event are varied, but the suffering is the same.

In her book, *Trauma and Recovery*, Herman classifies Post Traumatic Stress Disorder symptoms into three categories: The first one concerns the physical transformations and the vigilant, sensitive state of the trauma victim under the name of 'hyper arousal'. The second, which is the focus in the present study, is 'intrusion', which means that the horrific experience remains engraved in the victim's memory as if time stops at the moment of trauma. There is no present for the traumatized person, for he/she thinks constantly about the terrible event, relives it with the same terror and anger through flashbacks, nightmares or through being

exposed to a similar reminder of the experience long after it occurred. This is what Freud has referred to as the fixation on trauma and the French Post-structuralist critic, Pierre Janet, described traumatic intrusions as an “*idée fixe*” and writes, “[T]hen, one who retains a fixed idea of a happening cannot be said to have a “memory” it is only for convenience that we speak of it as a “traumatic memory” (qtd. in Herman, 27).

In addition to flashbacks, dreams, and reminders; trauma survivor can also relive the dramatic event through reenactment. That is to say, trauma survivors recreate the traumatic moment by choice once again aiming at changing the result. Yet, it mentioned in Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery* that reenactment is a “spontaneous unsuccessful attempt at healing”. In both cases, reenactment is of “driven”, “tenacious” and “daemonic” quality (30) that is as dangerous as the original event. Finally, when the intrusive symptoms decrease, “the numbing” or “constrictive” (30) ones appear. Constriction, the last type of post traumatic disorder, explains the state when the victim’s system of self-defense paralyzes then surrenders. Conviction defines the victim who is too weak and has no means to defend herself against the perpetrator at the moment of the trauma that she ends at accepting the abuse and submit to it. Herman explains that the individual’s “system of self defense shut down” (31) and a powerless person who cannot escape physically escapes by shifting her state of consciousness. She illustrates with the analogous states observed on animals that sometimes freeze when attacked. The same responses of a helpless person are found and presented in testimonies of a rape survivor “I couldn’t scream. I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed . . . like a rag doll” (31).

### **3.2. Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C. PTSD)**

Complex post traumatic stress disorder diagnosis treats survivors of repeated and prolonged trauma that comes as a result of captivity; that is to say, the victim who lives in an everyday oppressive environment and cannot escape it for many reasons as economic disability which is generally the case of women and children who endure a parent or a husbands' total control and have no other shelter to free themselves from the persisting cruelties. The victim of multiple and repeated traumas shows more complicated symptoms that bother him for a long time. After a long debate about the need of a new name for the severe traumatic consequences, Judith Herman has eventually come up with the convenient concept of "Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder" to refer to "[T]he syndrome that follows upon prolonged, repeated trauma" (87). Accordingly, Herman distinguishes between the traditional post traumatic stress disorder diagnosis that deals with victims of one traumatic experience and this that comes to undertake survivors with multiple traumas histories and referred to as complex post traumatic stress disorder.

Interestingly, childhood abuse history is the central interest of C.PTSD because its survivors show the most worrying symptoms such as: relationships difficulties, repeated victimization, more insomnia, self-mutilation, dissociation, anger, substance addiction, and depression. Therefore, three specific diagnoses, somatization, borderline, and multiple personality disorders, are used to childhood trauma survivors so as to identify the origin of the trauma and link it to the current disturbances then provide the victims a complete therapy.

First of all, somatization disorder diagnosis examines the physical problems caused by a traumatic experience, while, multiple personality disorder indicates the mental disturbances. As far as the third type is concerned, borderline personality disorder diagnosis analyses the difficulties in building a sane relationships and identity as childhood abuse survivor's major symptom. Borderline personality disorder sufferers complain intimate life

and identity instability. In fact, as Herman suggests they fear abandonment at the same time terrified domination. Thus, to preserve themselves from another exposure to harm, they tend to construct “special relations with idealized caretaker in which the ordinary boundaries are not observed” (Herman 90). Moreover, people with borderline personality disorder fail to give full image of them; their representation of self is often divided between good and evil and this is what is referred to as identity deformation. Ultimately, a history of childhood trauma is believed to be the origin for developing such disorder, and its recognition is central to the recovery process. It is somehow completing the Seduction Theory Freud had started at the beginning of his psychoanalytical course that was studying child sexual abuse but he abandoned it thinking his patients were lying and just inventing those childhood sexual stories.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has introduced trauma theory as viewed by one of the contemporary theorists, Judith Herman, and presented its components as explained in her book *Trauma and Recovery*. It has reviewed the history of the phenomenon of trauma by looking into the three phases it has gone through, including Sigmund’s Freud’s Insights into the issue in his early analysis of women’s Hysteria and the Unconscious, studies of war veteran experiences of abuse and tragedy in the major events of the twentieth century such WWI, the Holocaust and Vietnam War, and ultimately, contemporary trauma experienced by women and children. The chapter has emphasized the notion of the Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, highlighting its destructive impact upon the wellbeing and social relationships of the victim. The following chapter will use the set of the technical terms in Judith Herman’s trauma theory in the analysis of the trauma at the Heart of *God Help the Child*.

