

Review

Making of the body: Childhood trauma in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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The study probes into the historical and familial inherited trauma of being black in Toni Morrison's latest novel - *God Help the Child*. It illustrates how African American children, in Morrison's novels, learn about white culture, black communities, and their own self-worth through the legacy of racial discrimination. Childhood experience becomes knowledge and remembering in the hands, in the body, and in the cultivation and habit, functions as a site of endless exchange, intervention and re-intervention, passes from one generation to another, and eventually becomes the whole nation's collective memory. Such insight offers new angles from which to look at African Americans whilst showing the relevance of the issues these characters deal with to the contemporary American society.

Key words: *God Help the Child*, childhood trauma, body, memory.

INTRODUCTION

After 150 years of the abolition of slavery in the U.S., the ways in which the country is still affected by slavery is undisputable. The pain of being black is right under the skin. The vulnerability of racism is not only ubiquitous today, but its complexity unconsciously assimilated by African Americans also exists. The strong and powerful discourses fabricated in society create human body, which functioning as a walking text, a fleshly reminder of the contradictory nature of an American citizenry built around the ideology of difference.

Pecola's blackness, in *The Bluest Eye*, makes her the antithesis of the ideal beauty - "white is beautiful". However, Morrison never gives any depiction about Pecola looking herself in mirror before losing her mind. The visions of others serve as the "mirror" reflecting and confirming her ugliness. They question her very existence, leading her to find no affirmation of her identity; meanwhile they simply want her to get out of their vision, making her wish to let her body disappear.

Pecola's schizophrenia suggests the consequences of a split body and mind. Moreover, these "bodily biases" have overwhelming effects on African American community as a whole. The experiences of Pecola's parents provide a context that frames Pecola's plight, as well as pointing out a larger social problem. This trauma, lingers for forty-five years, reappears in (Morrison's 1970), newly published novel - *God Help the Child*, which bears curious replications of where she began in the first novel.

Once again, we have a black little girl - Lula Ann, and her life is ravaged by racism owing to her color. Her light-skinned parents disregarded her because of her dark complexion since she was a child. As soon as she grows up, Lula Ann leaves home, assuming a different name, Bride, and covering her blackness by wearing everything in white. Researchers Wang and Wu (2016) thinks that *God Help the Child* probes into the issue of childhood trauma by investigating the impact of dark skin

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on family relationships and personal life. This study goes further to argue that it is not only a critical story about the life of an adult is influenced and badly shaped by childhood trauma, rather than a whole nation's trauma.

Pain lives just under the skin

The most important part of Lula Ann's story is the minor impact of racism. They suffered a great deal from pain in a parent-child tie, so "fault and blame" are effective and strong. When the novel begins with "It's not my fault, so you can't blame me", as readers, we sense that this is a story about trauma which involves everyone like *The Bluest Eye* does. (Morrison, 2015).

Sweetness, Lula Ann's light-skinned mother, still remembering the fear of giving birth to a black baby - "It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong, Really wrong" (Morrison, 2015). All of Sweetness' family - her parents, grandma, as well as her husband are "white"; however, this African American black skin shows on her daughter which brings the shame to the whole family. Sweetness regarded her daughter's "midnight black" skin as shockingly ugly - "She (her daughter) was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black [...]. I wished she hadn't been born with that terrible color. I even thought of giving her away to an orphanage someplace" (Morrison, 2015: 5).

Sweetness punishes Lula Ann for her pitch-black skin, which brought shame to her, and moreover, ended her marriage. Louis, Lula Ann's father, refuses to hold his daughter, blames his wife's "infidelity" and treats Lula Ann as an enemy. Both Sweetness and her husband Louis are apparently white, and Louis, of course, could not bring himself to love a child who stands at the antithesis of the ideal beauty. The couple argued about their daughter's skin color until Sweetness argued that the blackness might be from Louis's family, not hers. Being suspected of having a Negro ancestor is astoundingly humiliating, the father simply abandons the family. "Her color is a cross she will always carry", mother concludes with a deadening lack of subtlety, "But it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not" (Morrison, 2015). The mother, meanwhile, insisted her child call her "Sweetness" instead of anything maternal, just as Pauline requires Pecola to call her Mrs. Breedlove.

