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## The Theme of “Child Abuse” in Contemporary English Literature

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### **Abstract:**

Every child has a right to a loving and secure upbringing. However a childhood lost to abuse can never be reclaimed. Children are most exploited and abused members of society. For a victim of childhood abuse, to confront the truth and the damage that persists through adulthood is not an easy thing. In contemporary English literature we have writers who are a voice of society and reveal to us the dark hidden realities of society and present them in agreeable manner. One of the common lessons that these works teach is that people who know you, hurt you. The present paper tries to trace briefly the contemporary English literature on child abuse. The paper also analyses the consequences of abuse on the victim's life and how it scars them for lifetime and at the same time gives opportunity to the victims to come up as survivors.

### **Keywords: Abuse, victim, neglect, contemporary.**

Contemporary Literature about child abuse differs from the earlier literature in a sense that it no longer depicts the victimised portrayals of child but deals with the anxieties, dilemmas and queries of the child who is subject to abuse. This shift in the stance of writers towards child abuse is a manifestation of change. Contemporary literature is no longer an infliction on the mind and body of victim but tries to uncover the criminal nature of the abusers. The genre has entered a new realm of facing the reality and accepting it as a grave problem to be addressed with great concern so that there are solutions to end this evil of exploitation and criminalisation of children. Tackling this problem is not enough but writers are trying to redefine the problem so that the victims no longer hold themselves responsible for abuse. We know the fact that even in happy societies we have children who are subjected to abuse. It was only in 19<sup>th</sup> century that the concern for child protection was raised and we have Dickens novels presenting problems of child abuse and trying to stir conscience of readers before that we have mere portrayals of children as victims of abuse like in Richardson's Pamela and Fielding's Joseph Andrews

The popular literary theories have opened a new vista towards the study of child abuse and have helped to come up with methods of coping and survival of the victims of child abuse. At present we have different genres to help the writers to express their opinions and views on child abuse but the credit to the recognition and acceptability of the issue goes to readers also which means that society is gradually accepting child abuse as a problem to be addressed. Writing about child abuse allows the victims a power over their tormentors. Popular literary theories consider it as a form of oppression known as neo or new oppression. In this oppression the children are granted no voice, no bodily integrity and no world of their

own. Here the oppressed is a child who is vulnerable and weak than his oppressor and can be overpowered easily. Writers like Toni Morrison write about child abuse which was unspeakable before some centuries and tries to bring to forefront these social evils. She states in the *Bluest Eye* that; ‘I focused therefore on something as grotesque as the demonization of an entire race could take root inside the most delicate member of the society; a child, the most vulnerable, a female.’ (170)

Contemporary literature deals in depth with the consequences and the predicament of child abuse. It gives readers a psychological insight to the ongoing tussle in the victims mind as a child and also a grownup. By acknowledging child abuse not only as physical but psychological mutilation in words of psychologists. ‘There is little doubt that child abuse and childhood experience of loss, where no effective opportunity is provided for the child to make sense of these experiences constitutes unresolved trauma which is likely to manifest itself in some way at a later date. [Boswell, 1997:35]. The studies have shown the potential impact of abuse on physical, emotional, behavioural, social and educational aspect of a victim lasting long into an individual’s adult life. This genre has gained momentum in addressing the problem. Psychologically and has given it altogether a new dimension, also understanding a child from sexuality point of view. Such theories have helped writers to identify different forms of child abuse which is no longer physical negligence but also not so openly talked about sexual one. The Contemporary Literature is breaking the constraints of culture and society about different facets of child abuse it is trying to bring forth the needs and justice of victims of child abuse by giving them a voice through works. Child abuse as evil has been happening since centuries but what has changed is that people are now talking about and is no longer pushed under carpet. We have strong voices all over the world in literature like Toni Morrison who has been rightly called author for children. Her novels bring up the issue of child abuse strongly.

In one of her novels *God Help the Child* there are many children and they all suffer from some form of abuse. Like her other works Morrison reminds us how the children endure the most of society’s ills. Her novels also depict the character of perpetrators which varies from each other.

Recent years have seen growing concern regarding the issue of child abuse which is increasing at alarming rate all over the world. The statistical records even though high are not the actual number because in most of the cases the victim do not disclose their abuse due to the fear of not being believed and understood. According to the study of WHO ‘any maltreatment which can be a potential harm to child’s health ‘is abuse’. Child abuse leaves a scarred mind for a lifetime. The victim being a child who is unable to retaliate in any way, There must be anger, hate and fear running through a child’s mind that he can do nothing against it except to hold it all inside. This breach of trust at the hands of their guardians leaves them unable to trust and make relationships. The child’s thought becomes irreversibly altered and results in negative schema. And set of beliefs. This negative schema often affects an individual’s ability to form and maintain relationships throughout life. Survivors often experience conflicting relationships and disordered lifestyles [2] the prerequisite for a healthy

brain development is a stable and secure childhood and if a child has repeated abuse and is left unaddressed they are at a greater risk of behavioural and emotional problems.

Another important point which this study tries to make is that the abused child is no longer alone in this battle but there is someone who understands them. Reading such works is a healing experience as the victims can identify themselves with the character and in this way it gives a vent to their feelings by openly addressing the topics of violence and abuse. The writers give readers chances to reflect on incidents of violence in their own lives, which can open doors to talk about what is happening. Contemporary writers writing about child abuse have opened new paths for prevention and healing of victims. In the *Colour Purple* Alice Walker tells the story of Celie, a young black girl growing up in Georgia. In a series of letters to God and her sister Nettie, Celie tells the story of her life ranging from the trauma of sexual abuse to her true happiness. In the opening letter to Nettie she writes ;

‘You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mamma. He start to choke me, saying you better shut up and git used to it. but I don’t never git used to it. and now I feels sick every time I be the one to cook’.

In Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* Pecola’s father Cholly, is often drunk and he beats his children and wife. He rapes his own daughter and as a result, she becomes pregnant with his child. Pecola is an easy prey because she is a child and has no power over adults. This abuse leaves Pecola in a psychological trauma.

‘Each night Pecola prayed for blue eyes. In her eleven years, no one noticed Pecola. But with blue eyes, she thought, everything would be different. She would be so pretty that her parents would stop fighting. Her father would stop drinking. Her brother would stop running away. If only she could be beautiful. If only people would look at her. When someone finally did, it was her father, drunk. He raped her. Soon she would bear his child.....’

Another Morrison’s novel *God Help the Child*, there are many children who suffer from some form of abuse. The main character is rejected by her mother because of her skin tone, Rain is a child who is prostituted by her mother.

In Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* we have a story of high school freshman Melinda Sordino who is a victim of abuse and its manifestations in her adult life and her self-hatred. Once said in an interview Anderson said, I have learned that *Speak* is not just a book about rape. It is a book about depression’.

One strong message that these works give that it is the abuser who is to be hated and not the abused. There is nothing wrong inherently in victims of abuse and therefore there is no reason to be depressed about it.

Child abuse falls into four categories; Physical abuse, Sexual abuse, Emotional abuse and Neglect. It is a complex phenomenon with multiple causes and occurs in range of circumstances. Child abuse is exploitation of weak by the powerful. Claudia says in *The Bluest Eye* ‘adults do not talk to us-they give us directions. They issue orders without providing information’ These lines of Claudia clearly reveal the parent children relationship.

What worries the writers about child abuse as a greatest evil in the world is its magnanimity. Modern man is becoming urbanised and modernised at the cost of annihilation of protective culture important for the healthy growth of a child. The natural environment of protection and safety have been demolished and modern man is becoming mechanised. The responsibility lies on our shoulders as how can we deal with the problem.

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