## Third Chapter

### Reading Childhood Trauma in *God Help the Child* through Judith

#### Herman's Trauma Theory

“Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not”

(Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 10)

“What you do to children matters. And they might never forget”

(Morrison, *God Help the Child*, 79)

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's works represent an illustrative framework that embodies the characteristics of trauma theory. In her demonstration of African American atrocious experiences of slavery and its legacy, abusive relationships, intra and interracial violence, Morrison emphasizes the tragedies and traumatic terrors African Americans have always experienced in an unfair American society. Significantly, her latest novel *God Help the Child* is the epitome that discusses childhood trauma of neglect, sexual and physical abuse. This chapter analyses the theme of childhood trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. It explores the origin of the novel's characters childhood traumas' experiences to help the reader understand both the trauma and its ensuing outcomes on the individual and society. Particularly, it investigates the specific way the novel depicts the two main characters', Bride and Booker, experience of trauma, relying on Judith Herman's previously explained theories.

The applicability of Judith Herman theoretical framework of trauma upon the Toni Morrison's texts cannot go without explanation. Toni Morrison and Judith Herman belong to

the same generation, have the same interests, and have always been interested in trauma studies. Morrison started writing when child abuse became officially a serious matter and a subject of many trauma studies. Her first novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) revolves around an abusive story of an eleven years old black Pecola who was neglected by her mother and raped by her father. Morrison's literary path continued with *Sula*, *Song of Solomon* and many other novels to reach to *God Help the Child* which is full of Pecolas. As black American experience is a ready storehouse for substance and material, Morrison relates the theme of child abuse to black history of slavery and racism in many of her novels. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness stands for the trauma the blacks endured during the racial segregation era of the separatist Jim Crow laws of 1877 to 1960s, while Bride symbolizes the definition of contemporary black beauty as "the hottest commodity in the civilized world (67).

Morrison's *God Help the Child* can be described as being racially and socially committed. Set in an African American racial context of the legacy of slavery and present day times, this novel, as its title suggests, bothers about the phenomenon of childhood trauma and seeks divine intervention and providence for child protection. On the surface, Morrison's *God Help the Child* tells a mere love story of a couple, Bride and Booker. Yet, deeply the plotline of the narrative transports us in a long errand into the characters' stories of abuse, molestation, and beating. Indeed, Morrison does not expose questions and issues only for the sake of evoking them; rather, she attempts to affect a change. Quoting Morrison's discussing the issue, Li Stephanie writes "but how to survive whole in a world where we all of us, in some measure, victims of something. Each one of us, in some way at some moment a victim and in no position to do a thing about it. Some child is always left unpicked up at some moment. In a world like that, how does one remain a whole- is it just impossible to do that? (xiii).

## 1. The Phenomenon of Childhood Molestation

Childhood abuse or molestation has been a major issue in the discourses of literature and psychology and has been a subject of study for many physicians, psychoanalysts and writers. On studies and insights into the issue, psychoanalysts, and in the vanguard Sigmund Freud, and later, Judith Herman, capitalize the necessity of having sane childhood for full development and mature identity. In this context, Herman compares a healthy childhood to an abused one explaining that in the former a child builds a good image of him and acquires self-confidence that helps him to maintain an independent adulthood and well react at a moment of trauma. She argues that “In the course of normal development, a child achieves a secure sense of autonomy by forming inner representations of trustworthy and dependable caretakers; representations that can be evoked mentally in moments of distress. Adult prisoners rely heavily on these internalized images to preserve their sense of independence” (78). Whereas, in the case of having a difficult childhood, the person develops a fragmented representation of the self and the child feels always helpless and in need of someone to rely on. In simple words this abused child develops an unstable identity as Judith Herman puts it:

[U]nder conditions of chronic childhood abuse, fragmentation becomes the central principle of personality organization. Fragmentation in consciousness prevents the ordinary integration of knowledge, memory, emotional states, and bodily experience. Fragmentation in the inner representations of the self prevents the integration of identity. Fragmentation in the inner representations of others prevents the development of a reliable sense of independence within connection. (78)

Away from the clinical insights into the phenomenon, literature proved to be the fertile soil through which the issue is analyzed, voiced and looked at. Indeed, the theme of childhood and childhood trauma has struck the attention of a great deal of writers and literary traditions. Many Victorian works as *David Copperfield*, *Hard Times*, *Les Misérables* among others bother about the exploitation of children and the violation of the child’s natural rights endowed at birth, including the right, to life, to enjoy childhood and to education. In the same

context, romantic literature has shown that “the child is the father of man”, to quote William Wordsworth, and has capitalized the innocence and purity associated with childhood.

Child molestation or child abuse is the violent and atrocious attitude parents, caretakers or other adults use in dealing with children, which, in return, ensues destructive consequences upon their physical and psychological sanity. The World Organization of Health defines child molestation as “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 responsibility, trust or power” ( Krug et al., 9) . This complex phenomenon of child abuse is believed to take four main types, including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and neglect.

