

God Help the Child (2015):
Toni Morrison's Healing Narrative

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Abstract

Toni Morrison dealt pervasively and sequentially with the traumatized experience of abused children in her fictional canon. Morrison, an Afro-American writer opted for the adoption of postmodern narrative techniques in order to overcome the quandary of being a black writer whose primary narratee belongs to the mainstream white American culture. This paper aims at investigating Morrison's schematic narrative technique in remembering, revealing and eventually healing the traumatic history of abused African American children in her last novel *God Help the Child* (2014). The paper hypothesizes that Morrison adopts a postmodernist authorial stance in the composition of *God Help the Child* depending mainly on the dialogical polyphonic consonance of the heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative voices of the main and minor characters in this novel. Moreover, the hypothesis of the paper is based on the presumption that Morrison's narrative schema is traceable to the psychoanalytic theory that the course of psychological recovery of the traumatized victims of child abuse is preconditioned by rendering full catharsis of trauma by means of narration.

Keywords: Child abuse, Trauma, Postmodern narrative, polyphony, Judith Herman, Recovery, Magic Realism and chronotope.

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The 1993 Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison dealt pervasively and sequentially with the traumatized experience of abused children in her fictional canon starting with her most acclaimed debut *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Being an Afro-American writer, however, necessitated Morrison's adoption of innovative narrative strategies to overcome the quandary of being a black writer whose primary narratee belongs to the mainstream white American culture. In *Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature*, Morrison says that these strategies are meant for accommodating "the mere fact of writing about, for, and out of black culture while accommodating and responding to mainstream "white" culture" (154). Thus, in her attempt to reconcile the expression of African American vulnerabilities to a Jim Crow supremacist white readership, Morrison opts for the indirect deliverance of her ideological stances by letting her characters authorize themselves rather than by defending them openly.

This authorial paradigm shift is mainly Morrison's strategy of expressing her ideology through the free indirect discourse of her characters in order to confront the racist ideology of her implied WASP readership. This convergence coincides, as Susan Lanser writes in *Fictions of Authority*, with

another convergence of African-American and feminist movements that intersect with a very different moment in the history of narrative voice: the moment I am calling "postmodern." Lanser

elaborates, it is a moment in which the narrator as a superior authorial voice “becomes not merely hollow but absurd. (126)

Toni Morrison’s masterful postmodernist narrative technique in *God Help The Child* could be best described in terms of the classic idiom *ars est celare artem* (art is the concealment of art). Applying magic realism and shifting between multiple heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative focalizers render Morrison’s last warning message against child abuse the strongest in her literary canon.

An abused child is either sexually molested and raped, or psychologically traumatized by parental neglect, maltreatment and/or societal rejection. Child abuse aggravates especially in the case of Afro-American children. According to the official statements of the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the fact findings of the report *Child Maltreatment 2014*, abused African American children die three times greater than that of the white children, and while they make approximately 16 percent of the child population nationally, they make up 30 percent of the child abuse and neglect fatalities. The report states: “using the number of victims and the population data to create rates highlights some racial disparity. The rate of African-American child fatalities (4.36 per 100,000 African-American children) is approximately three times greater than the rates of White or Hispanic children”(54). This rate disparity is indeed racially based on how the African American children are in most

cases the objectified victims of racial projection at the hands of their prime caregivers: their parents.

Domestic violence and oppression practiced against women and female children in African American families is traceable to the devastating long history of slavery in the United States. The atrocities of slavery and the inhuman treatment experienced by the African American ancestors at the hands of their white masters have always kept the vicious circle of the psychological projection of violence against their offspring revolving. The abused children become dysfunctional members in the society; moreover, they develop “coping strategies,” as Manuela López Ramírez explicates in “Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over”: Child Abuse in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, “to resist maltreatment or they can internalize oppression and feel unworthy and accept self-loathing” (149). The impact of abuse, neglect and violence against black children leads typically to a catastrophic childhood trauma that deforms their personalities and coerces them to psychopathic adaptive measures.

Commenting on the impact of psychological child abuse on children and how it equally affects them same as physical abuse, E. Hopper, F. Grossman, J. Spnazzola & M. Zucker explain:

victims of childhood emotional abuse and neglect exhibit equal or worse immediate and long-term effects than survivors of other forms of maltreatment and violence that have been much

more the focus of clinical and research attention over the past four decades (e.g., physical abuse, sexual abuse, community and domestic violence). (86-87)

Moreover, unlike adults, children become grievously powerless and susceptible to psychological harm especially when it is caused by a parent. In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman elaborates this point:

Repeated Trauma in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but 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. (70)

The helplessness of the traumatized victims hunts their memory and controls their entire being. Cathy Caruth explains, in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*, that the traumatized individuals shoulder the perilous burden of the history of the trauma within themselves or “they become themselves the symptom of a history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5). Likewise, Herman, along with a considerable host of other psychologists, insists that “remembering and telling” the memory of trauma is the prerequisite for the “restoration of the social order and for the healing” (12) of the traumatized person.

