

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**16** YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

**VOL. 16 ISSUE-2, APRIL 2025**

Editor-In-Chief: **Dr. Vishwanath Bite**

Managing Editor: **Dr. Madhuri Bite**

[www.the-criterion.com](http://www.the-criterion.com)

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**

[www.galaxyimrj.com](http://www.galaxyimrj.com)

## **The Weight of History: Bildungsroman and the Black Experience in *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child***

**Dhanusha S Kumar**

Department of English,  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,  
Amritapuri, India.

**Uthara Hari Kumar**

Department of English,  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,  
Amritapuri, India.

**&**

**S Shilpa Nair**

Department of English,  
Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham,  
Amritapuri, India.

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15320805>

**Article History:** Submitted-28/03/2025, Revised-09/04/2025, Accepted-13/04/2025, Published-30/04/2025.

### **Abstract:**

Human life is like an unfinished symphony — a work in progress, constantly being composed through experiences, emotions, and relationships. Two works by Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* and *God Help the Child*, have constructed profound readings into the genre of bildungsroman, especially when viewed as the formation of identity in oppressive social conditions and personal trauma. *A Mercy* is based on Florens, a young girl soon to be lost between different wants and needs that drive her. In contrast, *God Help the Child* is primarily based on the material conditions of contemporary society; it places at its centre a woman named Bride, later revealed to be the successful but emotionally stymied bearer of dark skin. Through a psychoanalytic lens, this

paper seeks to compare the two narratives within the bildungsroman genre, highlighting the effects of trauma and abandonment on identity formation.

**Keywords: Bildungsroman, Trauma, Identity formation, Oppression, Abandonment.**

A caterpillar's metamorphosis into a butterfly, the bildungsroman captures the profound transformation of the human soul. A bildungsroman is a genre that explores a character's growth, showing how they move from the uncertain and often overwhelming experiences of childhood toward greater understanding, inner strength, and personal success as they mature. These accounts depict the elaborate growth pattern of man and expound on the intra-psychic, social, and ethical dimensions of human development. The genre coordinates the drama within developing the protagonist's feelings and thoughts when dealing with the nuances of everyday life. Morrison's novel centres on the growth of female protagonists within the constraints of systematic oppression. According to Pin-chia Feng, "Instead of the romantic celebration of a Wordsworthian memory of an innocent childhood, Morrison and Kingston write about the *Bildungsheld* who cannot afford innocence" (Feng 40).

Examining the protagonist's emotional and psychological growth concerning the impact of racial and social oppression, a detailed reading of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* and *A Mercy* suggests that the two do not hesitate to expand the genre of the coming-of-age novels. *God Help the Child* is slightly distinct from most of Morrison's earlier fiction works because it has a few instances where time and place change. For instance, it may be unclear to readers exactly when Morrison expects them to comprehend the events unfolding in the novel. Centred around Los Angeles, with an excursion into rural California halfway through the novel, *God Help the Child* is cosmopolitan and contemporary. It is true that *God Help the Child* is about detaching oneself from one or more childhood traumas, but it is also sometimes about contemplating revenge or simply

the consequences of one's actions. On the other hand, though Bride is coping with the ill effects of her parents' colourism and the broader American cultural milieu, she still manages to thrive as a Black woman in a new media space that fetishizes and commercializes her Blackness. However, as she learns throughout the novel, that too comes at a cost and might not be a long-term strategy for genuinely thriving.

*A Mercy* takes place in colonial America in the 17th century, a period of early settlement characterized by slavery, intolerance for other religions, and changing power structures. Such a chaotic history is vital in shaping an individual's moral, emotional, and psychological aspects of development in line with the concept of bildungsroman. A more complex view emerges from the fact that the reality of this universe presents problems that demand from the characters of the novel a grasp and understanding of freedom, self, and the will to live, which intertwines with the growth of humans and the harsh realities and oppressive structures of society at the time. The central ideas of self-discovery and the struggle for autonomy, which stand in the focus of the bildungsroman tradition, gain a different feeling in the milieu of colonialism, where the combination of potential and abuse is overwhelming.