The consequences of child maltreatment can be long lasting and broader. The child’s psychological and social development is negatively impacted as survivors often suffer difficulties in forming intimate relationships with others and a complete representation of self. Still, studies on early childhood development show that a child grown in an oppressive family or which has been subjected to a past traumatic experience becomes so sensitive that he feels always alarmed even in a safe condition. Moreover, disposing of no means of defense against his/her perpetrator, the victim responds to the cruelties inflicted upon him by dissociation, self-abuse, depression and rage (Herman 88-90).

## 2. Childhood Trauma in African American Context and Literature

American literature is highly engaged in portraying the child throughout its multi-cultural background. As a notable classic, Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* introduce American readership with childhood exploitation and abandonment, boyhood life which are explored later in the works of William Faulkner, James Fennimore Cooper and others. Still, the best known characters in the nineteenth century American fiction, like Natty Bumppo, Tom Sawyer, Ishmael, Huckleberry Finn, Maggie, among others were children oppressed in family and by society. From around 1970s, the theme of childhood trauma became also the central plight of black American literature.

African American childhood trauma is directly related to slavery. White slaveholders perceive slave children as an investment for the economy of the nation and its welfare working in the plantations. Therefore, they prohibited any kind of education to slave children and punished anyone teaching them an inch. Moreover, slave children and their mothers are separated from infancy; the mother is sent to work in the plantations far from home and the child was given to be raised by an old woman. Toni Morrison's *A Mercy* is the epitome of this experience. Set in the 1680s, in the early stages of the slave trade, the text reveals the complications that arise from slavery at the level of family and society. The black protagonist, Florens, is given away by her mother and becomes slave in a Portuguese couple's farm the thing that traumatized her and ruined her life.

The slave children live in a constant fear of physical and sexual punishment directed to them or other slave adults. A horrible slave whipping scene Frederick Douglass described in his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass an American Slave* involves his white master unmerciful beating a slave woman, "[H]e commenced to lay on the heavy cow skin, and soon the warm, red blood (amid heartrending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came



dripping to the floor. I was so terrified and horror-stricken at the sight, that I hid myself in a closet, and dared not venture out till long after the bloody transaction was over. I expected it would be my turn next” (6). Subsequently, the lack of protection, nurturance, medical care and welfare causes the black children many diseases and death was their inescapable fate.

Long after the abolition of slavery, black children still suffered abuse. They were victims of inter and intraracial racism. They were racially separated from the white children and equally rejected by their own community because of the ugliness of their black epidermal signs. Moreover, traumatized by colorism black parents specifically mothers, have severely neglected their children especially their daughters. Those children grow fighting the past and struggling with the psychological scars that make the present more difficult. Again, Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* brings into light the plight of inter- and intra racism and highlights black children’s subjection to neglect, abandonment and their attempts to grapple with past experiences of colorism. The novel revolves around the story life of the child girl, Pecola, who received capital intimidation, rejection and bitterness from the black and white culture. The girl has been a subject of oppression in the family, at the hands of her mother who neglected her and her father who raped her. She has also suffered at the hands of the white because of her black epidermal signs and becomes insane at the end imagining herself with white standards.

### 3. Forms of Childhood Trauma in *God Help the Child*

#### 3.1. Neglect

Neglect can be defined as the failure of parents in providing the basic needs of love and protection for their children. *God Help the Child* attests to the phenomenon of neglect as the novel's characters, including Bride (born Lula Ann), Hannah, Rain and Brooklyn, were neglected by their parents. The core of the story is structured around these children's experience of neglect and its result on their adulthood and their surroundings.

Besides; Pecola Breedlove, *Beloved*, *Sula*, *Jadine* and others, Bride is Morrison's other black protagonist oppressed because of her black epidermal signs. Bride is a born to fair skinned black parents who lived during the racial segregation of Jim Crow period and still traumatized by its brutality to welcome a dark baby. Her mother, Sweetness does reject and loath her right from her birth, saying right in the opening of the novel:

“It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father” (12).

Nevertheless, being endowed with black complexion is not Bride's mistake nor her choice, but because blackness, as Booker suggests, is “just a color... a genetic trait not a flow not a curse not a blessing nor a sin” (235). Sweetness who had grown in a world of racism and discrimination under the white supremacy where, as she explains speaking about Lula Ann, “[Y]ou could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, 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 and trick her” (75), she is totally convinced that Lula Ann's “Color is a cross she will always carry” (20).

Similarly, Lula Ann's father did not accept her and viewed her like "[A] stranger more than that an enemy" (16). He eventually abandoned her and even suspected Sweetness to have betrayed him. As an abandoned wife, Sweetness could afford her black child nothing but cruelty and hatred. Unlike normal children, Bride grows poisoned by her mother's neglect; a mother who loathes to touch the black skin of her daughter, and refuses to hug her like other mothers do; a mother who gives no compassion but fierce reactions; shouting, screaming, punishing Bride and leaving her locked in her room for any small mistake like dropping something, unbraiding her hair and speaking to a stranger. Bride was deprived even from pronouncing the smoothest word of, Mama, as her mother forced her to call "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama." (18).

