



“...Rejected by Everybody All Her Life...”

ADVERSE CHILDHOOD ISSUES IN TONI MORRISON’S NOVEL GOD HELP THE CHILD (2015)

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Abstract

The goal of this study is to examine the adverse childhood that the protagonist of Toni Morrison's book "God Help the Child" had to deal with. There is evidence that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) can cause anxiety and depression. In this case, adolescents are more likely to feel anxiety and depression. This is the result of an adolescent having a mental health issue. . Adversity in adolescents has a significant impact on short and long-term outcomes. Since she was a child, the character has gone through harsh experiences. Felitti's theory of adverse childhood (2018) is relevant to this analysis. This theory is based on how the text has been interpreted and how the novel is being read. Through the use of quotations in the book, information is gathered. Sentences and paragraphs make up the data that was gathered. The results of the study show that the characters who face adverse childhood experiences can be seen through: (1) the main character has different skin colors at birth from his parents so that his parents do not accept him, (2) the main character gets various treatments that lead to the adverse childhood experiences he gets from their environment and parents. Therefore, the various bad treatment received by the main character is the main issue of adverse childhood experiences in the novel

Key words: *Adverse childhood, child, memories.*

A. INTRODUCTION

It is impossible to separate humans from the past. Memories, as well as current events, affect human life. Memory is an organized system that enables living things to store information about the outside world and utilize it to control their behavior. Every experience, both recent and distant, will be preserved in human memory and later brought back to life in their brains. Time does not cure

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emotional scars that occur in people's lives. Therefore, events that impact them will remain in their memories forever.

Someone's childhood has a significant impact on their life. A toddler's brain is like a sponge, swiftly absorbing all they observe around them. What they see and feel are well preserved in their memories. Their memories do an excellent job of recalling what they see and feel. As an illustration, the traumatizing childhood events they experienced or regularly watched ultimately cause in the child. According to Freud, if an incident results in a severe mental disorder, it can be said to have traumatized the individual. The brain's functional system may be irreversibly impacted. According to Freud, a situation is traumatizing if it makes the mind experience distress.

Children who have experienced ACE will grow up to engage in unhealthy habits. Substance abuse, alcohol abuse, smoking, risky sexual behavior, violence, and crime or behavior that leads to obesity are examples of these behaviors. This occurs because, despite having negative recollections, they did not receive special treatment from their parents when they were little.

Because this issue is becoming increasingly severe but is still receiving little attention, adverse childhood experiences are an essential topic for research. However, because the effects are unfavorable and long-lasting, they can significantly impact children's attitudes as adults, leading to a vicious cycle of misery, financial loss, and poor health. However, as the effects will have a detrimental and long-lasting effect on children's attitudes in the future, the influence could have a significant impact now. Their offspring in the following generation may likewise experience this effect. Bellis claims that those with ACEs are more prone to pass the disease to their offspring (2013:89). As a result, parents who have had ACE may be more inclined to expose their kids to it, leading to a vicious circle of misery, financial disadvantage, and bad health.

In this study, I'm focused on discussing how some experiences are recorded in memory. A person's painful life event that took place before the age of 18 but that they still recall as an adult is referred to as an "adverse childhood experience." (Kostić, 2019:15). According to Zeanah, ACEs are a variety of traumatic childhood experiences that take place within the first 18 years of a person's life. These experiences can include abuse or neglect. The period that they should have passed as a time where they could develop their talents, play with their friends and learn from many things must turn into a scary time that they should not have passed at that age. This traumatic experience dramatically impacts the individual who experiences it even until they grow up. Experiences during childhood can affect an individual's overall mental and physical health throughout the life course.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

The psychoanalytic theory and Felitti's concept of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) by Felitti was utilized in this study. A passage from Toni

Morrison's 2015 book *God Helps the Child* was used to collect data. Descriptive and content analysis were some of the research techniques used in this study. Using literary devices in the novel, such as characters, conflict, setting, narrator, theme, and point of view, is another analysis method.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A person who encounters terrible occurrences before the age of 18 is said to have had adverse childhood experiences. There are many different types of ACE, includes familial suicide, mental, sexual, and physical abuse, divorce, neglecting children physically and emotionally, domestic violence, and other behaviors that have an impact on a child's life through causing trauma. In this study, the main character Lula Ann, when she has grown up and changed her name to Bride she is still constantly bothered by the terrible experiences she had as a child. Her troubled background is due to her diverse skin tone. The following quotations illustrate some of the mistreatment or "adverse childhood experiences" she experienced in her life.