Lula Ann's childhood was soaked in hunger and shame, craving love, fondness and acceptance. She has the same experience as Pecola does at school. One day a girl and three boys heaped a bunch of bananas on her desk, and did their monkey imitations. They treated her like a "freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper" (Morrison 2015). She does not complain, but "build up immunity so tough that not being a 'nigger girl' is all she needs to win" (Morrison, 2015). As soon as she is

capable, Lula Ann leaves home, changes her name to Bride, and acquires a second skin to her pitch black hue by wearing anything in white. Surprisingly, Bride discovers that men find her extremely attractive, and her blackness is "the new black", which reminds us of the slogan in 1960s - "Black is Beautiful."

Nowadays, maybe not everyone would believe there appeared to be connection between one's looks and political struggle to end the policy of segregation in the United States. But it was true then. Morrison describes, in *Playing in the Dark*, how "white imagination" creates a "fabrication of an Africanist persona" and states that "in that construction of blackness and enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me" (Morrison, 1992). What Morrison tries to emphasize is that the white construction of black subjectivity produces chronic trauma for black Americans, and the danger of denying one's individuality as a rationale for encouraging racist solidarity, "When the strength of a race depends on its beauty, when the focus is turned to how one looks as opposed to what one is, we are in trouble", because "the concept of physical beauty as a virtue is one of the dumbest, most pernicious and destructive ideas of the Western world, and we should have nothing to do with it" (Morrison, 1974). Obviously, Morrison is clear on the hollowness of Bride's "new black", which is still generated and defined by a racially exclusive larger culture.

One mistake that had devastating consequences is that, as a second-grader, Bride was a material witness to a notorious sex crime, which resulted in the long imprisonment of an innocent twenty-year-old female teacher - Sofia Huxley. What motivates her to accuse an innocent woman is to get her mother's attention, and let her mother be proud of her - "Outside the courtroom all the mothers smiled at me and two actually touched and hugged me. Fathers gave me thumbs-up. Best of all was Sweetness. As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand. She never did that before, and it surprised me as much as it pleased me because "I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell" (Morrison, 2015).

After the trial, Sweetness let Bride's earlobes pierced and brought her a pair of earring as a gift. As an adult, Bride feels guilty and sets out to make compensation by offering five thousand dollars to Sofia who stays in jail for fifteen years, and currently on a parole. However, Sofia ends the compensation by giving Bride a good beaten, and throw her out rather than accepting the money. After that, Bride found her ear holes are mysteriously closed, and the mysterious things happened on her body one after another - her period stops, and then her breasts shrink. Something is changing inside of her body.

Different from Pecola, who wishes her black body disappears part by part actively; what Bride suffers is a negative body change as an adult - hairless pudenda,

delayed menstrual period, flat chest, and shrinking body. She is losing her black beauty and changing back into a black little girl - the repressed childhood trauma acts out on her body, thus further illustrates that body is a placeholder for memory, and trauma.

Another layer of trauma - Body speaks

Van der Kolk (2000) research shows that "some memories seem to become fixed in the mind, and remain unaltered by the passage of time [...] Traumatic scenes were re-experienced over years and decades, seemingly without modification". As an adult, Bride's body changing back into a black little girl reminds us of William Faulkner's well-known saying, "The past is never dead. It's not even past" - her childhood trauma is still there, right under her skin (Faulkner, 1951).

Bride takes the body change as a consequence of Booker's, her boyfriend, who abruptly abandons her which caused her to be heartbroken. She starts her journey searching for Booker. In Northern California logging country, miles away from home, Bride suffers a car accident, and is rescued and taken in by a white family. During six weeks recovering at their home, Bride becomes close to a child in their care named Rain who discovers Bride after the car accident. In Bride, Rain finds the only person she can talk to about the abuse she is suffered at the hands of her prostitute mother, and her mother's Johns. In Rain, Bride finds a friend which is always in vacancy in her childhood. Both of them understand each other in the easy way of children.