Though Sweetness drops the idea of murdering or giving Bride away to an orphanage, the black girl grows imprisoned in her authoritative mother's cage like Maya Angelou's black protagonist's, Marguerite, who was enclosed in the segregating Stamps village under her grandmother's control in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. Bride the baby is kept home most of time so as to not frighten people with her black African skin. Moreover, in her school she is forced to bear her mates insults because her mother warns her to not react or reclaim so not to be excluded. She even does not tell anyone when she saw the landlord, where her mother rented, raped a little child otherwise they will be put out of their apartments; all that because she is so black and "needed to learn how to behave and keep her head down and not to make trouble" (19), as Sweetness says justifying her roughness with Bride.

The color black causes neglect and pain for many children in America before, during and post Civil Rights Movement. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness makes it clear that colorism and racism are behind her harshness with her black child "[B]ut I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges" (78). Lula Ann (Bride) is aware that her blackness is the origin of the distance

between her and Sweetness. She prays at least to be slapped by her mother in order to feel her touch just like Pecola Breedlove has prayed to get blue eyes so as her parents, Cholly and Pauline, stop fighting each other, reasoning that “If she looked different, beautiful, maybe Cholly would be different and Mrs. Breedlove too. Maybe they’d said why, look at pretty-eyed Pecola we mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” and persistently, “Each night, without fail she prayed for blue eyes” (*The Bluest Eye* 46).

The neglect of Sweetness and all black parents result in a difficult and traumatic development of the children. Lula Ann needs her mother’s love and care, and only succeeded to grab at it when she lied and accused Sofia Huxley, a young black teacher, of child sexual abuse in the courtroom. Similarly, in Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Marguerite lied at the court about how many times Mr. Freeman raped her to not lose her family’s love because the first time she misunderstood his kindness and thought him a careful father and permitted him to touch her. Moreover, unlike Pecola who turns mad trying to own the white beauty; Lula Ann or Bride embraces the white ideals and attracts the love and admiration of people, writing:

[I] built up immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don’t need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It’s glory. (101)

And even her brutal mother who used to detest her black epidermal signs admires what Lula Ann turns to be, saying, “Each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes” (79).

### 3.2 Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is the sexually assaults exercised on children including rape, molestation, and incest, or it manifests by forcing a child into sexual affair such as prostitution which is the case of the character Rain in *God Help the Child*. Many fictional characters in the novel including Adam, Rain, Hannah, and Brooklyn are victims of sexual molestation received at the hands of inhuman abusers.

Adam Starbern is Booker's oldest and closest brother. Adam was ten years old when a child molester referred in the text as 'the nicest man in the world' kidnapped him, kept and chained him in his basement, tortured and raped him with other five children. Morrison's use of the word 'nicest man' in her text is symbolic. It stands for all the predators, and by repeating it several times in the narrative, Morrison warns her reader about whom they can trust, suggesting that appearance can trick. The kindest you think can be the meanest just like Booker suggests about a man who exposed himself to children and had his bones broken before hurting them, "Bald. Normal-looking. Probably an otherwise nice man—they always were. The "nicest man in the world," the neighbors always said. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Where did that cliché come from? Why not hurt a fly? Did it mean he was too tender to take the life of a disease-carrying insect but could happily ax the life of a child?" (186). Apparently, 'the nicest man' used his little dog as a lure to drag the children down to their butchery. He does not only sexually assault them but cut their sexual organs and save them in a decorative box. He seems enjoying that and satisfying his sexual demands as if this inhuman and disgusting act of raping little innocents gains him more years of life and clean his dirty old age as he used to tell his clients, "Dirt", most machinery died because it was not cleaned" (198).

In a simple conversation between the character Rain and Bride, we learn about Rain's sexual assault experience before the hippy couple Steve and Evelyn has found her under rain

lodging and naming her Rain in reference to her purity, innocence and unspoiled nature. Rain confides in Bride that she is prostituted and sexually abused for money, in return, for her mother. Once she opposes this act, her mother throws her out door.

In the street, Rain, a child of six years, confronts homelessness, loneliness, starving and fear that is why she startled and run away when Steve touched her shoulder asking her name when he first met her. Rain describes the hardships she found being homeless and lonely.

You had to find out where the public toilets were....; how to avoid children's services, police, how to escape drunks, dope heads. But knowing where sleep was safe was the most important thing. It took time and she had to learn what kinds of people would give you money and what for, and remember the back doors of which food pantries or restaurants had kind and generous servers. The biggest problem was finding food and storing it for later. (174)

Rain finds in Bride a sister, a friend and considers her an ear for who she externalizes her ill and sufferings. Moreover, Bride is also her protector who saved her from a gunshot, "My heart was beating fast, Rain recalls after Bride had left, because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me save my life. But that what my black lady did..." (180).

As it is previously said the novel under study is full of traumatic experiences. Hannah is the daughter of Queen, Booker's aunt, and another character who experiences sexual abuse. Hannah in *God Help the Child* is Pecola of *The Bluest Eye*. She was raped by her father at the age of eight, just like Pecola who was impregnated by her father at eleven. Also both, Hannah and Pecola, were neglected by their mothers who refused to support and help them to overcome their trauma. While Pecola's mother in *The Bluest Eye*, indulged in movies, Queen was occupied with her many husbands and totally taken by life to recognize her daughter's complains in which the text reads, "Rumor in the family was that Queen ignored or dismissed

the girl's complaint about her father—the Asian one, I believe, or the Texan. I don't know. Anyway she said he fondled her and Queen refused to believe it" (281). Hannah's case also reminds us of Maya Angelou's Marguerite in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* when she was sexually abused by her mother's boy friend.