The psychoanalytic theory helps examine how societal structures such as colourism, racism, and feminism can reflect unconscious prejudices, suppressed emotions, and the development of identities. It unveils how the basic elements of cultural norms and societal influences bring development to a conflicted human being from the inside, reflecting larger power dynamics. This would mean that things like the projection of fears and the making of "otherness" can help in understanding the processes of racism and colourism. At the same time, repressed female voices and their battle against patriarchy could stand for a treatment of feminism. This may shed light on the protagonist's psychological growth, which a bildungsroman typically portrays as

being strongly shaped by social norms. The unconscious force intertwines the individual's internal conflicts with broader societal constructs, including race, gender, and class. Psychoanalysis thus forms a bridge between subjective psychic states and objective social formations and expounds on how biases that are deep-rooted and historical traumas condition individual identity. The very process of repression accounts for the oppositional ways that marginalized subjects operate, either by complying with or resisting dominant cultural mandates. This defiance maybe expressed symbolically through language, bodily expressions, or even tendencies toward self-inflicted harm — all of which carry psychological significance. Beyond childhood traumas and past experiences that factor into the protagonist's present-obsessed operating, self-worth, and relationship with the world, these theories give insight into the ways unconscious conflicts informing one's choices will develop more access to the full scope of character development within a bildungsroman all while posing a critique on the societal structures that contribute to its relations of inequality. It becomes the lens through which literature reflects and challenges both historical and contemporary power dynamics.

Toni Morrison employs a complex blend of bildungsroman narratives in *God Help the Child* and *A Mercy* to depict the psychological development of marginalized characters, guided by psychoanalytical theories on how trauma, identity, and intergenerational scars shape their sense of self and agency. Morrison rethinks the archetypical coming-of-age arc with an eye toward the lasting impact of personal and historical trauma on the development towards self-realization by blending postcolonial critique of systemic suppression with Freudian concepts of “repression” and the “unconscious.” This, in turn, allows Morrison to examine her work on how the protagonists of her narratives rally to reconstitute their fragmented identities within social constructs of race, gender, and power.

Bride travels down her path; this path is that of *God Help the Child*, and is replete with setbacks due to racism and the contradictions of rejection. She constructs a façade of beauty and independence around her identity, shaped by her mother's rejection at birth due to her dark skin. Behind the veil of this beauty are deep emotional scars. It compels her to confront her suffering and the emotional vulnerability hidden beneath her confident exterior, a consequence of her relationship with Booker. In the early stages, she shields herself from pain and reality, triggered by Booker's emotional detachment, which echoes the coldness she once felt from Sweetness. Bride's development throughout this novel has many dimensions: recovering her identity, coming to grips with the damaging consequences of her past trauma, and coming to love and accept herself.

Similarly, in *A Mercy*, Florens, like Bride, deals with her development through abandonment. Dealing with the trauma of her mother abandoning her at birth to escape the evils of slavery, she struggles with feeling inadequate. She wants validation from a relationship with the Blacksmith, who emerges as a beacon of hope and a means of escape. Most troublingly, her all-consuming love for the Blacksmith reflects her dependence on others for her self-worth. When the Blacksmith denounces her as "wild" and parallels that opinion with her mother's abandonment, she confronts the fear born of her entrapment and the destructiveness of dependence. By writing on the walls of Jacob Vaark's house, she begins to retrieve her story, reclaim her past, make sense of it, and ultimately find her voice. Through writing, Florens begins to embrace "the wild", a presence of rage, strength, and depth in her character. She is slowly and painfully learning to be aware of herself: she is more than her suffering and the rejections she has suffered. Florens must accept her past, get rid of her emotional dependence, and speak for herself if she is to mature.

In a moment of quiet reflection, Lula Ann, the protagonist of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*, experiences a fleeting sense of triumph:

“Wiggling my toes under the silk cushion I couldn’t help smiling at the lipstick smile on my wineglass, thinking, “How about that, Lula Ann? Did you ever believe you would grow up to be this hot, or this successful?” (Morrison 14).