Van der Kolk (2000) states that in order to reverse the bodily effects of traumatic experiences, the "traumatized individuals need to have experiences that directly contradict the emotional helplessness and physical paralysis that accompany traumatic experiences". The bond between the two, one "pitch black", the other "bone white"; the very center of this powerful story is the mental age of an adult equal to a child's. Morrison employs psychoanalytic "repetition-with-a difference," having her characters inevitable return to an earlier moment of trauma and attempt to transform it. For Bride, this episode is self-acceptance, transformative and healing.

Moreover, by letting Bride go back to her childhood to make friends with white girl, what Morrison intends to state is that Jim Crow laws enacted to "separate blacks and whites, to segregated housing and schools, to discrimination in the dispensation of justice, to the myths about interracial sex, and to economic and political oppression" has destructive effect on African Americans, especially on black children (Berry and Blassingame, 1978). Such exclusion, according to Eyerman (2001), causes "dramatic loss of identity and meaning" - "a tear in the social fabric".

Thus "affecting a group of people that has achieved some degree of cohesion" as the collective memory of slavery. The child "comes to discover himself through a

progressive comparison of his own body with other people's bodies", thereby developing their own personalities (Clark and Clark, 1939). The segregation caused children to be aware that race consciousness is a part of particular group because physical appearance influences the development of self-consciousness. Consequently, the segregation damaged human personality and always unfairly treats a person.

Moreover, the family serves a crucial role in shaping children's character and self-consciousness, which is as pervasive as to be easily neglected. Generally, adult conduct in society is learned as a child. Morrison's novels are full of such examples that the child learns a way of looking at life in his or her early years. Cholly's rape to his daughter is the consequence of his own "rape" in his youth at the hands of two white men. As a mother, Sweetness makes it clear what she had done on her child is to protect her from a world that would be more tended to punish the dark skinned child, and she claims that she will never apologize for the way she raises her daughter - "Some of you probably think it's a bad thing to group ourselves according to skin color - the lighter, the better - in social clubs, neighborhoods, churches, sororities, even colored schools. But how else can we hold on to a little dignity?" (Morrison, 2015). The mother sees her cruelty as a mercy, a way to strengthen and prepare her child for the future abuse that the society as a whole will dump on her based on the color of her skin.

As a matter of fact, the trauma of being black is transferred unknowingly from parents to child. Researchers have studied this bodily and transferable aspect trauma, and how it creates a troublesome cycle of inherited behavior. The work of Erik Hesse and Mary Main elaborates this transfer as parents own traumatic experiences:

[...a parent] sporadically alarms the infant via the exhibition of frightened, dissociated or anomalous forms of threatening behavior. We suggest that spurious but ongoing interactions of this kind can occur even when a parent is normally sensitive and responsive to the infant, and can lead in turn to the infant's inability to remain organized under stress. (Hesse and Main, 1999).

In other words, parents who experience trauma place their infants at risk through their behavioral response to trauma. The parents' fear of acting out unresolved frightening experiences endangers the infant's ability to feel safe as well as the ability to regulate fear.

What Sweetness passes to Bride is this racial memory which takes on a bodily form exactly because it exceeds both the individual and the community's capacity to verbalize and mourn. Bride left home after she grows up and only wears white. She works hard to become an executive in a cosmetic company, "You, Girl!" where "black is the new black".

Though her very existence is distinguished, her childhood trauma still haunts. The trauma starts healing

after she feels guilty about accusing Sofia, and continuous being healed after making friends with Rain as well as saving Rain's life by putting herself in danger, and further to be healed after she met Queen, an old, black woman.

After a long journey tracing Booker, Bride comes to Queen's home. Queen opens the door and says, "Come on in. You look like something a raccoon found and refuse to eat" (Morrison, 2015). Bride was shocked, for the past three years she had only been told how exotic, how gorgeous she was, but now this old black woman with judging eyes had deleted the entire vocabulary of compliments in one stroke. Once again she was the ugly, black little girl in her mother's house. And Queen said, "Get in on, girl. You need feeding [...] and I know hungry when I see it" (Morrison, 2015). This "hungry", as a matter of fact, refers to mother-hunger. Bride finally finds the home she has been lacking, people feed her and want her to stay and the word "girl" indicates the healing power of connection and mothering.

