ASOS JOURNAL

The Journal of Academic Social Science

Akademik Sosyal Araştırmalar Dergisi, Yıl: 9, Sayı: 122, Kasım 2021, s. 266-280

ISSN: 2148-2489 Doi Number: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/ASOS.53911>

Yayın Geliş Tarihi / Article Arrival Date
20.10.2021

Yayınlanma Tarihi / The Publication Date
29.11.2021

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Gökçen KARA

Haliç Üniversitesi, Amerikan Kültür ve Edebiyatı

gokcenkara@halic.edu.tr

Orcid: 0000-0002-6048-3644

TONI MORRISON'IN *TANRI ÇOCUĞU KORUSUN* ADLI ESERİNDE ÇOCUKLUK ÇAĞI TRAVMALARI

Öz

Bu çalışma, Toni Morrison'un *Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun* adlı eserinde yer alan karakterlerin çocukluk çağı travmalarını incelemektedir. Morrison, son romanı *Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun*'da, önceki eserlerinde de incelediği bazı temel konuları yeniden ele almaktadır. Bu konlar: Batılı güzellik standartları, ırkçılık, toksik ebeveynlik ve çocuk istismarıdır. Bu romanla ilgili en dikkat çekici nokta, romanın merkezinde çocukluk travmalarının yer almasıdır. Morrison, bu eserde çocukların maruz kaldığı üç tür travmayı işlemektedir. Bunlar: Ebeveyn ihmali, çocuk cinsel istismarı, ve Afrikalı Amerikalıların acı dolu travmatik geçmişini tanımlayan ırksal travmadır. Ebeveyn sevgisinden yoksun olan romandaki çocuklar, doğdukları andan itibaren ihmal edilmiş ve aile içerisinde yakın bir bağ geliştirmemişlerdir. Onlar ayrıca ebeveynlerinin kendilerine aşıladığı öz saygısızlık duygusu nedeniyle hayatlarında onları etkileyen bireysel travmalara maruz kalmışlardır. Bu ırksal öz-saygısızlık, onların bir aidiyetsizlik hissine sahip olmalarına neden olmuştur. *Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun* karakterlerin önceki kötü ve korku dolu anılarına ve bu anıların bugüne olan etkilerine değinerek çocukluk döneminde ebeveynlerin veya istismarcıların neden olduğu travmaları deneyimleyen kişilerin hikayelerini anlatmaktadır. Bu çalışma, ırksal adaletsizliğin siyah çocukları nasıl travmaya sürüklediğini göstermektedir. Romanda çocuklar psikolojik veya fiziksel olarak acı çekmiştir. Romandaki travmatik çocukluk anıları nihayet Afrikalı Amerikalıların ortak hafızası haline gelmiştir. Bu çalışma, öncelikle çocukluk döneminde cinsel

istismara ve şiddete maruz kalan karakterlerin psikolojisini keşfetmeye odaklanmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın odak noktası, karakterlerin travmatik deneyimlerini ve bu travmalardan kurtulma stratejilerini incelemektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tanrı Çocuğu Korusun, çocukluk travmaları, ırk, toksik ebevenlik, toplumsal cinsiyet

CHILDHOOD TRAUMA IN TONI MORRISON'S *GOD HELP THE CHILD*

Abstract

This study examines the traumatic experiences of children in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. In her latest novel, Morrison takes up some of the major themes she has explored in her previous works: Western ideals of beauty, racism, toxic parenting, and child abuse. What is particularly striking about this novel is that it focuses on the trauma childhood trauma. Morrison reflects on three types of trauma that children suffer. These are: Parental neglect, child sexual abuse, and racial trauma, which describes the painful traumatic past of African Americans. Without parental love, the black children in the novel were neglected from birth and did not develop a close bond with any person in the family. They were subjected to individual traumas that affected their lives because their family instilled in them a sense of self-hatred. This racist self-hatred made them feel like they did not belong. *God Help the Child* makes reference to the characters' past memories of depression and anxiety and their impact on the present. This study shows how racial injustice drives African American children into trauma. In the novel, the children suffer psychologically or physically. The traumatic childhood memories of the novel eventually becomes the collective memory of African Americans. This study focuses primarily on exploring the psychology of the characters who were subjected to childhood sexual abuse and violence. The focus of this analysis is on the portrayal of the traumatic experiences and the strategies the characters use to try to overcome them.

Keywords: God Help The Child, childhood traumas, race, toxic parenting, gender

INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's main source of influence is African American culture and heritage. Most of her works show the author's ability to discuss colonial myths, racism, and the problems of poverty and injustice that the black community has long faced in white America. She tries to show what happened to African Americans in the past and sheds light the painful past of African Americans.

Morrison received the Nobel Prize for her ability to address to American reality in her works. Scholars have paid particular attention to her portrayal racial conflict because her extensive literary output covers a particularly turbulent period in the history of race in America, including the civil rights movement in the 1960s.