This paper aims at investigating Toni Morrison's narrative scheme in remembering, revealing and eventually healing the traumatic history of abused African American children in her last novel *God Help the Child*. The paper hypothesizes that Morrison's adoption of a postmodernist authorial stance in the composition of *God Help the Child* depended mainly on the dialogical polyphonic consonance of the heterodiegetic and homodiegetic narrative voices of the main and minor characters in this novel. In addition to the use of magic realism, the intended lack of direct reference to specific time and place adds to the enigmatic atmosphere of the narrative discourse of those characters with the aim of universalizing their common experiences of traumatic child abuse. Moreover, the hypothesis of the paper is based on the presumption that Morrison's narrative schema is traceable to the psychoanalytic theory that the course of psychological recovery of the traumatized victims of child abuse is preconditioned by rendering full catharsis of trauma by means of narration.

The novel *God Help the Child* is made up of four parts. Each part consists of consecutive narrative segments that alternate between the homodiegetic (first-person) narrative voices of multiple characters and the heterodiegetic (omniscient) authorial voice aimed at setting the stage for the revelation of the history of traumatic child abuse experienced by the two main characters Bride and Booker. This alternation incorporates with the shifting

of narrative foci through its various characters; as a result, revealing intermittently the history of the trauma of child abuse by portraying the shifts in the lives of the two main characters Bride and Booker. Commenting on the narrative consorting of these narrative renderings, Walton Muyumba writes in “Lady Sings the Blues”:

God Help the Child is a tragicomic jazz opera played out in four parts. Part I reads like a choral prelude: there are nine sections, each driven by an individual voice, as if Sweetness, Bride, Brooklyn, and Sofia were trading improvised solos. Part II contains four sections: two told by an omniscient third person narrator and one each for Sofia and Rain. Part III is devoted entirely to Booker’s backstory, told by the anonymous third person narrator. And part IV is made up of three sections: Brooklyn returns for a solo: the anonymous third person narrates Booker’s reunion with Bride; and Sweetness closes the show with a final flourish. (N.P.)

It is worthy of note that the course of the events in *God help the Child*: the remembering, the establishing of the trust in an untrustworthy society and the victim’s cathartic revelation of the traumatic past are concomitant with what Herman labels “The fundamental stages of recovery,” which are basically the “establishing [of] safety, reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community” (14).

The first part of the novel consists of nine narrative segments that follow the dramatic consecutive entries of the homodiegetic voices of Sweetness (Bride's mother), Bride and her work partner Brooklyn. This narrative consequence is repeated a second time, and it is concluded with Sofia's narration of her experience of child abuse and its catastrophic effects on her life. In fact, the first part of the novel plays an essential role in the setting of the background for the narration of Bride's traumatic history of child abuse from multiple narrative stances: in coincidence with the first stages of trauma recovery: remembrance.

Sweetness's first words; "It's not my fault. So you can't blame me" (3) reveal her compunctious regret for being the primary cause of Bride's traumata of child abuse in spite of the fact that she is supposed to be her prime caregiver. The exonerative tone of Sweetness's first entry resonates within the collective African American subconscious helplessness towards their generic black skin in this racial society. Sweetness reminisces about the long history of social segregation against Blacks in American society. She says how her mother's relatively light skin color could have "passed easy" for a white woman but she chose otherwise and had to pay a heavy price for her choice. Lula Mae, Sweetness's mother, worked as housekeeper for a rich white couple. They ate the food she made for them and scrubbed their backs "while they sat in the tub and God knows what other intimate things they made her do." Nevertheless, when she went

to the courthouse to get married to Sweetness's father they found "two Bibles and they had to put their hands on the one reserved for Negroes" (4). Sweetness's memories reveal more about the cause of her deep shock when she first saw her "Midnight, Sudanese black" (3) newborn baby. It is almost catastrophic for Sweetness to have a child whose black skin is darker than hers as it means a "throwback" in the social order:

I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father. Ain't nobody in my family anywhere near that color. Tar is the closest I can think of yet her hair don't go with the skin [...] you think she's a throwback" (3).

Having black skin in this racial society meant being "spit on in a drugstore, shoving elbows at the bus stop, walking in the gutter to let whites have the whole sidewalk, charged a nickel at the grocer's for a paper bag that's free to white shoppers" (4). Having a light skin color; by contrast, meant having privileges that her light-skinned parents enjoyed. Thus, her mother was not stopped from "trying 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 the back room. Neither one would let themselves drink from a "colored-only fountain" (4). The narration of these racist facts sets the background for Sweetness's resentful attitude toward her own child whose "blue-black" skin made her feel "embarrassed" and contemplate infanticide as she

“held a blanket over her face and pressed.” She even thought of “giving her away to an orphanage.” As soon as she took her baby home she stopped nursing her and started “bottle-feeding” (5).

The newborn child was also rejected by her father who accused her mother of cheating on him. He never touched her and treated her “like she was a stranger—more than that, an enemy” (5). The father deserts them both forever when the mother tells him that the child’s blackness “must be from his own family” (6). Meanwhile, Sweetness had to look for a cheaper place and to take some precautions against acknowledging her black-skinned daughter publicly:

I know enough not to take her with me when I applied to landlords so I left her with a teenager cousin to babysit. I did the best I could and didn’t take her outside much anyway because when I pushed her in the baby carriage, friends or strangers would lean down and peek to say something nice and then give a start or jump back before frowning.
(6)

Sweetness’s shadism led her to project her racist fears against her own daughter and to consequently maltreat her. She, for instance, locked her daughter up because she didn’t want people to recognize her as her daughter. Furthermore, Sweetness prohibited Bride from call her “mother” or “Mama” in public. Thus, the regretful tone in Sweetness’s personal voice confesses her parental rejection and neglect of her daughter as she says, “I told

her to call me “sweetness” instead of “Mother” or “Mama.” It was safer” (6). In fact, Sweetness’s confessional narrative exposes her as the primary cause of Bride’s traumatic childhood experience. Moreover, this is exasperated by her admittance of practicing racism against her own child. The final words spoken by her in this part, “it’s not my fault” (7), reveal the nature of psychological stress she experienced in rearing a child whose color is shadier than hers in a racial society that practices discrimination and annihilation of people on the basis of their skin colors.

