

Vol. 8, Issue-II (April 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

THE CRITERION

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Peer-Reviewed, Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Sr. No. 40]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

Impact of Child Abuse and Effects of Post Memory in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Article History: Submitted: 20/02/2017, Revised: 02/04/2017, Accepted: 05/04/2017, Published: 30/04/2017

Abstract:

This paper attempts to discuss in simple terms how abuse during childhood confounds one's mind until later in adulthood and how they find relief from this fog, either on their own or with help from the greatest healer 'time'. Apart from physical abuse, even hurtful, vengeful words and actions leave lasting and haunting impression on the young minds, hampering growth and survival as adolescents and adults. On the issue of reasons for an abuser choosing to hurt a child, (physically or verbally), there are quite many – obsession with skin colour, physical beauty of a child and the innocence attached to it, pervert sexual orientation to mention a few. Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) brings out few of these issues of child abuse and it is intended to study the hurt consciousness of the abused in the story and how they resurface towards their journey to normalcy.

Colour a vibrant word with shades of meaning is the only word probably that carries both positive and negative connotation. This notion, small as it may sound, has led to serious psychological breakdowns resulting in people resorting to every idea under the sun to become 'the fairest of all'. A brief look at the protagonist of 'God Help the Child' helps strike a chord with colour-obsessed consciousness across the globe.

Keywords: Physical beauty, obsession, colour, child abuse, hurt consciousness

Introduction

Childhood has a connotation of happiness for most people; with vivid memories of playing, running, mischief; colour and enthusiasm. This may not stand true for many who relate childhood to some miserable event that took place in their lives at that point in time. Apart from the domestic, financial and emotional happenings in a child's family which contribute to the development of the child, there are other invisible things that leave an indelible impressions in the child's life. As with most things in the world, there seem to be a surge in occurrences of

physical and psychological traumas from yesteryears, especially with facts and figures related to child abuse. Alarming statistics related to human degradation acts like murder, rape, assault and abuse shake our consciences and dishearten us. Remedial measures are unleashed in full swing in most parts of the world and preventive education has gained momentum to avert the cruelest form of abuse on the face of earth perpetuated by humans on humans.

There are innumerable works on the nerve-wracking issue of abuse meted out on children. Much research has gone into, and still is, why the perpetrators indulge in such acts, the damage it causes on the victims, the repercussions of these in adult life, ways to curb and prevent these from happening, equipping people with legal and medical help, revising the medico legal facilities and laws to help the victim and their family and other issues associated to abuse. This said, it becomes necessary for all to familiarise with the facts and figures resulting out of these researchers in order to help make human life better around us. It does not hurt much for even those outside the abuse experience to learn these as to enable in extending a helping hand.

A brief look at abuse incidents over the decades displays less of optimism. More and more horrifying details pour out due to the open-minded approaches towards abuse issues in society and doing away with the denial of existence of these ugly societal diseases. But certain questions remain unanswered as to the cause of these incidents. It is hard to ignore these childhood psychosexual bruises just like one would the various bruises on the knee due to falls in childhood; or should we? Pinki Virani's *Bitter Chocolate* (2000) is an extensive account of child sexual abuse and quite many approaches regarding why the abuses do so have been undertaken with not much conclusive results. The book aims at curing the adult with the hurt child's mind and does so effectively.

The fact that there are no clear cut indicators as to why a person abuses and how an abused will turn out later lends to the complexity of the child abuse issue. One striking feature of child abuse is that all over the world there is largely the same pattern of abuse. Child psychology is same for all children irrespective of culture, nationality and color. But yes, all these could be a cause of abuse, which add to the vulnerability of being a child. The differences and disseminations existing in the adult world poison the outlook of the average person towards other person in their immediate vicinity or far. These differences could be financial, racial, gender based. Apart from physical abuse, even hurtful, vengeful words and actions leave lasting and haunting impression on the young minds, hampering growth and survival as adolescents and adults. On the issue of reasons for an abuser choosing to hurt a child, (physically or verbally), there are quite many –obsession with skin colour, physical beauty of a child and the innocence attached to it, pervert sexual orientation to mention a few. Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* (2015) brings out few of these issues of child abuse and it is intended to study the hurt consciousness of the abused in the story and how they resurface towards their journey to normalcy.