The Nobel Prize committee, describing her as one “who in novels characterized by visionary force and poetic import, gives life to an essential aspect of American

reality,” awarded Toni Morrison the Nobel Prize in literature in 1993. This award came after several others in Morrison’s career. She was nominated for the National Book Award in 1975 for *Sula**, earned the National Book Critics’ Circle Award in 1977 for *Song of Solomon**, and won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved**. Morrison was the first African American woman to receive the Nobel Prize in literature. (Beaulieu, 2003: 248)

African American literature struggles to claim the history and heritage of black Americans that American whites have destroyed. African American literature is recognized and becomes an inevitable part of the American literary canon in the 20th century. Morrison pays special attention to the national trauma of African Americans and demonstrates her deep compassion for their plight. Morrison's novels are full of allusions to trauma, especially prejudice against black mothers and children. Morrison intended to show the reader how individual trauma evolves into national trauma by tracing the history of black people from the beginnings of slavery to the twentieth century through the eyes of the protagonists of her books.

The childhood trauma has attracted many writers. By the end of the nineteenth century, American literature had become preoccupied with the childhood traumas. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, gave voice to the traumatized children and established a legacy that would continue to develop throughout the American literary canon, in works such as *The Bluest Eye*, and in contemporary literature. "All contemporary literature can be traced back to a single novel by Mark Twain called *Huckleberry Finn*." (Hemingway, 2016: 29) As Ernest Hemingway once famously said, Twain sets as a model for American writers and gives voice to the traumatized children and establishes a tradition that has influenced future works throughout the American canon. Childhood trauma, which began with Twain in the 19th century, became a prominent theme in African American literature.

Morrison constructs a complex web of childhood trauma in which all the protagonists have been abused in some way: Neglect, witnessing domestic violence, emotional and psychological abuse, molestation, sexual assault, and so on. Her firsthand experiences with trauma or their professional involvement in the social problems of their society and community may contribute to this theme.

I feel personally sorrowful about black white relations a lot of the time because black people have always been used as a buffer in this country between powers to prevent class war, to prevent other kinds of real conflagrations. . . . But in becoming an American, from Europe, what one has in common with that other immigrant is contempt for me [:] it’s nothing else but color. Wherever they were from, they would stand together. They could all say, “I am not that.” So in that sense, becoming an American is based on attitude: an exclusion of me. It wasn’t negative to them it was unifying. When they got off the boat, the second word they learned was “nigger.” . . . Every immigrant knew he would not come as the very bottom. He had to come above at least one group and that was us. (Morrison, “Pain of Being Black” 255)

In *God Help the Child*, Toni Morrison takes an in-depth look at child abuse and trauma, showing how devastating this act of childhood violence is to the well-being of victims and the health and development of society. Morrison most vividly depicts violence against children

through a group of characters who all have different histories of abuse. Morrison tried to express the pain of hundreds or even thousands of neglected and abused children, from *The Bluest Eye* (1970) to *God Help the Child* (2015). This strongly encourages us to consider the devastating consequences of this phenomenon. Her latest novel, *God Help the Child*, is a vivid account of years of childhood neglect and violence. She attempts to show how childhood trauma affects the development of identity. Neglect and sexual exploitation are the two types of childhood trauma that have been highlighted in research.

In Morrison's works, traumatized children are victimized by the dreadful impact of racist and sexist stereotypes and their subsequent patterns of exclusion and marginalization. In many cases these childhood traumas are so severe that those children are unable to cope with them and eventually resort to madness and/or violence. (Gallego, 2020)

Mar Gallego addresses the childhood traumas in the works of Toni Morrison and mentions that the child cannot cope with these traumas. This reminds us of *The Bluest Eye* and Pecola. Referring to Pecola's traumatic condition, Marc Q Conner (2008: 52) states in *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison*:

In The Bluest Eye, Pecola Breedlove forms a peculiarly unstable core for the book. Pecola has no specified place, and she floats on the peripheries of the community she longs to enter. When Claudia Macteer is first informed by her mother that Pecola will be staying with them for a few weeks, she is told simply that "a 'case' was coming—a girl who had no place to go." Pecola has become homeless because her drunken father has destroyed their home, "and everybody, as a result, was outdoors"

In *God Help the Child*, however, the abused children struggle to free themselves from their past traumas. At the end of the novel, they face their past and try to build a new life. *God Help the Child* highlights two significant periods in American history: the first concerns America's colonial history, slavery, which is represented in the novel by the character Sweetness; the second concerns modern American society, in which being black reflects beauty, which is also represented by the black character Bride.