The following chapter of the first part is delivered in Bride’s homodiegetic narrative voice. There is a time laps of twenty three-years that separate Sweetness’s narration from Bride’s. Through her narration, the reader is delivered a glimpse of Bride’s life as a twenty-year-old successful businesswoman: the owner of a thriving cosmetics product line which she labled “You Girl” (10). She lives in her luxurious apartment and drives her “sleek, rat gray [Jaguar] with a vanity license”. Bride has a work assistant; dines in extravagant restaurants, and enjoys parties and promiscuous sex. She, however, severed her ties with her mother since she decided to leave after high school. In this stage of Bride’s life, we witness her taking the first step in direction toward recovery from her traumatic past, which is creating a secure environment by achieving personal freedom and taking possession of her material surroundings. This typically relates to Herman’s three stages of trauma recovery as she explicates:

[R]ecovery unfolds in three stages. The central task of the first stage is the establishment of safety. The central task of the second stage is remembrance and mourning. The central task of the third stage is reconnection with ordinary life. (180)

It is, therefore, an essential prerequisite for the traumatized victim to gain freedom in order to achieve safety. However, freedom in Bride's case comes at a great cost. Despite her occupational success and luxurious possessions, Bride is fully aware of the fallacy of her materialistic world. She is conscientiously compunctious about her promiscuity so she admits, "my life is falling down. I'm sleeping with men whose names I don't know and not remembering any of it. What's going on? I'm young; I'm successful and pretty" (53). This realization comes to the surface when her lover Booker decides to leave her after she tells him about her intention to visit the ex-con Sofia Huxley. Booker just tells her "you not the woman I want," and leaves. Bride's long-maintained false materialistic world suddenly crumples and she feels "melting away" (8).

Bride learns after her break-up with Booker that the safety of her material affluence is void and unreliable, so she starts the perilous journey of self-reconciliation that ensues in the second stage of remembrance and mourning. Bride's first-person narrative voice expresses her perplexed emotional state after Booker left her. Though Bride had numerous boyfriends, her sex

life was void of emotional gratification. She says that her promiscuous sexual relations were like “Diet Coke—deceptively sweet minus nutrition,” and that all her ex-lovers were “waiting for [her] crotch or [her] paycheck like an allowance” (36). Still, Booker was especially different because he was the only friend Bride could confide in. Thus, she says, “I spilled my guts to him, told him everything: every fear, every hurt, every accomplishment, however small” (53). According to Herman, the second stage of recovery consists of founding a secure emotional bond with trustworthy persons with whom the traumatized victim can have a catharsis of his/her psychological ailment.

Herman writes; “sharing the traumatic experience with others is a precondition for the restitution of a sense of meaningful world” (51). Therefore, Booker is Bride’s confidant whose presence in her life means release by voicing her traumatic past and whose absence means lack of psychological balance. Bride found that talking with Booker could make “certain things [she] had buried came up fresh as though [she] was seeing them for the first time” (53). In fact, Morrison’s polyphonic alternation of the narrative voices of Sweetness and Bride in the first part of *God Help the Child* aims at revealing the atrocities of child abuse through the parallel oscillation between the mother’s remorsefulness and the daughter’s cathartic remembering that is only accessible in Booker’s presence.

Sweetness's following monologue in the first part of the novel reveals more of the atrocities of childhood abuse and neglect she inflicted upon her child. The mother's monologue is followed by the daughter's in a narrative schema that aims at achieving a dialogic interactive plurality of consciousness in which each character delivers her homodiegetic version of reality and the reader is not constrained to receive a monologist heterodiegetic version imposed by an omniscient author. There are, however, narrative intervals by other characters in the form of monologues such as those by Brooklyn and Sofia who were also traumatized by child abuse. The reader is given, in Bakhtin's terms, a heteroglossia of several realities of child abuse conveyed by several voices depending on their different perspectives.

Repeatedly, Sweetness affirms that she was not a "bad mother" (43). She admits that she feels bad about the way she "treated Lula Ann when she was little," but she immediately asserts that she had "to protect her. She didn't know the world" (41). Sweetness's remorseful monologue reveals how racism affected the lives of Black children especially when it was practiced by white age-mates. She says:

I once saw a girl nowhere near as dark as Lula Ann and who couldn't be more than ten year old tripped by one of a group of white boys and when she fell and tried to scramble up another one put his foot on her behind and knocked her flat again ...See if I hadn't trained Lula Ann properly she wouldn't have

known to always cross the street and avoid white boys. (41)

Remarkably, Sweetness's monologue includes her account of the most distressing incident in Bride's life, which is taking the witness stand in Sofia Huxely's trial for the accusation of child sexual harassment. Sweetness says that Bride's performance in the court made her "proud as a peacock" because it was not "often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites" (42). The vindictive tone of Sweetness's account reveals the animosity of the racial social periphery they lived in. The vengeful exaltation the mother experienced changed her attitude toward the child whom she never touched, so she "had her ears pierced and bought her a pair of earrings" as a reward for her "courage" (43). That "courage" of the daughter was; nevertheless, as false as her testimony for which she paid a heavy price.