Marianne Hirsch quotes Morrison's words in *Sula* that her mother characters consider their children as an extension of their limbs and wounds to express the bondage of their relationship. Lula Ann Bridewell who calls herself Bride was born black in color to parents of lighter black skin. They both took to hating her as soon as she was born and eventually her father deserts the mother and the child. After the desertion, Bride's mother Sweetness accepts her responsibility as a mother but is unable to shake off the fact that her child is unlike her in color and despises her for it. Despite the hatred, she continues to mother Bride in ways which had incessantly caused a string of hurts in the child's psyche. Sweetness is hateful to the point of not willing to touch the child. The child obviously deprived of the world's most powerful mother's touch yearns for such moments, even if it meant the contact came from being slapped. Bride goes to great extents to win her mom's love, which she does by carrying out her mother's wish, a cruel one at that. Moving through various stages of abuse, Bride evolves into a beautiful woman, who capitalises on her talents and emerges a successful businessperson in the much vied for cosmetic industry. She estranges herself from her mother but does send money in way of maintenance. She is in a beautiful relationship with Booker about whom she knows next to nothing and probably that's what is binding her relationship. A small step to reconcile with a mistake in the past leads to total destruction of her present but leads her into a journey of uncertain future which ends in a destination of self-realization and self-sufficiency. The people she meets in this path and the experiences of each one's abuse tale helps Bride come to terms with her own.

A striking paradox as well as a parallel to Bride's character is Rain whom she meets during her journey in search of Booker who abandons her all of a sudden. Rain is a little white girl, who is taken up by the gypsy couple, Steve and Evelyn living a minimalistic life in the jungle near where Bride is rescued when her car crashes. Rain takes an instant liking to Bride and together they form a bonding of souls, complementing each other of their needs and thoughts. Their relationship is short-lived but leaves a long-lasting impression in both their minds.

Rain's mother was a prostitute and stoops to initiating the child into it. When the child does not cater to one of her customers and even goes to the extent of hurting that man, she throws Rain out of the house. Though she is happy to be away from her mother's oppressions, she does not feel much happy about being taken in by Steve and Evelyn either. They are too decent for her wayward ways on the street, but she does put up primarily for safety reasons. She knows it is an unsafe world out there. The little incident where some young boys taunt her asking "Hey, Rain. Who's your mammy?" (Morrison105), and fire with shotguns, displays the abusive situation the child is put in due to her mother's lifestyle. Rain was mature enough to keep away from her mother and at the same time from the 'pigs' i.e. cops. Bride is taken aback by the callousness of Rain's mother and laments: "Why would anybody do that to a child? Bride

wondered. Even Sweetness, who for years couldn't bear to look at or touch her, never threw her out."(Morrison101). Her own inadequate childhood was devoid of the natural motherly care, yet Bride felt Rain's mother's act was unnatural in ostracizing her kid. She thus condones her mother who never touched her because of the blackness, but at the same time never abandoned her. Bride complies with her mother's wishes to testify against an innocent school teacher, Sofia, accused of child abuse and thus doing wins her favour and approval. Both Bride and Rain are unhappy about their mothers and have no qualms staying estranged from them. Their mothers play a pivotal role in shaping their lives into what they will be in future, both good and bad.

Bride's attempt to salvage this grievous mistake is what leads to a sharp turn in her life, both personal, social, and professional. Sofia had served 15 years in prison and is paroled when she is met by Bride who offers some money and travel tickets hoping to make up for the years of servitude. Sofia injures Bride badly for such a treatment, but inwardly feels crumbled and defeated for her violence. In reality, after the thrashing, Sofia cries soulfully which actually cleanses her and she sees Bride as a savior. "... that black girl did do 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 70). Sofia carries out her duty caring for the invalids with complete devotion and in doing so claims to herself to be mentally healing the bruises she inflicted on Bride.

Bride is a harbinger of happiness in other's life, especially Rain and Sofia. Rain is overwhelmed when Bride takes up the pellets shot by the boys at Rain on herself. "[...] nobody put their own self in danger to save me. Save my life. But that's what my black lady did without even thinking about it. [...] I miss my black lady(Morrison 106). While Rain confesses she would happily kill her mother at the next opportunity, she does express her happiness in finding sisterhood in Bride and looks forward to extension of the relationship soon. This indicates that human beings, where children or adult, get over hurt and desperation with help from other human beings, who themselves have been through that path. Bride acts both the inflictor and healer of Sofia's pains and towards Rain is protective and caring.

Booker, Bride's boyfriend, deserts Bride all of a sudden, the reason for which she will not discover until later in the journey. While he marvels at Bride for her brilliance and substance, he is uneasy when she plans to meet Sofia with gifts. Bride had carefully kept from Booker her part in Sofia's conviction and uncomprehending her motives of reconciliation Booker walks out on her. This decision stems from Booker's own experience with child abuse of a sibling as well as himself. He had lost his brother Adam at the hands of a serial child abuser and killer. Surprisingly, his own reaction to child abusers was not of fear or intimidation, but of vengeance and violence. He mercilessly beats up the 'normal-looking' abuser in the park, instead of yielding, cowering and suffering. He is amused at the descriptions normally assigned to abusers

and how people feel it is inconceivable that such persons could commit so gruesome an act on small children.

“Bald. Normal-looking. Probably an otherwise nice man-they always were. The “nicest man in the world,” the neighbors always. “He wouldn’t hurt a fly.” Where did that cliché come from? 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? (Morrison 111).