Most of Toni Morrison's works seem to have a revelatory narrative structure, that is, one based on a central event that occurs in the past in the sequence of events narrated. *God Help the Child* follows this very structure, with Bride as the protagonist, whose story must be rebuilt to be properly understood. Bride is a black heroine who was born to light-skinned parents. Because of her dark skin, she was rejected by her father and despised by her mother. The child's dark skin humiliated her mother so much that she forced her daughter to say 'Sweetness' instead of Mama. She even tried to kill her by putting a blanket over her face and denying her any affection or care. Bride moves out of her mother's house a few years later and works as a regional manager for a cosmetics company called "YOU GIRL". She also has a romantic attachment to a man named Booker Starbern. This man occupies an important place in her life.

Even when Bride becomes successful, there is something that torments her and prevents her from living a happy life. Scenes from her past torment her and complicate her new life even more. As the story progresses and with a series of flashbacks, we learn that Bride accused her teacher, Sofia Huxley, of sexual violence against children in court and Sofia Huxley was sent to

prison for 15 years and paroled. To make up for this horrible childhood lie, Bride has procured several gifts and visits Sofia Huxley. The most intriguing thing about this story is that Bride made up this lie just to get her mother's attention. Bride is a character who is denied her mother's affection because of the colour of her skin and has to live with this trauma for the rest of her life.

Bride was cursed by her landlord when she was six years old after seeing him sexually abuse a young child: "I saw not a cat but a man. He was leaning over the short, fat legs of a child between his hairy white thighs. I leaned over the windowsill and stared. The man had the same red hair as Mr. Leigh." (Morrison, 2015:54) However, because her mother told her to "shut up," Bride was couldn't speak up for herself when she was harassed at school. These obscenities and bullies permanently scarred her. Bride's silence was broken at the age of 8 by accusing Sophia Huxley.

I was only eight years old, still little Bride, when I lifted my arm and pointed my finger at her.

"Is the woman you saw here in this room?" The lawyer lady smells of tobacco.

I nod.

"You have to speak, Lula. Say 'yes' or 'no.' "

"Yes."

"Can you show us where she is seated?"

I am afraid of knocking over the paper cup of water the lady lawyer gave me.

"Relax," says the prosecutor lady. "Take your time."

And I did take my time. My hand was in a fist until my arm was straight. Then I unfolded my forefinger. Pow! Like a cap pistol. Mrs. Huxley stared at me then opened her mouth as though about to say something. She looked shocked, unbelieving. But my finger still pointed, pointed so long the lady prosecutor had to touch my hand and say, "Thank you, Lula," to get me to put my arm down. I glanced at Sweetness; she was smiling like I've never seen her smile before— (Morrison, 27).

Bride lied so that his mother could take her hand and look at her proudly. She lost her ability to decide because she lacks affection. Given the importance of the need to be loved, it isn't surprising that Bride told such a bad lie. "I lied! I lied! I Lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her but she didn't do anything" (Morrison, 2015: 153). As Bride expresses her thoughts, it seems that she has accepted that her past is behind her and that she must leave her childhood trauma in the past in order to live a normal life in the present and in the future. It is evident that she has grieved over her past and that she is now beginning a new phase of her life. childhood abuse: "must build a new life within a radically different culture from the one they have left behind. [...] perhaps for the first time she can discover her own ambitions" (Herman, 1992: 196-197).

Brooklyn is Bride's closest companion and colleague. She too, like Bride, had a difficult childhood. She was raised by her mother, who ignored what her uncle had done to her. When Brooklyn was 14, she left her parents' home and struggled to survive from that day on. She

meets Bride through her job. Despite the fact that they are close friends and like spending time together, something doesn't seem right about their connection. The reason is their past. Both have been deprived of a loving and secure upbringing. As a result, both find it difficult to socialize and do not know how to act and what to speak.

Booker is the lover of Bride. At the beginning of the novel, without knowing why but probably because of his traumatic past, he quickly left Bride one day. Probably Booker believes that escaping his childhood trauma is the best way to deal with it. Booker's story is gradually revealed. His older brother, Adam, was murdered when he was a young child. The event drastically changed Booker's life and Adam's death still affects his life when we meet him in adulthood. It is impossible for Booker to continue his life. The man who murdered Adam and five other boys was found six years after Adam's murder and convicted of sexual assault. Booker is depressed and probably just struggling with his own life. When Booker meets Bride, his life unexpectedly takes on new meaning. He thinks their current relationship is perfectly fine. Nevertheless, Booker leaves her after six months without trying to explain it to Bride. Bride initially admits that Booker ran away. She has had to deal with arrogant, dishonest, hypocritical men all her life. However, she immediately realizes that her relationship with Booker was different. He was unlike any other man she's ever had in her life. She decides to find him. Her journey to find Booker is complicated and dramatic because she was in a car accident. However, this accident was the beginning of a second story. A couple named Steve and Evelyn rescued Bride and took her to their home where she met abused and abandoned Rain. Rain is a young girl who experienced a much worse childhood than she did. During this time, her friendship with Rain became an important experience for her and she realized the importance of creating a safe and happy place for a child. Eventually, Bride recovers some time later and she must leave Rain and her caretakers to find Booker.