Bride reflects on who she is today and contrasts it with who she thought/thought herself to be yesterday. With self-assurance and eyes full of pride, Lula Ann looks back on her path from nothing to something with unwavering conviction. The silk cushion and the lipstick-smeared wineglass represent not only material success but also her ability to reclaim her identity and sense of worth. Despite facing hurt and rejection in childhood, she has grown into a woman who stands tall and reflects with strength and self-awareness. This moral progression fits neatly into Tolstoy’s notion of purgation and humility as fundamental prerequisites for the spiritual life. In the essay “Religion and Morality,” Tolstoy examines the significance of surrendering personal desires to a higher will, arguing that true morality is rooted in self-sacrifice and pursuing the greater good. Morrison complicates the narrative with Bride’s inner monologue, which is marked by a self-deprecating and self-absorbed style. This stylistic choice enables readers to appreciate the craftsmanship of both Morrison and Tolstoy in shaping characters whose moral lessons seem inscribed on their very faces. The authors suggest stripping away the façade of beauty and social status to allow a deeper exploration of the human spirit’s capacity for growth and redemption. Tolstoy’s ideas starkly contrast with Lula Ann’s reflections, as the female protagonist’s successes and appearance serve as the foundation of her achievements. However, it also corresponds with Tolstoy’s advocacy for inner change since Lula Ann has broken social barriers and limitations, thus, proving her uniqueness and strength.

Lula Ann goes through a deep psychological change, and Morrison uses her journey to highlight the tensions between the emotional fulfillment of a woman and the material success of

her conflict. Though it seems a victory, Lula Ann's journey from rejection to acceptance is marred and complicated by unhealed scars because of her past. Morrison presents Bride's apparent self-confidence as an elaborate cover for the fragile remnants of a girl who longed to be cared for and loved. This dilemma of hers is a repetition of Tolstoy's ontological conflict between spiritual awakening and worldly attachments.

In "Religion and Morality", Tolstoy maintains that humility and ego surrender are conditions for authentic virtue to become possible. He holds that moral improvement involves an inward purification of the soul, not an external validation. Lula Ann has accomplished things that society considers a success, but Morrison invites us to think if these things can alone heal neglected and abandoned wounds. Bride rejoices in her transformation yet craves approval and validation. While contradicting Tolstoy's view that humility and submission are the cardinal virtues in the pursuit of morality, it still supports his argument that material prosperity often distracts one from true self-discovery.

While Tolstoy recommends retreating from everything material, with Morrison, retreating is not an option. From her perspective, such a stance requires sacrificing the will to develop both intellectually and physically in order to function effectively. In many ways, to "stand tall and reflect" in Lula Ann depicts her inner refusal to yield totally, even if she may not fit precisely into Tolstoy's picture of giving oneself over. Here, she has demonstrated all her strength— how tough she is as a woman— by breaking the norms of a well-deserved life. Yet, the question remains: has she found peace within her soul? The silk cushion and glass stained with lipstick may well symbolize triumph; on the contrary, their presence prompts the reader never to forget that the past can never be fully entirely erased.



When Scully observes Florens making her way back to the Vaark farm after being rejected by the Blacksmith, he sees a changed girl:

“Thus, her change from “have me always” to “don’t touch me ever” seemed to him as predictable as it was marked” (Morisson 106).

While Lula Ann looks back on her path with excitement and confidence, amazed by the shift from uncertainty to achievement, Florens’ evolution is moulded by her emotional path, showing a change toward self-protection instead of celebration. Her emotional pullback shows the marks of pain and loss, a way to defend against more hurt. Her primary need for love from others stems from a sense of security, which could have originated from childhood experiences of abandonment. However, this strong desire also brings about anxiety and fear of closeness, resulting in a subconscious wish to protect oneself from future emotional hurt. Her outright refusal may reflect a defence mechanism she developed to shield herself from the possibility of being abandoned again. If left unprocessed, such wounds can resurface and trigger unexpected changes in her behaviour. This would signify a crucial period in her emotional and psychological development. In denying physical contact, she takes an important step to assert her identity and disentangle herself from the pain of the past. This act reflects not only her enhanced understanding of self but also shows a pathway to self-discovery in the woman, the enslaved being, and the individual.

While defined by rejection and pain, the journey of Florens leads to a greater self-awareness as well as better knowledge of her place in the world. Her transformation is a statement of agency as much as self-preservation. In some sense, by refusing further physical contact- a control that had never belonged to her, as it was part of her life as a slave- Florens protects herself from any more suffering, yet also comes to have control over her bodily and emotional self.