“It’s not my fault. So you can’t blame me. I didn’t do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn’t take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me.” (P.11)

“I hate to say it, but from the very beginning In the maternity ward the baby, Lula Ann, embarrassed me.” (P.12)

From the quotation above, it can be revealed that the adverse childhood experience received by the main character in this novel was experienced when she was just born. This is supported by Lula's mother's statement that "She was so black she scared me, Lula Ann, embarrassed me." Lula's skin tone was different from her parents' when she was born. This causes Lula's presence to be unacceptable to her parents because they think they don't have the same skin color as Lula. Because of this difference, Lula was mistreated, such as receiving verbal abuse from her parents. She could not be fully accepted in her own family because of the differences she had, and her parents looked down on her as a result. This also relates to what Asmussen (2020:8) said that verbal abuse is a form of ACE followed by physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse.

“He never touched her. I never did convince him that I ain’t never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness must be from his own family—not mine. That’s when it got worse, so bad he just up and left and I had to look for another, cheaper place to live ” (P.12)

It is clear from the passage above that the main character was treated poorly when she was a baby and her parents did not show her any affection. In this case, Lula's father didn't care about Lula because he felt Lula was not his child. The worse thing is when her father never touched her. "He never touched her," is a statement that proves it. Not only that, in the end Lula's father also left her with her mother. Her father ended up leaving Lula with her mother because he couldn't believe in the existence of a different Lula. Due to the treatment that Lula received from her father, Lula lost one of the figures she needed in her life, and of course, it would cause psychological disturbances in her. As stated by Donkin (2015: 5) that the prevalence of ACE is correlated with poor parenting, the age of young parents, and family structure. This means that Lula was shaped into a child who will experience trauma throughout her life because of what her father did when he abandoned her and refused to help with her upbringing.

"I told her to call me "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama." It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me "Mama" would confuse people." (P.13)

From the quotation above, the adverse childhood experiences received by the main character in the novel are from her mother. Lula, who was born with a different skin tone than her parents, forced her to put up with her mother's harsh behavior. The mother figure is supposed to be the one who gives love to her child but what Lula gets is the opposite. Even to call her biological mother a "mother," Lula couldn't do it because her mother forbade her and told her to call her mother "Sweetness". This is evidenced by the words of her mother "I told her to call me "Sweetness" instead of "Mother" or "Mama ". It was done to Lula for the good of herself, even though the solution to the problem was not supposed to be that way.

"As we walked down the courthouse steps she held my hand, 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. 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—bed without supper, lock me in my room—but her screaming at me was the worst." (P.30)

From the quotation above, it can be said that the various things Lula Ann has received since she was little reflect her mother's hatred toward her. It was

clear that her mother attacked Lula physically and mentally. She starts by not wanting to touch Lula, yelling at Lula very roughly, treating her like a stranger, and doing other things a mother should not do to her child. This treatment is proven by Lula's utterance "she held my hand, my hand. She never did that before, she had ways to punish me without touching the skin she hated—bed without supper, lock me in my room—but her screaming at me was the worst.". These things certainly won't be easily erased from Lula's memory. In accordance with Bentovim (2018:7) ACE has a serious negative impact on a child's mental health as they grow up and become adults. This is demonstrated by Lula's ability, even as an adult, to recall and describe in vivid detail the challenging upbringing she experienced.

"I don't know. Maybe I'm just mad more at myself than at Mrs. Huxley. I reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beat the shit out of me. I could have died on the floor of that motel room if her face hadn't gone apple-red with fatigue. I didn't make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers." (P.31)

In the quotation above, it is said that when Lula was a child, she received terrible things from her parents, but this did not make her a person who quickly put up a fight. Even one time where Lula still allowed her mother to treat her inappropriately. One day, when Lula wished her mother would spank her, hoping it was the only way her mother would touch her. Therefore it can be seen that the adverse childhood experienced by Lula had an impact on her life even until she grew up. As stated by Felitti (2002:44) Time has not healed some of the bad experiences we find so common in the childhood of a large population of middle-aged, middle-class Americans.

"Sweetness never attended parent-teacher meetings or volleyball games. I was encouraged to take business courses not the college track, community college instead of four-year state universities." (P.33)

In the quotation above, it can be seen that Sweetness, who is Lula Ann's mother, is not like a mother as she should be who devotes her love to her child. Since childhood, Lula never received such affection. The proof is "Sweetness never attended parent-teacher meetings". Sweetness' behavior toward Lula's life, which demonstrates her lack of concern for her daughter, supports this assertion. Lula's mother neglected her as a child and disregarded her rights. Sweetness never even showed up for any of the school's events, despite the fact that kids her age need parents around just like their other friends did.