Bride then finds Booker in Whisky Valley and their search for Booker eventually leads to an intense and dramatic situation between the two. The trauma inflicted on them in their younger years has exhausted them both. Bride confesses that she once lied and that Huxley was innocent, and Booker tells her that he left her because he thought she would forgive a pedophile like the one who once sexually molested and killed his brother Adam.

Still, Booker and Bride may have better days ahead. Bride explains that she is pregnant. The child would be a new beginning for them, and that child would have a happy childhood they never had.

The world is still plagued by slavery, even many years after its abolition. Not only does racism persist today, but so does its intensity, which African-American people experience unconsciously. Slavery led to strong discourses in society, and based on these discourses, dynamics such as race, skin color, and gender were established. When looking at the character of Pecola in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, one can see that she is an antithesis to the Western perception of beauty and the ideology of "white is beautiful". *God Help the Child* is also about a young black child - Bride - whose world is destroyed by dramatic racism. Her parents have despised her since the day she was born because of her dark skin. Toni Morrison reveals the sense of degradation that the ideology of beauty imposed by the white and male system causes in black people. However, Morrison also challenges this white, male hegemony. When Bride grew up, she was a very beautiful and attractive woman. Unlike Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, the men find Bride very beautiful and are impressed by her. On the one hand, Morrison emphasizes

that blacks can be beautiful and challenges the perception of white beauty. On the other hand, Morrison illustrates the inferiority complex of black characters by stating that the concept of beauty is a mechanism constructed by the Western, white, male system. Bride leaves home when she comes of age, adopts a new name, Bride, and hides her blackness by dressing all in white. She tries to cover her blackness with white fabric in different ways.

The theme of motherhood runs through contemporary American literature. But some narratives seem to neglect the mothers and focus on the daughters' perspective. Narratives that "focus only on the daughter's perspective and relegate the mother to the object role are collaborating with patriarchy. Women are sometimes clearly described as mothers in patriarchy and therefore not treated as individuals. With the main goal of parenthood, women's personalities as individuals are ignored. According to Rebecca Ferguson (2007: 16)

In Toni Morrison's fiction, the connection between mothers and children takes on a central importance... partly because this theme (and the experience of black women in general) had long been neglected by many black male writers, and partly because heritage and responsibility became particularly urgent in the context of motherhood.

Morrison highlights the impact of black women's backgrounds as mothers in her novels. Morrison opposes the traditional portrayal of women in Africa as prominent mothers while challenging the notion of motherhood. The figure of the black woman has traditionally been associated with the black matriarch. This myth confirms the notion of a selfless woman who is born to be a mother. Morrison's novels move further away from stereotypes that essentialize the role of women as mothers in order to portray the diverse experiences of the characters. When it comes to the black woman, Morrison challenges with stereotypes such as the traditional black matriarchal figures who are protective and powerful, whose selflessness is equated with their loving and caring qualities. According to Morrison, these destroy the identity of the mother as an individual. Morrison's portrayal of motherhood contrasts with the socially sanctioned idealization of motherhood. Her mothers are transformative agents who confront the harsh realities of a segregated society.

Toni Morrison's purpose, according to Yoshinobu (2001), is to create a body of work that is simultaneously artistic and political, and she has achieved this goal. Morrison's work addresses the tensions between historical narratives and mythic narratives, particularly between African American history and myth. Morrison depicts the painful traumatic history of African Americans

Historical Context of the Novel

As an important moment in the history of African Americans, the Middle Passage is symbolic of the transplantation of Africans to America, where their tragedy of slavery and racial oppression begins. Pearl Sharp (2007: 6) states:

The forced voyage of Africans across the Atlantic is usually called the transatlantic slave trade or Middle Passage. It also has been given other names that more adequately reflect the pain and hardship enslaved Africans endured. These terms include the Black Holocaust, and in some African countries, le mort, from the French term for death.

The term "Middle Passage" refers to the trade by which manufactured goods and

weapons are shipped from England to Africa in exchange for boats overloaded with African slaves who are sold to white masters to work on American soil. Danger, suffering, cruelty, rape, suicide, and death are omnipresent on this dark journey to America. Several Africans arrived in America and began life as slaves on the plantations under the brutal rule of the white masters.