Although this resistance seems primarily driven by fear, it simultaneously resembles an act of empowerment. While bearing the weight of trauma, Florens' epiphany is more internal and lonelier than that of Lula Ann, who confidently embraces her self-reinvention. Her conduct is, therefore, a window into Morrison's investigations on how emotional traumas develop the self. By refraining from physical contact, she tends to alter her dealing with people, preferring her security to her needs. Moreover, her development is indicative of how an emotional withdrawal can turn into a symbol of trauma. Through the prism of psychoanalysis, what could be taken for another form of survival is her strategy to regain a feeling of worth, not concerning what others think. This is one of the moments Morrison uses to mark a transition in the course of her bildungsroman when she learns to live not for the needs and expectations of others. The change is indeed striking, as it results from a complex and difficult process rather than a simple resolution. While in traditional coming-of-age stories, self-acceptance is primarily placed with outside approval or integration into a community, Florens' convalescent road outlines the continued impact of trauma by producing uncertainty. Ultimately, withdrawal is an expression of grief mixed with resilience. It is a mastery of body and emotion while entirely shutting herself off from any possibility of intimacy. Though painful, it marks the beginning of accepting a new reality—once scarred by the past, yet full of potential to shape an original future.

Both Lula Ann and Florens experience abandonment by their mothers, which sets the foundation for their emotional struggles and development. Lula Ann's emotional abandonment by Sweetness leaves her with a sense of unworthiness tied to her skin colour. In contrast, Florens' physical abandonment by her mother leaves her searching for love and validation. In both cases, Morrison illustrates how parental rejection leaves lasting scars that influence a person's identity, ability to trust, and relationships. Lula Ann's eventual acknowledgement of her mother's influence

and her reconciliation with Booker mark the beginning of her emotional healing. Florens' act of writing her story symbolizes her reclaiming agency and making sense of her abandonment. Lula Ann grows from a woman who masks her pain with external success and beauty into someone who begins to confront her trauma and embrace her worth. Florens moves from dependency on others for validation to a fragile but growing sense of self-awareness and agency. Morrison through these narratives emphasizes the difficulties of healing and self-discovery and considers it a life-long process. Although both women have been shaped by loss, they carve out their own paths, showing that survival involves not just resilience, but also transformation.

In conclusion, *God Help the Child* and *A Mercy* are Toni Morrison's exploration of identity formation and emotional growth within the Bildungsroman genre by interweaving personal trauma, societal oppression, and psychoanalytic exploration. Bride and Florens present a new kind of coming-of-age journey, where the wounds, which are deeply rooted in colourism, abandonment, and systemic subjugation, are the main obstacles for the two characters to understand themselves and overcome them. These stories speak of the inescapable pain of rejection, but the reclamation of a self is always reachable. Morrison asserts that healing doesn't happen in stages or overnight, but it can be achieved through self-awareness and the courage to confront the past. Both characters realize that discovering one's true self is neither smooth nor painless; rather, it is a journey of exploration, self-analysis, and ultimately, self-acceptance. By blending psychoanalytic theory with narratives of racial and gender oppression, Morrison portrays how enduring trauma is overcome through resilience and personal agency. Her books are a rebellion against growth, suggesting instead an intricate metamorphosis of the self that also has an intrinsic connection with the social and historical powers bent on relegating it.

### Works Cited:

Morrison, Toni. *A Mercy*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2008.

Morrison, Toni. *God Help the Child*, Alfred A. Knopf, 2015.

Pistelli, John. "Toni Morrison, God Help the Child." John Pistelli, 24 Apr. 2015, [https://johnpistelli.com/2015/04/24/toni-morrison-god-help-the-child/](https://johnpistelli.com/2015/04/24/toni-morrison-god-help-the-child/).

Feng, Pin-chia. *The Female Bildungsroman by Toni Morrison and Maxine Hong Kingston: A Postmodern Reading*. Peter Lang, 1999.

Tolstoy, Leo. "Religion and Morality." Marxists Internet Archive, 1900, [https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/religion-and-morality.html](https://www.marxists.org/archive/tolstoy/1900/religion-and-morality.html).