Brooklyn is Bride's white friend and the one who takes care of her and her place in the cosmetic industry after the beating she received from a parolee. Brooklyn's presence in the novel is more supportive to Bride's standing in the story than building a complete character. But still she has her own sexual abuse story. Brooklyn was her uncle's victim of sexual harassment and like Hannah and Rain her drunken neglecting mother was not here to protect her. She was fourteen when she ran away and built herself alone.

The last character I want to refer to is Sofia Huxley. As Bride, Sofia Huxley has a childhood trauma background too that is physical abuse; the form which is not discussed in this thesis but I meant to refer to it in order to reinforce the idea that says the novel *God Help the Child* is a painting of childhood traumas and abuses. When Sofia goes to her family's home to attend her mother's funeral her childhood memories come back fresh as she is re-experiencing the severe punishment she used to receive from her authoritative mother as a child for any action she did like wetting her underwear and fighting back boys in the street. She has also confronted fifteen years of misery, obedience, torture and silence in prison but when she was released she poured her captivated terrors on Bride, beating her until death confessing that "[B]lack girl did me a favor. Not the foolish one she had in mind, not the money she offered, but the gift that neither of us planned: the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able" (122).

Obviously, "child abuse as Kara Walker suggests in a reviewing article, cuts a jagged scar through Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*", making it an important substance of analysis. The characters suffer one or another form of abuse and molestation inside the

family which is kind of domestic violence or outside the family that is considered criminal offense in the case of Adam and the little child whose rape Lula Ann had witnessed but could not help for she was a child herself then it remained unaddressed. Here then *God Help the Child* draws attention to those ignored voices and speaks them, and in which Morrison outwards it in Booker's voice when he heard from Bride about the little child years later, "Now five people know. The boy, the freak, your mother, you and now me. Five is better than two but it should be five thousand" (98).

#### **4. Judith Herman's Trauma Ideas in *God Help the Child***

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Judith Herman has elaborated a rich theoretical framework on the trauma theory which puts a hem on the revival of traumatic events, the difficulty of leading an ordinary life in the wake of the trauma's haunting specter, and its permanent presence and reenactment in the life of the survivors and also the difficulties of enjoying a full identity in the aftermath of trauma. This section of chapter three interprets Judith Herman's notions of intrusion and borderline personality disorder in *God Help the Child*.

##### **4.1. Intrusion in *God Help the Child***

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* leafs through the consequences of the recurrence of the past terrible experiences in the makeup of the present and the memory of childhood traumas on the individual's psyche. A cursory reading of the novella does not reveal, at first glance, the post traumatic stress disorder the two characters, Booker and Bride, are caught in, as the love story of this damaged young couple is the direct and immediate concern of the text. Nevertheless, a scrutinous analysis manages to trace the impact of childhood trauma the two characters, Bride and Booker, have endured.

According to Judith Herman, intrusive memories of a traumatic events obstacle the normal development of the survivor's life. That is to say, trauma's effects are not directly felt at the moment of the incident or experience, rather in the months or years following the accident explaining, "long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present"(26). This is the case with Morrison's text, *God Help the Child*, where the impact of the past traumatic experiences haunts the present lives of the characters, mainly Bride and Booker.

Bride's memory as an adult is still stuck in her experiences of childhood traumas and refuses to forget her mother's avoidance of any physical contact with her.

Remembering the experience, Bride suggests “I could say, distaste was all over her face as I was little and she had to bathe me, she continues, I used to pray she would slap my face or spank me just to feel her touch. I made little mistakes deliberately, but she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated” (59). Still, traumatized by her mother’s loath to touch her hateful dark skin, Bride recalls how much she was happy when she stained the bedlinen with her first menstrual blood then Sweetness slapped her, “Her shock was alleviated by the satisfaction of being touched, handled by a mother who avoided any physical contact whenever is possible” (134). Nevertheless, Bride is aware that this touch is not of love or tenderness; she assimilates it to the beating she got from Sofia Huxley, “Being beaten up by Sofia was like Sweetness’s slap without the pleasure of being touched. Both confirmed her helplessness in the presence of confounding cruelty” (135).

Herman points out that “the adult survivor is at great risk of repeated victimization at adult life” (81) because of the early abuses that render the survivor weak and could not defend himself against the repeated victimization in front of a powerful abuser. Recognizing this helplessness against Sofia Huxley Bride thinks, “I reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beats the shit out of me ..... I didn’t make a sound, didn’t even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers”(60).