Racial slavery began in 1680 when many Africans were forcibly brought to America to alleviate labor shortages. In the 1770s, the practice of slavery was approved and officially recognized. In addition, many laws were passed in the southern states to restrict the lives of blacks. Not only were slaves separated from their native African families and cultures, but they were also restricted to the lands that could be sold and bought and were subject to violence and danger of death. They were subjected to constant physical violence for no reason. Women were also physically and sexually abused. Children were denied human rights, including parental care and education. Debates over slavery between the South and the North and opposing views on the removal of slaves to the newly conquered territories of the West led to the Civil War. The Civil War is the brutal struggle between the North and the South in the United States. After several battles and clashes between the two sides, the war ended in 1865 with the North winning. After the Civil War, the American country rebuilt what the war had ruined, especially in the South, but mostly to preserve the rights of the blacks who were freed. After Reconstruction, racism reasserted itself; the Southern states also passed laws to enforce racial discrimination. The influence of slavery continued to dominate American history and troubled black Americans for over a century until the Civil Rights Movement. From the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, the civil rights movement focused attention on the issues facing African Americans on the national and international stage. The civil rights movement grew out of bigotry and barbarism toward the black population in the South.

Racial discrimination is a tension between two races based on other body characteristics such as skin colour, nose type, eye colour, and lip shape. This can refer to social, caste and ethnic class. Intra racism or what is known as colorism is a type of segregation within the same racial group that believes in white supremacy and the inferiority of dark-skinned people. The problem of colorism began with slavery in America when slave owners impregnated their black female slaves and gave birth to babies with lighter skin. These babies were known as mulattoes.

African American literature has also been dedicated to stopping and eradicating interracial brutality. Many Black American authors have addressed this issue and the negative consequences of this practice. Toni Morrison, for example, frequently talks about inter- and intra-racial brutality in her novels. Colorism is one of the major themes in Toni Morrison's latest novel *God Help the Child*. In the novel, Sweetness's family is a good example of the reproduction of ethnic ideologies. Sweetness's mother had to pick up a Bible when she got married that is only for blacks because the other Bible is available to whites. However, she has access to something that other blacks do not have because of their lighter skin: She can wear dresses and use the women's restrooms in department stores. As mentioned in the novel, Sweetness's grandmother married a white man and later cut off contact with all of her black relatives. At the same time, colorism affected Sweetness so much that it prevented her from loving her own child. She hated her own daughter because she was black.

Childhood Traumas in *God Help the Child*

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* is revealed in the repetition of past horrific experiences of the characters. All the characters in the novel, whether black or white, are under the influence of traumas from the past. It is true that racial discrimination in itself is a cause of trauma, but the main cause of trauma is parental indifference and lack of love.

According to Judith Herman, unwanted flashbacks to a traumatic experience inhibit the normal development of the victim's life. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, she calls one form of trauma Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, referring to "[T]he syndrome that follows prolonged, repeated trauma" (2015: 87). Trauma is repetitive, according to Herman. The situation of the characters in the novel illustrates Herman's theory. No matter how much their lives change, each of them is stuck in their traumatic past.

Repeated trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality. The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness. (Herman, 2015: 96)

As Herman stated, children who are victims of trauma need a safe environment. However, since the abused children in the novel are neglected by their own parents, they can never find the safe environment they need and cannot get rid of their past traumas throughout their lives. Series of tragedies in the novel starts with the birth of Bride. Even at her birth, her mother feels repulsed by her because of her dark skin. Sweetness says: "Midnight black, Sudanese black" (Morrison, 3). The hostility intensifies when Bride's father abandons them because he believes he cannot have a daughter as dark as Bride. "Parents unwittingly pass hatred to their children, thereby 'reproducing the enemy who has humiliated them over and over'" (Sacks, 2015). Sweetness' constant rejection of her child because of the colour of her skin is the worst kind of emotional abuse.

The racialized culture has greatly influenced the life and parenting style of Sweetness. Morrison reveals how a racially biased culture has a profound impact on parenthood and the tragic consequences for children. Morrison perfectly embodies self-destructive and toxic forms of parenting in Sweetness, "who has been poisoned by the strain of color and class anxiety that persists in black communities" (Walker, 2015). Morrison deconstructs stereotypes of black mothers who are protective and powerful and develops a concept of 'toxic motherhood' which manifests in two ways: first, abuse and second, neglect. Because of her mixed-race identity, Sweetness finds herself in a marginal and tragic situation that relegates her to her two-world consciousness, and she becomes a victim of the racist culture in which she finds herself. Sweetness's self-loathing, which impairs her ability to be a good mother, is the result of her absorption of the patriarchal racist rhetoric she has internalized. In the patriarchal institution of parenthood, she finds herself trapped and forced to acknowledge her powerlessness.

Bride, Morrison's female heroine, is ostracized because of her black skin color. Bride's parents, relatively light-skinned blacks, suffered racism during the Jim Crow era of racial discrimination, so having a black child was a humiliation for them. Her mother, Sweetness, has rejected her from birth and hates her guts, as she says at the very beginning 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 Bride’s father” (Morrison, 2015: 12).