Bride withstood severe psychological pain for the rest of her life for falsely accusing Sofia of taking part in molesting school children, and for causing her to be sent to prison for fifteen years. Bride bore the shameful of this secret, along with a more horrendous one, that traumatized her consciousness for long years. It is only through her relationship with Booker that she could recover from her repressed pain by narrating those shocking incidents. So, through Bride's monologue, the reader is given a variant narrative view of her traumatic past. It is a polarization of

narrative focalization that aims at a wider scope of the revelation of the facts. The schematic narrative variation in the accounts of the mother and the daughter is the hallmark of legitimate reliable witness testimony.

After her false testimony at the courthouse, Bride reminisces how her mother touched her tenderly for the first time since she was born. The repetition of “she held my hand, my hand” in her account reveals the deep psychological pain Bride suffered from because of her mother's loathsome maltreatment just because of her stark blackness. As a child Bride was deprived of her mother’s tenderness as she says that she yearned for even a slap on the face:

[...] I always knew she didn't like touching me. I could tell. Distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me. Rinse me, actually, after a halfhearted rub with a soapy washcloth. 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 [...]. (31)

Bride had to suffer parental rejection and maltreatment—both are forms of child abuse—because of her mother’s shadism. The above words reveal her deep sense of emotional deprivation, especially from her mother’s tenderness. Bride was willing to do whatever it required to gain her mother’s empathy. Psychologically, this fits in with Herman’s analysis of the

traumatized child's psychopathic self-laceration in his/her will to do whatever it takes to placate his abuser:

This malignant sense of inner badness is often camouflaged by the abused child's persistent attempts to be good. In the effort to placate her abusers, the child victim often becomes a superb performer. She attempts to do whatever is required of her. She may become an empathic caretaker for her parents, an efficient housekeeper, an academic achiever, and a model of social conformity. She brings to all these tasks a perfectionist zeal, driven by the desperate need to find favor in her parents' eyes. (127)

A second horrendous shameful regret Bride had to suppress during her childhood relates to her mother's coerced conspiratorial concealment of witnessing a child being sexually abused. At the same age Bride gave her false testimony in Sofia's case just to please her mother, she was ordered to keep the secret of witnessing their landlord raping a child in the back alley from the window of their apartment.

In "Toni Morrison's God Help the Child," Kara Walker writes that Morrison "has always written for the ear, with a loving attention to the textures and sounds of words" (n.p.). One is prone to verify that her narrative gratifies the senses of the reader so he almost hears, smells, tastes, feels, and sees the narrated events through her coherent and cohesive register. Bride's description of the landlord's crime of raping a child in the back alley proves the

hypothesized hyperbole above. With this horrible crime being described, the reader listens through Bride's monologue a "cat's meow [...] how pained it sounded, frightened even" (54). However, the meowing was not that of a cat but of the child being raped by the landlord whose moaning "was soft, squeaky and loaded with pain." There is also the indelible visualized image of the boy whose "little hands were fists, opening and closing" with agonized pain between the "hairy white thighs" of his predator. Bride, still little Lula Ann at the time of this horrible crime, is double-fold traumatized due to her mother's apathy towards the abused child and her coerced conspiratorial silence against this heinous crime. Sweetness, we are told, was "furious," not about the "little crying boy, but about spreading the story. She wasn't interested in tiny fists or big hairy thighs; she was interested in keeping our apartment." As an innocent child who witnessed that terrible crime, Bride had to suppress her shocked feelings of fear and loathsomeness. Her mother warned her against letting the secret out; "Don't you say a word about it. Not to anybody, you hear me, Lula? Forget it. Not a single word" (54-55). Instead, Bride has never forgotten witnessing the horror and pain experienced by the abused child, as well as she has never forgotten Mr. Leigh looking up at her window and cursing her; "Hey, little nigger cunt! Close that window and get the fuck outta there!" (55). From a psychological perspective, the witnessing of child abuse is as a devastating experience as that of being its

immediate victim. In his *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, Jenny Edkins explains this point; “[w]itnessing violence done to others and surviving can seem to be as traumatic as suffering brutality oneself” (4).

Furthermore, Herman explicates that “the abused child’s sense of inner badness is compounded by her enforced complicity in crimes against others. Children often resist becoming accomplices” (126). Ironically, Bride bore the lacerating remorsefulness of being forced to give false testimony against an innocent woman just to please her mother, and of becoming an accomplice in keeping the secret of a child abuse crime. The painful feelings of regret and helplessness are traumatic as the coerced silence meant the sparing of the real predator and the false testimony meant the ruin of an innocent women’s life. Bride says, “what if it was the landlord my forefinger was really pointing at in the courtroom?” the perplexity of the situation affects Bride’s psychological balance as both a child and an adult. Bride, however, never gives a catharsis of her traumatized past but only in the presence of Booker. She says “that was one of the best talks we ever had. I felt such relief [...] I felt curried, safe, owned” (56).