In addition to her mother neglect, society had also rejected Bride’s blackness. Bride feels enraged as she recalls how at school and in the street, her black epidermal signs made her the subject of insults for her schoolmates and people as they shout offensive epithets at her “Nigger”, “Coon, Topsy, Sambo, Ooga Booga”. Bride forced the maltreatment and the denigration she experienced to the bottom of her unconscious to be forgotten, buried and goes on with her life. Nevertheless, the unconsciously recurrence of

the unwanted and buried experiences, in Sigmund Freud's understanding, and the uncertainty of the effacement of the stain, as in Jack Derrida's viewpoint, is not sure after its erasure. Derrida writes:

Granted, every human can, within the space of doxic phenomenality, have the *consciousness* of covering its tracks. But who could ever judge the affectivity of such a gesture? Is it necessary to recall that every erased trace, in consciousness, can leave a trace of its erasure whose symptom (individual or social, historical, political, etc.) will always be capable of ensuring its return? (135-6)

Here then, for Derrida, the ability to judge the successful effacement of a trace or stain oversteps the scope of human knowledge, erudition and choice. The recurrence of the buried experiences, in accordance with the manifestation of the unconscious is always plausible and probable.

As I have already mentioned, Herman's theory does not only include victims but also the witnesses of trauma in its studies stating, "Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic trauma" (1). This is the case of Booker in the novel. Booker does not experience a direct abuse rather he is traumatized by his oldest sibling dramatic death at the hands of a child molester. After the discovery of Adam's corpse, the burden haunts Booker's memory, and ruined his life. Like Bride, Booker managed to bury his brother traumatic death and forget about his molestation, pushing it to his unconscious, and enters into a love relationship with Bride as remedy for his pain, only to find that the same relationship shatters him when Bride decides to help a child molester, Sofia Huxley. And in this context Herman writes, "Equally as powerful as the desire to deny atrocities is the conviction that denial does not work" (1). That is to say, Booker, like Bride too, does not succeed to erase his traumatic experience from his memory at once and forever because this moment intrudes and bothers him each time he endeavors to build new life.

Indeed, Sofia Huxley's release from prison, after fifteen years of child rape sentence, presents, as Judith Herman suggests, the "small insignificant reminder" (26) that

opens both of Bride and Booker's childhood wounds. Booker remembers his molested brother running away leaving behind a beautiful love story he was enjoying for six months. Controlled by Adam's ghost, Booker chooses an isolated corner in the city to grieve his loss alone in a dissociated world of trauma victim.

Disfigured by Huxley as she offers her aid to start a new life, Bride falls into a dissociated world invaded by the scars of the past and hunger for mother love and in which, as the text reads, "[B]ride quickly dashed a bright memory of Sweetness humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann hiding behind the door to hear her. How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together" (148), and obsessed by her lover's, Booker, absence Bride admits, "I don't want to think about him now. Or how empty, how trivial and lifeless everything seems now" (69). The influence of her abusive mother touches even Bride's behavior; in one of her meetings with her best friend, Brooklyn, and when the latter asked her if she too was molested by Sofia Huxley, Bride says "I shoot her the look Sweetness always put on when I spilled the Kool-Aid or tripped on the rug" (88). It seems a threatening look that even Brooklyn withdraws her words immediately.

The unpredictable intrusions of trauma in the present life of Bride and Booker do not only lead, in Judith Herman's words, to the development of an "abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness" (26) and which directly compels Bride and Booker to remember their traumatic past experiences, but to relive the same feelings and reenact the same situations of the past. Bride remembers that her toxic mother "Sweetness never attended parent-teacher meetings or volleyball games" (66), and reminds that she accused Sofia Huxley of molestation to win the admiration of Sweetness saying "[A]s we walked down the court house steps she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before..." (59). Yet, the intrusive experience was more painful as it involved the

reenactment of the rejection not from her mother this time, but from her lover Booker. Bride is “Dismissed” “Erased” (70) that “she felt she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life” (167).

Similarly, Booker experiences, to use Judith Herman words, “the involuntariness of the driven, tenacious and daemonic quality of traumatic reenactment” (30). Still unable to forget his brother’s tragic death, Booker as an adult tries to protect children from the same suffering as Adam and stops the act of molesting whenever it is possible. He reenacts this moment as he once beats a man who attempts to sexually assault some children near school. In another instance, Booker beats a couple who was taking drugs in the front seat of a car while their baby of about two years cries in the backseat. And, when Bride hands a helping hand to a freak predator she was forgiving, Sofia Huxley, the reenactment again reveals itself in Booker’s decision to leave Bride behind and to lead a solitary life as he explains in a conversation he had with his aunt, Queen:

“What caused the split?”  
“Lies. Silence. Just not saying what  
was true or why.”  
“About?”  
“About us as kids, things that  
happened, why we did things, thought  
things, took actions that were really  
about what went on when we were just  
children.”  
“Adam for you?”  
“Adam for me.” (256)

Then Queen adds:

“Well what? You lash Adam to your

shoulders so he can work day and night to fill your brain. Don't you think he's tired? He must be worn out having to die and get no rest because he has to run somebody else's life." (258).

In her description of the traumatic or intrusive memory, Herman describes the trauma survivor as living in a fragmentary and isolated life, reliving his traumatic experience through flashbacks or dreams for he is unable to utter them openly writing, "traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context; rather, they are encoded in the form of vivid sensation and images" (27). In *God Help the Child*, Bride's traumatic memory is caught in what Herman calls "fragmentary sensation, on image without context" (27). Here, Bride sees only visual scenes of her horrific childhood traumas without speaking them aloud. She imagines the little ugly obedient Lula Ann she was and how frightened that she correctly behaves at the court during Sofia Huxley's trial "When fear rules, obedience is the only survival choice. And I was good at it. I behaved and behaved and behaved. Frightened 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 mother like" (60). Bride also recalls the hostile atmosphere in her mother's house that sometimes she forgot what to do, "Leave the spoon in the cereal bowl or place it next to the bowl; tie her shoelaces with a bow or a double knot; fold her socks down or pull them straight up to the calf" (134).