Sweetness has lived under racial oppression in a world of racism and prejudice. Therefore, it is a shame for her to have a black child. Sweetness's harmful patriarchal parenting style propagates racist ideas and attitudes that she inherits from her society. Her inability to instill a good racial image in her daughter stems from her own self-hatred. Bride's self-esteem is destroyed by her strictness and lack of love. Similarly, Bride's father saw her as '[a] stranger, more than an enemy' (Morrison, 1995: 16). He initially believed that Sweetness had betrayed him. For Sweetness, accused of betrayal, life was literally difficult. He reflected this challenge to his own daughter as hatred. Sweetness detests her daughter's dark skin and avoids kissing her. She reacts to Bride with violent reactions such as yelling at her and locking her in a room. The bride was also barred from saying 'mother', she was forced to say 'Sweetness'.

For many African American children before and after the civil rights movement, the colour of their skin is the cause of abuse and suffering. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness notes that they are subjected to racism and even racism prevents them from loving their own child. ["I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect him. I had to. All because of skin privilege" (Morrison, 2015: 78). Bride knows that the reason for her insincere relationship and unkindness towards her mother is her blackness. The distance her mother puts between them angers her so much that she asks her mother to slap her. Parental neglect causes children to grow up in complicated and traumatic ways. Bride longs for her mother's love and affection and only gets it when she tells lies and accuses Sofia Huxley, a black young teacher, of sexual exploitation of children in the courtroom. Bride supports white values and wants to attract people's attention and admiration. She says:

[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. (Morrison: 2015: 101)

In addition to unkindness and apathy, another trauma children face is sexual abuse. Booker's brother Adam Starbern was captured, raped and murdered. Herman's trauma theory involves not only the victims but also the witnesses of trauma, as the following statement shows: “Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic trauma.” (Herman, 2015: 1) This is the situation Booker finds himself in throughout the novel. However, Booker is more traumatized by the murder of his older brother by a child molestor. Since this event intrudes and troubles Booker every time he tries to start a new life, he, like Bride, fails to erase his terrible experience from his memory once and for all.

Booker’s aunt, Queen's life also illustrates child neglect: “[S]he abandoned some of them [her children] to marry other men. Lots of other men. And she didn’t or couldn’t take the kids with her. Their fathers made sure of that” (169). As a young woman, Queen believed that

being beautiful was enough, but she soon discovered that it was not. She married several times and she was unable to raise any of the children beyond the age of twelve. Queen lives alone in the woods, despite having a lot of children, she has no close relationship with any of them. She has only their pictures to look at.

While the story focuses on the romance of Bride and Booker and the events surrounding their separation, there are other characters in this novel who are victims of trauma. Hannah, for example is another character who suffers from sexual assault. Hannah is the daughter of Queen, Booker's aunt, who was also the victim of a sexual assault. Like Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*, she was raped by her father when she was eight years old, and both Hannah and Pecola were neglected by their mothers, who gave them no support or help in overcoming their trauma.

Brooklyn is a very close friend of Bride. She too has her own history of sexual harassment. Brooklyn was sexually abused by his uncle. The worst part of the trauma was that her mother did not protect her. *God Help the Child* draws attention to the abused children who have been neglected by their mothers, and the novel raises their voices. Brooklyn is a young woman who has struggled throughout her life to come to terms with her circumstances. One of the most formative aspects of Brooklyn's upbringing was her drug-addicted mother, who never saw Brooklyn's violent uncle. Apparently as a result of her early trauma, Brooklyn claims to have acquired the ability to predict what will happen next. After her childhood experiences, she now claims to have developed an inner sense that warns her when danger is approaching. She cites a number of instances in which she was correct, including:

Like when the landlady stole the money lying on or dining room table [...] or when my uncle started thinking of putting his fingers between my legs again, even before he knew it himself what he was planning to do. (Morrison, 2015: 139)

She must fend for herself and defend herself from predators while still a child. To Brooklyn, men are nothing more than a source of danger. Morrison has developed a new character that is different from those she usually writes about. Brooklyn is a white girl, but her situation is just as traumatic as Bride and Booker's.

Another child victim of sexual abuse is six-year-old Rain. She was both raped and abandoned by her mother. Rain explains her poor and pathetic condition:

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. (Morrison, 2015: 174)

Bride finds a friend in Rain; they communicate in the simple way of children. The interactions between the two form the remaining focus of the story. Rain has a transformative and therapeutic effect on Bride. In a direct conversation between Rain and Bride, we learn of Rain's sexual assault before Steve and Evelyn discovered her under the rain and renamed her Rain for her purity, innocence, and unspoiled nature. Rain confesses in Bride that she is sexually abused and prostituted for money by her mother. When she speaks out against this behavior, she is shown the door. Rain, a six-year-old child, faces homelessness, loneliness, hunger and fear on the streets. That's why she was startled and fled when Steve touched her on

the shoulder during their first encounter. Rain sees in Bride a sister, a companion, and a safe world. Moreover, Bride is also her protector, for she rescued 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. (Morrison, 2015: 180)

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* explores the role of recurring events from the past in shaping the present. The memories of a traumatic event, Judith Herman argues, interfere with the ordinary course of the victim's life. This means that the effects of trauma are not felt immediately but have a profound impact years later. "Long after the danger has passed, traumatized people relive the event as if it were constantly replaying itself in the present" (Herman, 26). Bride's mind remains stuck in her childhood trauma even as an adult. She states:

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 (Morrison, 2015: 59).