In *God Help the Child*, the two main characters Bride and Booker recover from their traumatic experiences through narrative though at different paces. While Bride voices her trauma as soon as she finds security and comfort in her relationship with

Booker, she doesn't fully recover but later in the novel after a journey of self-reconciliation and full confession of her life-long-hidden secrets. The initiation of this journey ensues after Booker decides to leave her when she tells him about her intention to visit Sofia, the woman she accused of child abuse when she was eight years old. Booker's words "you not the woman I want," (8) express his deep disappointment in Bride for trying to make amends with a child predator. The announcement of her intended visit to that "raging alligator" (29) woman ripped the scab off his unhealed wound of child abuse.

The oscillation between the narrative monologues of Bride and Sweetness in the first part of the novel is intersected by the narrative intervals of Brooklyn's and Sofia Huxley's monologues. Both were victims of child abuse and molestation that affected their psychological beings. We first meet Brooklyn in the first part of the novel twice, then a third and fourth times in the second and fourth parts consecutively. Brooklyn is Bride's closest friend and her assistant in Sylvia, Inc., where they both work. She is a blond twenty-one young woman who has had her share of childhood abuse, and same as Bride she had to run away from home after her uncle "started thinking of putting his fingers between [her] legs again" (139). She had to run away when she was fourteen, but "invented" and "toughened [herself]" (140). Brooklyn says she can "read [Bride's] mind like a headline" (139). However, Brooklyn knows how strong Bride is except for

when it comes to her promiscuous sexual relationships. It is noteworthy that Brooklyn's narrative intervals in first-person voice help in shedding light on both Bride and Booker's personalities. Through her monologues, we learn about Bride and Booker's first random encounter in a dancing party. Both were total strangers whose mutual licentiousness ignited their immediate physical attachment. Brooklyn says, "You just don't grab somebody from behind like that unless you know them. But she didn't mind at all. She let him squeeze her, rub up against her and she didn't know a thing about him....She liked the sex. Addicted to it and believe me I know" (58). Through Brooklyn's account, we also learn about Booker's promiscuous nature, so he doesn't mind kissing Brooklyn who takes advantage of his being alone naked in Bride's bed. She backs up, however, because of his offensive sarcasm:

Between kisses, I whispered, "Don't you want another flower in your garden?"

He said, "Are you sure you know what makes a garden grow?"

"Sure do," I said. "Tenderness."

"And dung," he answered. (59-60)

Sofia's narrative homodiegetic monologues are only introduced in the novel at the end of part one and at the second chapter of part two. Sofia's first-person narrative voice signals off the first part of the novel after a sequel of consecutive narrative entries repeated systematically twice. Thus, the sequence of the

narrative accounts of Sweetness, Bride and Brooklyn is repeated twice and ends with Sofia's final tone. This narrative scheme consists of polyphonic interactive entries of narrative voices all humming the same tune resonant throughout their shared traumatic history of child abuse. With the absence of Morrison's authorial voice, this multi-voiced interconnectedness leads to a plurality of consciousness as every character recounts the reality from a different perspective. The reader, by consequence, understands the reality of the characters' accounts from variant dialogic perspectives, and assumes the truth objectively. This also fits in Bakhtin's ideology of dialogic fictional creation, taking Dostoevsky's fiction as his ideal example:

What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousness, with equal rights and each with its own world, combined but not merged on the unity of the event. (6)

In two homodiegetic narrative chapters in the first and second parts of *God Help the Child*, Sofia Huxley reminisces about her traumatic experience in women's prison "Decagon" for fifteen years after being convicted of child abuse. Sadistic guards, gang rapes, and infirmary imprisonment were aggravated by the fact that Sofia and her cellmate "Julia," who was in prison for "smothering her disabled daughter," (67) were "at the bottom of the heap" of criminals because "hurting little children was their

idea of the lowest of the low” (66). Sofia was raised by austere religious parents, especially her mother who punished her severely for some things she cannot even remember now, so she “couldn’t wait to get out of Mommy’s house and marry the first man who asked” (76). It is important to remark how Bride’s and Sofia’s mothers abused their children by either rejecting or maltreating them, and in both cases their children ran away as soon as they could. Sofia recounts her vengeful attack on Bride who was one of the students who “helped kill [her], take [her] life away.” Still, Sofia is grateful for Bride for healing her psychological pain as her narrative monologue achieves its cathartic and/or healing effect:

For the first time after all those years, I cried. Cried and cried and cried until I fell asleep....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. (70)

The second part of the novel includes two chapters in the author’s heterodiegetic narrative voice: one followed by Sofia Huxley’s monologue and the other is followed by Rain’s only narrative contribution in the novel. Rain is a run-away adolescent whom Bride meets with her foster hippy parents in the woods after her car crashes into “what must have been the world’s first and biggest tree” (82). Rain had her share of traumatic child abuse

same as the rest of the characters who populate the social milieus of the two main characters Bride and Booker. Rain had to run away from her prostitute mother who forced her into child prostitution. The mother kicked Rain out after she bit a regular client on whom she was forced to perform oral coitus. The mother apologized to the client, “gave back his twenty-dollar bill and made [Rain] stand outside” (101). She never let her back in. Rain had to learn “where sleep was safe” and “what kinds of people would give you money and what for” (102-103). She was named “Rain” for the rainy night Evelyn and Steve found her waiting alone at the Salvation Army truck stop” (103).