After giving birth to Bride, Sweetness thinks nursing Bride "is like having a pickaninny sucking her teat, so she goes to bottle-feeding" (Morrison, 2015). As Morrison has compared milk as mother's present and enduring love in *Beloved*, taking one's milk away can be viewed as being forsaken.

Traumatically, the Mother-daughter bond is broken literally after the mother refuses to breast feed her child. This bond starts rebuilding after staying with Queen. Under Queen's guidance, both Bride and Booker re-experienced their childhood trauma by telling their own stories. One of the most disturbing barriers to changing lives is the connection between early trauma and attachment issues.

According to Cooper (1986), an actively affective reliving of the traumatic event needs "sustained social support". Therefore, retelling and remembering the trauma within a supportive other mother enables trauma victims to move forward, as Lacan (1991) suggests, "enjoyment comes from the repetition of the past because doing so represses the anxiety of lack", and the lack "gives rise to desire", which can "drive subjects to repeat outmoded and even dangerous behavior", or, in more open condition, lead to change".

As a matter of fact, touching is what Bride craves for throughout of her childhood. She used to pray that Sweetness would slap her face or spank her just to feel her mother's touch. So she deliberately made little mistakes, but Sweetness had every way to punish her without touching her body. She traumatically tells the reader that when her mother had to bathe her, "Distaste was all over her face", which reminds the reader the shopkeeper in *The Bluest Eye*, manages to get the penny without touching Pecola's little hand. Touching always bears crucial meanings in Morrison's novels, for example, touching is part of Pauline's desire when she describes her love making with Cholly; Young (1996) Cholly and

Darlene's touching is presented as completely consensual and entirely natural; adult Claudia understands and memories her mother's love through touching: the hand which whipped them for small mistakes was also the same that did not let her die of a severe cold.

The mother-child bond is rebuilt through desire of touching, which is fully described in the section of bathing Queen after she suffered a severe fire and sent into hospital. In *Beloved*, after Sethe fled from Sweet Home, Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, bathed her in sections. What she tries to transfer is the power to let her daughter-in-law love her body, the body that slaveholders as the dominant power attempts to destroy in order to remain in tyrannical control. Paul D's bath to Sethe, in *Beloved*, indicates that he finally understands Sethe's infanticide and appreciates her scarred body. The couple may not revise the past, but it does reveal some hope that they have a better chance at carving out a future. Milkman's bath to Sweet, in *Song of Solomon*, prove worthy of staying with Black woman and for the first time he gives himself to a woman, and learns the joy of sharing.

However, in *God Help the Child*, it is child who offers bath to their Black mother. While Queen is unable to rise to a bedpan in hospital, Bride bathed Queen "one section at a time, making sure her body was covered in certain areas before and after cleansing" (Morrison, 2015).

Besides Bride's tender bath, Booker maintained the pedicure, soaped, then rinsed Queen's feet, massaging them slowly, rhythmically, with a lotion that smelled like heather and he did the same for Queen's hands. Different from Baby Suggs's bath for Sethe, Milkman's bath for Sweet, or Paul D.'s bath for Sethe, which tenderly demonstrate maternal love and lover's love, the bath for Queen is offered by children to their other mother. Mothering and healing are intricately connected loving relationships with individuals and communities assist in the creation of self. Bride's body back to the normal and her breasts returned indicates that her childhood trauma starts healing.

The whole nation's trauma

According to Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember*, that memory "is not an individual faculty", it is a "collective or social memory" (Connerton, 1989).

If memory is a collective or social memory rather than an individual faculty, then what we experience present is "very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past, and we may experience of present world in a context which is causally connected with past events and objects, and hence "with reference to events and objects which we are not experiencing when we are experiencing the present" (Connerton, 1989).