Bride was traumatized because her mother did not touch him. When Bride had her first bleeding, she was slapped by her mother for soiling her bedding. The bride was so happy, interestingly, because she needed her mother's touch so badly. "Her shock was tempered by the satisfaction of being touched, handled by a mother who avoided any physical contact whenever possible" (Morrison, 2015: 134). Bride knows, however, that this touch is not affection or tenderness. She compares her mother's beatings to Sofia Huxley's. "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" (Morrison, 2015: 135).

According to Herman, "the adult survivor is at great risk of repeated victimization at adult life" (2015: 81). Aside from being neglected by her mother, Bride is also ignored by society because of her skin color. Bride is frustrated when she remembers how she was humiliated by being black. Her classmates yell racist terms such as "nigger", "coon, topsy, sambo, ooga booga".

Herman's theory concerns not only the victims, but also those who witnessed this victimization. She states, "Witnesses as well as victims are subject to the dialectic trauma" (2015: 1). Booker is an example of this situation. He is a "tortured black trumpet player [. . .] who has his own dark past regarding child abuse. Booker's elder brother, who he worshipped, was murdered by a pedophile, a serial killer, when the two were kids, a tragedy to which Booker has clung" (Shriver, 2015). Booker is another victim who has been profoundly affected by a sexual assault in his family and subsequent events, including the death of his older brother. This tragic event haunted his memory and affected his entire life. "The scars inflicted on Bride and Booker by their childhoods are metaphors of sorts for the calamities of history and the hold they can exert over a country's or a people's dreams" (Kakutani, 2015). Morrison emphasizes how childhood abuse and neglect lead to psychologically damaged adults as a result of their experiences. After losing his brother, Booker's father has refused to play music. Booker is depressed and believes that life without trumpet is too much for him, so he goes to his father

and asks if he can take trumpet lessons. Music is one of the ways Booker copes with the pain Adam's death has caused in his life. Therefore, towards the end of the novel, he throws away his trumpet, claiming that he does not need it anymore.

Sofia Huxley is another character who suffered trauma. She too had to suffer, submit, humiliate and keep silent in prison for fifteen years, but when she was released she confessed 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 (Morrison, 2015: 122).

Morrison's fictionalized account of the prosecution of Sofia Huxley and her husband in *God Help the Child* is based on two true events. The first accusation is from 1905 against Anna Julia Cooper. The second is a 2010 "story" that inspired Heather Piper and Pat Sikes, educators in the UK, to investigate.

Sikes heard a story told by the wife of a secondary school teacher who had been accused of sexually assaulting a female student. The woman's husband had denied the allegation and had maintained his innocence throughout a 6-month inquiry conducted by local social service child protection investigators and the police. The case had eventually been dismissed when the student confessed that she had made up the tale [to] get back at him and take revenge for the humiliation she claimed to have experienced after the teacher had verbally chastised her in public for shouting out and swearing in class. (Piper and Sikes, "Researching Allegations," 295)

Sofia Huxley's release from prison after a fifteen-year sentence for child molestation is a "small, insignificant reminder," as Judith Herman puts it (Herman, 2015: 26), that causes Bride to reconsider her past traumas. Bride enters an alienated world, afflicted by past wounds and the need for maternal love:

[B]ride quickly dashed a bright memory of Sweetness humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Bride hiding behind the door to hear her. How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together" (Morrison, 2015: 61)

The position of the mother in a person's life, whether child or adult, is crucial not only for laying a solid foundation, but also for providing comfort and hope in difficult times. Based on Bride's situation, it can be said that a child who has been neglected by his/her mother has a higher risk of developing long-term trauma.

Conclusion

Toni Morrison, a pioneer of the African American literary movement, challenges white supremacy in the American literary tradition. By denouncing the atrocities of racism and segregation suffered by blacks in America, she succeeded in bringing black American literature to the forefront. She emphasizes the importance of the past in shaping the present and highlighting the cultural heritage of blacks, their culture, and their race. Her writing is rich in themes. Black themes of skin color, sexism, slavery, maternal relationships, the exploitation of black children, the development of a multicultural mosaic, and a unique piece of literature are

skillfully woven together.