The third part of the novel is written in the third-person narrative voice same as the fourth part except for two homodiegetic narrative intervals by Brooklyn and Sweetness, whose final monologue signals off the novel as it began it. Morrison chose to dedicate half of the narrative discourse in *God Help the Child* to the omniscience of the heterodiegetic voice in order to activate other narrative techniques such as magic realism and chronotopic encounters. The application of these techniques helps in accelerating the healing process of the main characters’ traumatic experiences through their final reconciliatory reunion and full psychological catharsis to one another.

After her breakup with Booker and the deadly battering by Sofia, Bride feels the unraveling of the strong independent identity she has built up ever since running away from her

mother's house: she feels "[d]ismissed" and "[e]rased" (38). It is worthy to note that this is the turning point in the narrative scheme of *God Help the Child* at which Morrison switches to the voice of the heterodiegetic narrator as Bride loses her sense of identity; consequently, she loses her narrator/focalizer narrative voice.

Same as Bride, Booker bore the burden of the memory of his dead brother Adam who was a victim of a serial pedophile killer "convicted of SSS, the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys" (118). Thus, Booker is fighting the demons of a childhood trauma. He is a secondary victim whose psychological being is shattered by the crime of child sexual abuse and murder in his family and their devastating aftermath. Adam was Booker's favorite elder brother and the "replacement" for his dead-at-birth twin. Losing Adam left Booker psychologically debilitated as he had always felt a "warm void walking by his side...A presence that shared the quilt under which [he] slept" so years passed and "the shape of the void faded, transferred itself into a kind of inner companion" (115). The last time Booker saw his brother was when he was skateboarding down the sidewalk in his fluorescent yellow T-shirt. The visual image of Adam's last appearance floating like "spot of gold moving down a shadowy tunnel towards the mouth of a living Sun" (115) clings to the mind of the reader as fast does the "single yellow rose" Booker places on the

lid of Adam's coffin as does the same color of the rose he tattooed on his left shoulder" (120).

The images of the roses on Adam's Coffin and Booker's shoulder have complex metaphorical connotations. Booker's ideal family life never returns to its normal course. So, after Adam's murder, there were no more family unions, communicative discussions or trumpet playing by his father. Nonetheless, after months of mourning the family decides to move on and this shatters Booker's psychological being. He became obsessed with a "poisonous vein of disapproval" (125) of his family's attitude. In the course of time, Booker became increasingly incapable of forgetting or forgiving, and he could not get over how his family "pretend[ed] it was over? How could they forget and just go on?"(117). Adam's death meant the loss of Booker's soul mate: his murder left him alone. In fact, Adam's death "became his own life [...] his only life" (147). Six years later, Mr. Humboldt, Adam's murderer, was caught and executed for the sexually stimulated slaughter of six boys, whose names were tattooed across his shoulders and their amputated small penises were found in a decorated candy tin in his house. Booker's vengefulness had never been quenched because he thought that the execution of child abusers such as Humboldt was "a too facile solution," as Ramirez writes in "Childhood Cuts Festered and Never Scabbed Over": Child Abuse in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. Instead, Booker would rather have his murdered brother's body

“lashed” across Mr. Humboldt’s back as he heard that an African tribe does so with murderers. He thought “that would certainly be justice—to carry the rotting corpse around as a physical burden as well and public shame and damnation.” The “calming solution,” for Booker was to reenact the gesture he had made at his brother’s funeral when he laid a rose on his coffin by having a small rose tattooed on his left shoulder. This symbolic gesture has its psychological implication as it means that Booker has displaced his vengefulness against Mr. Humboldt upon himself: he shoulders the shameful pain of his brother’s murderer upon himself. He even wonders, “[w]as this the same chair the predator sat in, the same needle used on his paste-white skin?” (120)

Morrison’s dedication of the third part of the novel to the omniscient narrative voice sheds light on Booker’s personality that was gravely affected by the heinous child abuse that tortured, mutilated and killed his brother. We learn through this heterodiegetic stance how Booker adopted a sardonic attitude towards his life and all he did in college was to “sneer, laugh, dismiss, find fault [and] demean”(121). Before falling in love with Bride, Booker had a relationship with Felicity, a “substitute teacher.” They enjoyed their time together for two years “without deadlines,” (126) or obligations. However, they broke up after realizing their differences: Booker found Felicity “nosy, forever prying into his life,” and she saw him as a “misogynist loser”(128). The final stroke came when Felicity had to bail out

Booker from a police station after battering two drug addicts who were “sucking on a crack pipe” while a two-year baby was left “screaming and crying in the backseat of the crackheads’ Toyota” (128). In spite of Felicity’s sarcastic remark about Booker being “batman,” (129) it proves to be the right description of his self-avowed mission to defend children against abusers. Having lost his brother in such a horrendous crime, Booker constantly shows aggressive and/or impulsive emotional reactions. However, Booker’s impulsive aggression shows only as an enactment of his will to defend helpless children against any possible predators. This explains Morrison’s first introductory descriptive words of Booker at the beginning of part four:

Blood stained his knuckles and his fingers began to swell. The stranger he’d been beating wasn’t moving anymore or groaning [...]. He’d left the beaten man’s jeans open and his penis exposed just the way it was when he first saw him at the edge of the campus playground. Only a few faculty children were near the slide and one was on the swing. None apparently had noticed the man licking his lips and wavering his little white gristle towards them. (109)

Booker’s instant infatuation with Bride led to a “flawless” (133) relationship for six months of “the bliss of edible sex, free style music, challenging books and the company of an easy undemanding Bride” (135). Nonetheless, Booker had to move away when Bride told him of her intention to visit a convicted child abuser.