As for her remembrance of Booker, Bride does not tell her friend about his unexpected disappearance and the last words he told her before leaving "You not the woman I want" which she describes as harder than a fist hitting. Rather, she replays their intimate moments in her imagination and feels them as Herman explains this state in the theorist Bessel van der Kolk's words is "the sensory and iconic form of memory".

Both, Bride and Booker, suffer intrusive/traumatic memories or what Janet defines as 'idée fixe' and Freud calls 'fixated to the trauma' (Herman 27), and explains that trauma survivors, like Booker and Bride, are attached to a specific part of their past incapable to liberate themselves from its chains and stay separated from the present and future (Freud 313).

#### **4.2. Borderline Personality Disorder in *God Help the Child***

As far as Borderline Personality Disorder is concerned, it investigates the survivor's childhood trauma history and his/her incapacity to build a full identity and consistent relationships. The American therapist, Judith Herman, devotes a large section to childhood abuse phenomena in, *Trauma and Recovery*, as the origin of adulthood psychological disturbances and explains that, "Unstable relationship is one of the major criteria for making this diagnosis [borderline personality disorder]" (90).

In the universe of *God Help the Child*, Bride and Booker, as childhood trauma survivors, display difficulties in maintaining close relationships, and a complete identity. Thus, in order to cope with their childhood traumas, previously mentioned, these two characters in their early adulthood strive to create an identity of their own. Bride relocates in California, changes her countrified name Lula Ann to Bride, and following her designer's advice, she wears all in white, "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" (64), "True or not, it made me, remade me" (67). Similarly, Booker quits his family, takes history and economics courses and sings in a street band.

Moreover, escaping their traumatic past, this pair finds refuge, security, and love in each other company. Bride's relation to Booker is this of idealized special caregiver who offers her care and protection, feeling, "curried, safe, owned" (99); the qualities she lacked as a child and in which Herman says, "By idealizing the person to whom she becomes

attached, she attempts to keep at bay the constant fear of being either dominated or betrayed” (81). Thus, to avoid exploitation or abandonment, Bride does not interfere in her companion’s privacy “I left him his private life” (109), and does not seek in their intimacy beyond his comprehension of her and the joy they have together, “What was important in our relation, other than our lovemaking and his complete understanding of me was the fun we had” (107). Booker himself a trauma witness also looks for peace in his relation with Bride who does not bother him and dig in his past.

Nevertheless, the intrusions of their traumas do not permit them the accomplishment of their intimate relationship. Both of them are recognized as borderline personality disorder sufferers when the childhood traumas reappear in their current life and defeat the romantic relationship between them and to put this in Herman’s words, “Interpersonal difficulties have been described most extensively in patients of borderline personality disorder” (90). At the moment the couple believe everything is perfect in their life; glamorous outfits, an exotic car, a luxurious apartment, extravagant night parties and mutual understanding, a ghost from the years of neglect and abuse comes back and tear them apart. This is exactly what Herman reflects in the following passage:

Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom. But the personality formed in an environment of coercive control is not well adapted to adult life. The survivor is left with fundamental problems in basic trust, autonomy, and initiative. She approaches the tasks of early adulthood—establishing independence and intimacy—burdened by major impairments in self-care, in cognition and memory, in identity, and in the capacity to form stable relationships. She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma. (80)

Bride And Booker try to divorce with their past and throw it back, but now they are both forced to meet their childhood pains again when Bride, to amend her big lie, decides

to visit Sofia Huxley. Booker recalls his raped brother refuses to stay with Bride who looks sympathizing a predator. Gradually they lose the connection between them, “he was not just ending our silly argument but ending us, our relationship” (21), Bride desperately denounces. Then Bride after this collapse turns to what Herman describes in *Trauma and Recovery* as “People with borderline personality disorder often suffer as well from major depression, substance abuse, agoraphobia or panic, and somatization disorder” (89). To illustrate these symptoms from the novel, Bride becomes alcoholic, “the more white wine the more I thought good riddance” (27). And her physic starts to revert to a little girl, her body hair suddenly vanishes, her earlobes close, and she strangely stops menstruating; this is what is referred in the quotation as somatization disorder. In addition, after the deformation she avoids people and stays home all time what is called agoraphobia.

The two trauma survivors are left with “fundamental problems in basic trust, autonomy and initiative” (Herman 80), things that caused their failure in building a stable relationship. Despite the beauty of their intimacy, the couple seems they do not trust each other enough to reveal some dangerous and hurtful truths of their past. Bride did not tell Booker that Huxley was innocent, that she did not molest anybody, that she invented the lie only to receive some love from her ‘Mama’. Booker too did never speak about his life, not even about his brother accident to her. Bride regrets his company says, I shouldn’t have trusted him... he told me nothing about himself (109). They remain alone on the stage and self-healing is their sole goal. There is no psychologist, no sociologist not even an old wiser to wake them and explain that trauma like a volcano does not die it just takes a rest and prepare for a sudden violent attack when the villagers settle in peace down the mountain.