After Adam’s death, Booker’s world changes, in that his perspective towards family, society, and even his relationship, undergoes a transformation which serves only to alienate him from them and in turn himself. His unfailing love for Adam whom he perceives as an embodiment of innocence and purity, eventually becomes turns into bitterness towards others who have seeming to move on from the incident as such. It is weird he resorts to tattooing a flower in memory of Adam, when his suggestions to his family to pay homage to Adam is either ridiculed or rejected. This act of tattooing is a paradox to that of the perpetrator’s tattooing. “... the nicest man in the world was caught, tried and convicted of SSS, the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys, each of whose names, including Adam’s, was tattooed across the shoulders of the nicest man in the world” (Morrison 118).

After deserting Bride, Booker goes to his aunt Queen, who lives in a countryside place called Whiskey. Bride, after her long journey involving the car crash, physical wounds, recuperation and relationship with Rain and her foster parents, undergoes great transformation of mind, and eventually finds Booker. In a bitter argument with him involving physical violence, typical of lovers, Bride does confess her part in Sofia’s conviction. Queen, quoting Bride’s example, tells Booker to bury the past with Adam. Queen suffers a fire accident and is hospitalized and eventually dies. Her illness and death brings Booker and Bride a lot closer than before. Adam eventually learns from Queen and Bride to let go of past and regrets losing good moments of life in the present time. “How long had childhood trauma hurtled him away from the rip and wave of life?” (Morrison 173).

Queen is one of the minor yet powerful characters in the book, but not without a rub with the abuse experience. She had many husbands and many children by them, but they shunned her, leaving her a lonely creature with just memories to live by. Her favourite child was Hannah, a medical student, and during her hospitalization mistakes Bride to be Hannah. It was circulated in the family that Queen had disregarded Hannah’s complaints regarding her father about fondling her. Queen and Sweetness are mothers who end up being abandoned largely because of their own doing or undoing. Queen, having learnt a lesson through her denial of the abuse claims made by her child, advises Booker to hang on to Adam as a way of recognition of the pain felt by the abused child. Booker, however, at her deathbed, determines to overcome the past grief and successfully does so after her death. Sweetness had ended up in a home for elderly due to her bone disease. She rationalizes her upbringing as a means to protect Bride from abusers and

making her strong to face the world which is cruel towards darker people. Sweetness understands she could have been a better parent and these mothers had conscious reasons for acting in a particular manner to their daughters which only helped in estranging them for lifetime and end up being sad and frustrated.

Morrison presents a contrast in drawing Sofia and Booker as a parallel to Bride and Rain with reference to their families. Bride and Rain are represented as children of mothers who displayed their hatred overtly and thought more of appeasing their own wishes and desires. Sofia and Booker seem to have been raised in prim Christian households with their mommies being instrumental in bringing about the aura of piety and austerity in the household. This desperation apart, she attributes her ability to survive a hellhole of a prison like Decagon largely due to her mother's upbringing. She behaved at her worst, exhibiting her anger through violence, only on Bride, which serves as a cathartic and she inwardly apologizes to her mother for her behavior.

More depressing than abuse and its victims is the outlook and harangues of the general public on these issues, which create ruts that run deeper than those created by the abuse. The behavior towards Sofia as a perpetrator of child abuse ushers in an uneasy feeling in the reader's mind, which reprimands people to view crime against child from a broader perspective. Child abuse as a crime is assigned to the top rung of crimes against children, rendering other crimes insignificant. Other crimes are as heinous as child abuse and affect children indirectly. Being wrongly framed a child abuser, Sofia has to take the brunt of being accused and abused by other criminals for her never-done sin. These words help understand that any act which directly or indirectly affect a child robbing of its childhood is a heinous act. It leaves unforgettable memory of the event, running into adulthood and remains so unless by sheer effort and chance they overcome the past. Bride, herself a girl with bitter childhood, is responsible for the healing she provides to Rain, Sofia, and Booker and even Queen. Bride made it in the world with her ability to fight the odds and ends up in the cosmetic business, much in irony with all the fuss over her own colour by her mother. She may never know that her mother takes all the credit for that, but Bride achieved in the area where she was put down, colour. On her new line of cosmetics she proudly comments, "I named it YOU, GIRL: Cosmetics of Your Personal Millenium. It's for girls and women of all complexion from ebony to lemonade to milk" (Morrison 10).

Conclusion

Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* is not a cry for help or a tirade of accusation. It is rather a soft whine and whisper of the hearts affected in different ways from incidents of child abuse. There is no mention of any of the modern methods of psychological coping and no strong facts about the abusers. The book deals with child abuse from an adult survivor perspective, as to how some things are never forgotten, but eventually must be forgotten and sometimes forgiven, to move ahead and out of the hurt circle.

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