Tracing the narrative scheme of *God Help the Child*, Bride's journey into the countryside in search of Booker and their eventual reunion make up almost the rest of its third and fourth parts. The eventual union of the two main trauma-stricken characters parallels the last two stages of recovery as explicated by Herman: "reconstructing the trauma story, and restoring the connection between survivors and their community" (14). Morrison's inclusion of the fairy-tale mythical transformation in Bride's physical appearance—in the mid of this seemingly realistic fictional world—parallels her use of the chronotope of the road as both techniques reflect Bride's perplexed feelings toward her lost identity. It is noteworthy that Booker at this point was equally suffering his loss of identity; therefore, he too sets out on a journey back to his hometown, "Whiskey, California" (75). Amazingly, after her break up with Booker, Bride begins to realize sudden inexplicable transformation in her body that reverts her back to adolescence. In addition to other magical transformations, Bride notices that her pubic hair disappears; her breasts flatten; and her earring holes vanish:

Although there were no more physical disappearances, she was disturbed by the fact that she'd had no menstrual period for at least two, maybe three, months. Flat-chested and without underarm or pubic hair, pierced ears and stable weight , she tried and failed to forget what she believed was her crazed transformation back into a scared little black girl. (14)

The idea of these magical transformations in Bride's physique is closely related to her journey in quest for her lost identity. Bride had to get rid of all her false materialistic surroundings and possessions and to lay off her vain femininity which she carried throughout her career as a salable commodity. In this respect Manuela Lopez Ramirez comments, "in her epiphany, Bride, away from her sophisticated life, realizes how materialism cannot make up for her traumatic childhood" (184). As soon as Bride begins her journey, she is stripped off her car, her luxurious life style and her vainglorious self-image as a successful businesswoman. This element of magic realism is applied concomitantly with the application of the chronotope of the road to an uncertain destination. Morrison is brilliantly making use of these two narrative techniques in order to prepare both Bride and Booker for their eventual reunion and full recovery from their traumatic past: they both have to be stripped off of that traumatic past and to be driven away from the materialistic vanity of this world.

In *The Dialogic Imagination* Bakhtin writes, "the image of man is always intrinsically chronotopic"(65). According to Bakhtin, chronotope is the organizing center for the interconnectedness of the fundamental narrative events of the novel and the means of materializing time in space:

It is precisely the chronotope that provides the ground essential for showing forth, the representability of events [...]. All the novel's abstract elements—philosophical and sociological generalizations, ideas, analyses of cause and effect—gravitate toward the chronotope and through it take on flesh and blood, permitting the imaging power of art to do its work. (250)

Bride's journey is chronotopically devised to retrieve her back to purity as a child. The unraveling of Bride is both literal and metaphorical as it aims at the “unpeeling of layers of civilization [and paring] her down to the bare human,” (8) as Meenakshi F. Paul and Khem Raj Sharma write in “Childhood Matters: The Palimpsest of Retellings in *God Help the Child*.” In this journey, Bride “sets out on a restorative identity quest for self-forgiveness and self-definition,” (156) as Ramirez explicates. Bride had to learn that she “had counted on her looks for so long—how well beauty worked. She had not known its shallowness [...]”(151). In rural California, Bride's Luxurious car crashes into a large tree and her ankle get fractured. Luckily she is rescued and taken care of by the hippy couple, Steve and Evelyn. This incident, however, marks off the transmission into a chronotopic terra incognita and undetermined time zone. The anti-capitalist couple's unconditional care and kindness teach Bride a lesson about the vagueness of her materialistic attitude, so she wonders “what did she know anyway about good for its own sake

or love without things? (92). Remarkably, after Bride is fully stripped off of her façade of material affluence and vainglorious femininity the first person who comes into her sight is Rain: the white version of herself. Same as Bride, Rain is a run-away child who had her share of traumatic child abuse. Their relation, especially after Bride's regression to childhood, is very influential in taking Bride out of her self-absorption and monologicality. In mid idyllic landscape, the two children find solace in each other; henceforth, their healing process ensues as they voice their traumatic memories. Rain was physically rescued by the hippy couple but never healed psychologically until she met Bride. Rain complains "I don't know who I can talk to." She likes her foster parents but "they frown or look away if I say stuff about how it was in my mother's house". By contrast, Bride, "[her] black lady listens to [her] tell how it was. Steve won't let [her] talk about it. Neither will Evelyn" (104). In fact, Bride and Rain's encounter is an extremely essential step toward her recovery. Hence, the power of the healing narrative which Morrison allows her traumatized characters to experience through giving voice to their long-repressed past pains. Bride's attitude changes radically from selfish apathy to altruistic self-sacrifice as she covers Rain's face and body with her own body in a gangsters' shotgun attack. The two children provide for one another what they missed in their toxic relations with their natural mothers: maternal care and self-sacrifice. Rain says, "My heart was beating fast because nobody

had done that before. [...] 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." (105-106).