The clinician Herman also explains that when the idealized caretaker fails to satisfy the traumatized individual’s wishes, the latter may belittle him, “Inevitably,

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” (81). Disappointed by the unexplained breakup, Bride went furious, raged and starts derogating Booker saying, “I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Samaritan things not directed to him. Selfish bastard. I paid the rent not him and the maid too. When we went to clubs and concerts we rode my jaguar or in cars I hired” (29).

When childhood trauma represents in the adult’s life or what it is called post traumatic stress disorder many of borderline personality disorder patients opt for suicide as the curative solution but Morrison in her novel elaborates a happy closure encouraging her reader with new birth. By the end, Bride and Booker come to understand that only by re-examining and re-interpreting the trauma they can move forward as Herman confirms, “the trauma is resolved only when the survivor develops a new mental “schema” for understanding what has happened” (30) and what she names reconnection. Booker concludes that only by letting Adam rest in peace his life can come back to normal as he puts it down in his notebook “I apologize for enslaving you in order to chain myself to the illusion of control and the cheap seduction of power. No slave owner could have done it better” (266), while Bride had taken this step long before when she decided to track him down to hear his reasons behind his sudden disappearance. And the couple wishes to protect their coming baby from “racism”, “abandonment”, “insult” (289) and all evil just like it is forwarded in *Trauma and Recovery*, “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 83).

## **Conclusion**

The chapter has looked into the phenomenon of childhood trauma, tracing its manifestation in white American literature, in the narratives of slavery writers and ultimately in many works of Toni Morrison. Accordingly, the analysis of the phenomenon has been in reference to many of works dealing with the issue such *The Bluest Eye* and *A Mercy*, but also other black writing such as Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird sings* and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*.

The chapter has also analyzed the different forms of childhood abuse the different characters in *God Help the Child* have endured. Ultimately, it has studied Bride and Booker's childhood trauma in the light of Judith Herman's ideas. The focus has been on the Herman's notion intrusion and borderline personality disorder.

## General Conclusion

Toni Morrison's literary career reads as a commitment to the burden of African Americans as her major works revisits traumatic moments in the black history and culture. She has voiced African-American experiences of racism, segregation and forms of deprivation in white America, and has particularly concentrated on the oppression inflicted upon children. Indeed, the theme of childhood abuse and trauma has been recurrent in her major works including *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, *Tar Baby* among others.

The present work has studied childhood trauma as represented in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* in the light of Judith Herman's ideas on Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. It has underlined black Children's experiences of trauma in the American setting and has outlined sexual abuse and neglect as two main forms of childhood molestation. As has been revealed in this thesis, trauma has long term effects, involving a breakdown in the individual psyche and a ruin of human relationships.

*God Help the Child* is filled with references to the theme of childhood abuse as it unveils the traumatic experiences children endure at the hands of society and caretakers. As revealed in this thesis, the characters in *God Help the Child* are deprived of parental love and compassion and left alone fighting to overstep the ghost of childhood horrific experiences to build up their future. Bride and Booker were the example of survival; they firmly battled the nightmare of the past to offer themselves a happy living in the present.

The thesis is divided into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion. The introduction has explored the theme of childhood trauma in literature and in particular African-American context. The first chapter has introduced the historical and literary context of *God Help the Child* by exploring the major historical events the text is aware of and the literary techniques the author has tried a hand on. The second chapter has dealt with Judith Herman theory of trauma, explaining her major ideas, including intrusion and

borderline personality disorder. The last chapter has profoundly studied the theme of childhood trauma in *God Help the Child* in the light of Judith Herman's ideas. It has reviewed the issue of child abuse, focusing mainly on its manifestation in African American literature. It has also looked into Morrison's *God Help the Child* as an epitome of childhood trauma, studying and analyzing the text's characters' experiences and subjection to abuse and molestation.

Furthermore, the study has confirmed the eligibility and suitability of Judith Herman's trauma theory in the analysis of trauma in *God Help Child*. The research has also validated the relevance of the novel's event to real life experiences that the abused characters of *God Help the Child* voice the same frightening experiences of millions of children in Africa, America, Asia. Ultimately, the thesis has looked for ways and possibilities to affect a change in terms of childhood abuse, focusing on the healing and therapy ethos implied from Judith Herma's ideas.

## End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Morrison, Toni. *God Help the Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2015, (113, all the references to the text are cited parenthetically).

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This Poem, Written by an African Child was Nominated for the Best Poem of 2005.

## **COLOUR**

When I born, I black; When I grow up, I black;  
When I go in sun, I black; When I scared, I black;  
When I sick, I black; And When I die, I still black.

And you White fellows:

When you born, you pink;  
When you grow up, you white;  
When you go in sun, you red;  
When you cold, you blue;  
When you scared, you yellow;  
When you sick, you green;  
When you die, you grey;

**And you call me coloured.**