Therefore, the memory "is a theoretical construct that connects the state of the individual in the past and the

influence the event had on the individual to the behavior in the current situation" (Leuzinger-Bohleber and Pfeifer, 2002). Past experiences, triggered by sensory stimulation, are re-categorized and related to the current activity.

Bride thinks her mother does not love her because of her dark skin, therefore after she grew up and left home, her aim is to be beautiful by wearing and only wearing anything in white the way in which she thinks is the best way to reflect her beauty. Her identity, as a matter of fact, is defined by the corroding larger white culture, and shaped by her parents' trauma, showing low self-esteem and a sense of helplessness. She needs to heal her physical trauma to have a whole self-combined both mind and body.

In addition to the psychological contributions to trauma, bodily components store and perpetuate traumatic events and sensations. Caruth (1996) concludes that "what causes trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat" and that what is passed on, finally, is "not just the meaning of the words but their performance". Trauma is embedded in body, and its performance passes from one generation to another, eventually transfers into a whole nation's trauma through collective memory.

According to Freud's distinction between "mourning" and "melancholy"—the differences between what he calls "cultural memory" and "racial memory", claiming that "cultural memory", both written and oral, official and unofficial, constitutes a healthy model of mourning, while "racial memory" is a collective memory of negation that remains non-verbalized yet somehow transfers itself from one generation to another as symptom or effect. Sweetness's racial memory comes from her parents and black community as a whole. This process reaches into everyday details of their lives that not only influence, or distort their experience of the present, but also legitimate a present social order.

Individual's ease arises from the assurance that he is able to embody the socially legitimated body and so is able to impose the norms by which his own body is perceived and accepted by others. "Unable to incarnate an acknowledged model, one tries vainly to compensate for this inability through the proliferation of the signs of bodily control [...]. This too is a habit of performance, but it is a habitual experience of the body as a condition of unease, as a perpetual source of awkwardness, as the all too tangible occasion for experiencing in the mirror: a fissure of which one is being perpetually reminded both by the reactions of others and by the process of self-monitoring by which they notice and try to rectify the gap between the social legitimate body and the body one has" (Connerton, 1989).

Sweetness's grandmother passed for white, and never gets in touch with any one of her children in order to cut the link with them. Both of Sweetness's parents are very light, so her mother wasn't stopped from trying on hats in

the department stores or using their ladies' room; and her father could try on shoes in the front part of the shoe store, not in a back room. That's why they thought Bride's pitch-black skin brought shame to the family.

African American children, in Morrison's novels, learn about American culture, their black communities, and their own self-worth through the legacies of racial discrimination. Their evaluations about their bodies come from the parents, community and society's idea. Physical body always symbolizes the conceptualization of national identity. The very way we evaluated and contextualize political, social, and ethnic representations revolves around the rhetorical mobility in the national public sphere of the American body politics. This strategy is what Karen Sánchez-Eppler called "the bodily biases of the state."

Framed in this context, the Black body has been considered more or less as "a conglomeration of social meanings, meanings that, in the end, mark this body as "other" or bodiless according to specific cultural and national mandates that objectify the African American body so much that black identity is formed in relation to the split between mind and body (Sánchez-Eppler, 1993).

CONCLUSION

If the young generation grows up in a culture in which black identity is marginalized, this trauma will simply pass from generation to generation, finally, becomes a whole nation's trauma according to *How Society Remembers*. The childhood experience becomes knowledge remembering in the hands, in the body and in the cultivation of habit. The childhood trauma eats, grows, naps on the body, and becomes the adulthood memory, which will be transferred to next generation. The injustices of slavery and its consequences haven't been worked through, and the racial oppression remains a contemporary reality. Therefore, the circle of abuse and violation repeats itself. In order to "eliminate racism from American culture", says Morrison, "we need to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home" (Morrison, 1997). In such a society, individual and communal racial identities could exist without the psychological burden of hatred, scapegoating, or otherness. In such a society, we can protect our children "from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, and abandonment. Error-free, all goodness" and always bear in mind that "What you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (Morrison, 2015). If we don't, no doubt, for generations, there will be no social peace in the United States.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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