The final encounter between Bride and Booker takes place after a transient sojourn with his aunt. Same as Sweetness, Queen—Booker's aunt—is a single mother who had been affected by African patriarchy: both women had suffered the desertion of their husbands and both are penalized for their neglect of their children. Queen, however, proves to be a weaker mother than Sweetness as she could not keep any of her children. She had multiple husbands and had to abandon her children in order to “marry other men. Lots of other men” (169). Queen had “no opportunity to raise a single child beyond the age of twelve” (159). Nevertheless, her main traumatic memory pertains her failure to keep her daughter Hannah safe from sexual abuse by her father. Queen refused to believe Hannah and ever since “the ice between them never melted” (170). As a result, Queen had to suffer the abandonment of her daughter who ran away same as Bride, Rain, Brooklyn and Sofia did with their mothers.

At the final part of the novel—told in omniscient third-person narrative voice—Bride and Booker give full catharsis of their traumatic pain and achieve full recovery through narrating to each other the atrocities of their traumatic past. Booker and Bride reconcile after she admits giving a false testimony in Sofia's trial in order to please her psychopathic mother. This cathartic

confession relieves her troubled psychological being and leads to her eventual self-reconciliation. It is important to notice that Bride must feel secure in the presence of Booker in order to face her past traumatic memories. This fits in Herman's explication that the "[a]s the survivor summons her memories, the need to preserve safety must be balanced constantly against the need to face the past" (203).

Thus, the final reconciliatory dialogue also helps Booker correct his misunderstanding of Bride's visit to Sofia, as he had thought that she was "suck[ing] up to a monster" (153). Booker explains to Rain why he left by telling her that his brother was "murdered by a freak, a predator like the one [he] thought she was forgiving" (154). Bride admits; "I lied! I lied! I lied! She was innocent. I helped convict her [...]." The poor child wanted her mother to "look at [her] with proud eyes, for once" (153). Their reconciliation meant the unburdening of their traumatic past of child abuse: their loss of affection; their witnessing of other children's abuse and their coerced intimidation to hide the truth about "things that happened, why [they] did things, thought things, took actions that were really about what went on when [they] were just children" (155). Having confessed her childhood traumatic pain, Bride feels "newly born," as she is no longer "forced to relive, no outlive the disdain of her mother and the abandonment of her father" (162). Furthermore, this eventual reconciliation of the lovers brings to an end the magical

transformation in Bride's body and the retrieval of her femininity as she realizes the return of the "tiny holes" (169) in her earlobes and the "magical return of her flawless breasts" (166). Bride's final announcement to Booker that she is pregnant with his child marks off the end of their life-long traumas of child-abuse. They, finally, say their vows to give their child what they were deprived of: "A child. A new life. Immune to evil or illness, protected from kidnap, beatings, rape, racism, insult, hurt, self-loathing, abandonment. Error-free. All goodness. Minus wrath" (175).

In conclusion, *God Help the Child* is Morrison's last and strongest fictional message against the atrocities of child abuse—a common theme that runs through her entire fictional canon. This paper deals mainly with the recovery of the main characters from the ailments of their traumatic past through a scheme of healing narrative that follows the psychologically proven recovery stages: finding safety, reconstructing memory and restoring connection between survivors and their communities. The adoption of postmodern narrative technique helped Morrison in voicing the unspeakable truth of the atrocities of child abuse practiced against children, especially in the Afro-American community as it is doubly aggravated by racism and color shadism. The novel, however, ends with a hopeful prayer "God help the child" (178).

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الملخص

تناولت الكاتبة تونى موريسون بتوسع و على نحو مطرد فى نتاجها الأدبى التجارب الصادمة للأطفال المُعتدى عليهم. و أعتمدت موريسون، الكاتبة الأفريقية الأمريكية على آليات السرد ما بعد الحداثية لكي تتخطى معضلة كونها الكاتبة الأفريقية التى ينتمى السواد الأعظم من قراءها إلى عموم الثقافة الأمريكية البيضاء. و يهدف هذا البحث إلى دراسة خطة آليات السرد التى اتبعتها موريسون فى تذكر صدمة الاطفال الأفارقة الامريكويون و افشاء اسرارها و التعافى منها فى روايتها الأخير "فليكن الله فى عون الطفل" (2014). و يقوم هذا البحث على فرضية أن موريسون تتبنى منهجية سردية ما بعد حداثية فى تأليف روايتها الأخيرة معتمدة فيها بشكل أساسى على تعددية الأصوات السردية بشكل حوارى تتناغم فيه أصوات السرد الذاتية داخل الشخصيات الرئيسية مع بعضها البعض فى مقابلة مع صوت الراوى الذى يحكى قصصهم. كما تعتمد فرضية هذا البحث على فكرة ان خطة موريسون السردية من الممكن تقفي أثرها فى نظرية علم النفس التى تفيد بأن طريق التعافى من صدمة التعدي على الأطفال مرهونة بشرط التخلص من ذكرى تلك الصدمة عن طريق السرد.

الكلمات الرئيسية: الاعتداء على الأطفال، الصدمة ، السرد ما بعد الحداثى ، تعددية الأصوات ، جوديث هيرمان، التعافى، الواقعية السحرية، الزمكانية