Toni Morrison speaks about the burden of African Americans in her major works, in which she rehashes horrific events in black history and culture. She has spoken out against African Americans' experiences of racism, segregation, and other forms of disadvantage in white America, with a particular focus on the oppression of children. Indeed, the theme of childhood abuse and trauma appears in many of her major works, including *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Tar Baby*.

Racism has always been the cause of many problems for African Americans. Due to societal prejudice, the aesthetic value of black and white skin causes psychological problems among members of the black community, as well as self-loathing, which basically causes feelings of self-inadequacy. A major focus of the current work is the trauma experienced by black children in the United States and sexual abuse and neglect, which have been identified as the two most common forms of child abuse. As this study has shown, trauma has long-term consequences.

The protagonists in *God Help the Child* are deprived of parental love and compassion and must struggle alone with the ghosts of their traumatic childhood memories to build a better future for themselves. Bride and Booker were the epitome of tenacity. They resisted the nightmare of the past in order to secure a comfortable existence in the present.

At the end of the novel, Bride confronts Booker at the end of the novel, explaining why she visited a "child molester" in prison, how she lied to get some affection from her mother. On the other hand, Booker informs her about the murder of his brother by a sex offender. Confessions of two lovers and their confrontation with the past save them from haunting memories of the past. Sharing painful life experiences from childhood with empathetic listeners becomes helpful and serves as a therapeutic coping mechanism for them. True repentance and taking responsibility for her life results in the Bride's feminine qualities being restored and her rebirth ushered in. The optimistic conclusion of *God Help the Child* evidences a healthy dose of hope. No doubt the psychological and emotional wounds of childhood that fill this story will eventually be healed. Most of the main characters, who are themselves true survivors of child abuse, undergo a cathartic change in their lives. Rain discovers in the happy couple the potential to mature and heal from the scars of their childhood. Bride and Booker also seem to come to terms with their terrible pasts. Both eventually realizes that what connected them and held them together was the commonality in their past, namely childhood traumas.

In the novel the lack of love and the sense of trauma are intertwined and complementary. Toni Morrison has achieved her goal of bringing abuse and neglect to the forefront of society through her novel. She has once again managed to draw the reader into the lives of fictional characters in her own unique and amazing way. Morrison skillfully shows that all types of childhood abuse are still prevalent by portraying how most of her characters suffer from traumas sustained as a result of having witnessed or been the target of one or more forms of child abuse.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beaulieu, H. (2003). *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Conner, M. C. (2008). *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison: Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson: University press of Mississippi.

- Ferguson, R. H. (2007). *Rewriting black identities: Transition and exchange in the novels of Toni Morrison*. Bruxelles: P.I.E. Peter Lang.
- Gallego, M. (2020). New Critical Essays on Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*: Race, Culture, and History (pp. 89-123) (A. K. Eaton, M. L. Montgomery, & S. A. Stave, Authors). Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Hemingway, E., Pfeiffer, P., Hemingway, P., Hemingway, S. A., & Shenton, E. (2016). *Green Hills of Africa*. New York: Scribner.
- Herman, J. L. (2015). *Trauma and Recovery*. London: Pandora.
- Kakutani, Michiko (2015): "Review: In Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, Adults are Hobbled by the Pain of the Past". The New York Times. April 16, 2015. <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/books/review-in-toni-morrison-s-god-help-the-child-adults-are-hobbled-by-the-pain-of-the-past.html>
- Morrison, T. (2015). *God Help the Child: Book group*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- . "The Pain of Being Black." Interview by Bonnie Angelo. 1989. *Conversations with Toni Morrison*, edited by Danille Taylor-Guthrie. UP of Mississippi, 1994, pp. 255–61.
- Sacks, S. (2015, April 17). The deliberate message of Toni Morrison. Retrieved October 18, 2021, from <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-deliberate-message-of-toni-morrison-1429299235>
- Sikes, Pat and Heather Piper. "Researching Allegations of Sexual Misconduct in Schools: The Need for a Narrative Approach," *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*. December 2011 8(4). 294–303.
- Sharp, S. P., & Schomp, V. (2007). *The Slave Trade and the Middle Passage*. New York: Marshall Cavendish Benchmark.
- Shriver, Lionel (2015): "Lionel Shriver: Toni Morrison Picked the Wrong Subject in *God Help the Child*". *Newstatesman*. April 25, 2015. <http://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2015/04/lionel-shriver-toni-morrison-picked-wrong-subject-god-help-child>
- Walker, Kara. "Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*." The New York Times April 13, 2015.
- Yoshinobu, H. (2001). Richard Wright, Toni Morrison, and the African —Primal Outlook Upon Life. *Southern Quarterly* 40(1), 139-53. Retrieved from <http://Digitalcomons.kent.edu/engbub/8> [Accessed 15th of July 2019].