“Even Sofia Huxley, of all people, erased me. A convict. A convict! She could have said, “No thanks,” or even “Get out!” No. She went postal. Maybe fistfighting is prison talk. Instead of words, broken bones and drawing blood is inmate conversation. I’m not sure which is worse, being dumped like trash or whipped like a slave.” (P.35)

“Oh, yeah, I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula Ann when she was little.” (P.37)

In the quote above, it can be seen that the treatment of people around Lula towards her was done consciously. They do it with full awareness themselves, caused by the hatred in him for Lula. This is evidenced by the sentence spoken by Lula's mother in the quote above, which says “I feel bad sometimes about how I treated Lula “. She says that sometimes she regrets what she did to Lula in her childhood. A childhood that should have been filled with love from parents and those around them changed to a childhood where no child wanted to feel in Lula's position.

“I was six years old and had never heard the words “nigger” or “cunt” before, but the hate and revulsion in them didn’t need definition. Just like later in school when other curses—with mysterious definitions but clear meanings—were hissed or shouted at me. Coon. Topsy. Clinkertop. Sambo. Ooga booga. Ape sounds and scratching of the sides, imitating zoo monkeys. One day a girl and three boys heaped a bunch of bananas on my desk and did their monkey imitations. They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper. I didn’t complain to the teacher for the same reason Sweetness cautioned me about Mr. Leigh—I might get suspended or even expelled. So I let the name-calling, the bullying travel like poison, like lethal viruses through my veins, with no antibiotic available.” (P.47)

The passage above claims that both Lula's parents and her classmates contributed to her unhappy childhood. Her friends bullied Lula verbally and physically. An expression demonstrates this “They treated me like a freak, strange, soiling like a spill of ink on white paper” . They made animal noises at Lula, threw bananas at her, and subjected her to additional cruel treatment; no child of Lula's age should be subjected to such treatment simply because she is different from them. She endured a lot of mistreatment at school, but she lacked the guts to speak up or notify her teacher. This is the result of Lula's mother having instructed her never to share anything that she has gone through. After all, it would be a problem for her because of her differences.

“When she soiled the bedsheet with her first menstrual blood, Sweetness slapped her and then pushed her into a tub of cold water. Her shock was alleviated by the satisfaction of being touched, handled by a mother who avoided physical contact whenever possible.” (P.63)

In the quotation above, it is said that when Lula accidentally makes a mistake which is very common for children of Lula's age, the first thing she faces is hatred and anger from her mother. This is proved by “Sweetness slapped her and then pushed her into a tub of cold water”. Her mother beat Lula and pushed her into a tank of icy water after she soiled her bedding with menstrual blood. The response given by Lula's mother is, of course, very far from the attitude that a mother should give to her child. It is very unusual for a mother to punish her children with a reason to punish them.

“She felt she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life. Booker was the one person she was able to confront—which was the same as confronting herself, standing up for herself. Wasn’t she worth something? Anything?.” (P.76)

According to the passage above, Lula came to the realization that she had not developed a memory during her lifetime. "She felt she had been scorned and rejected by everybody all her life" supports this assertion. She could only recall bad incidents, including being shunned by her father, friends, and many social groups. According to Asmussen (2020:23), if a person has one ACE, the chance of a negative adult outcome is very low; if they have four or more, the risk is relatively considerably higher. This proves that how an adverse childhood will continue to be carried by those who experience it into adulthood and they will always be overshadowed because memories cannot be erased as long as we are still alive.

“If I sound irritable, ungrateful, part of it is because underneath is regret. All the little things I didn’t do or did wrong. I remember when she had her first period and how I reacted. Or the times I shouted when she stumbled or dropped something. How I screamed at her to keep her from tattling on the landlord—the dog. True. I was really upset, even repelled by her black skin when she was born and at first I thought of...No. I have to push those memories away—fast. No point. I know I did the best for her under the circumstances. When my husband ran out on us, Lula Ann was a burden. A heavy one but I bore it well.” (P.131)

In the quotation above, it is said that Sweetness did various harmful treatments to Lula. Starting from verbal violence, neglecting injuries, physical violence, and other forms of violence that she consciously committed. Lula's treatment from her mother resulted from her father's treatment, which left Lula and her mother since Lula was born. Her mother felt this difficulty due to her husband's treatment, who did not play a role in raising Lula and did not provide support for his wife. Instead of treating her mother well, her father left them, which caused her mother to be cruel to Lula because she felt that Lula was the cause.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The problem of the main character's traumatic childhood traumas is explored in Toni Morrison's novel *God Help the Child*. In this study, the researcher examines and comprehends the text and content analysis as part of the descriptive procedural data analysis method. The notion of adverse childhood experiences (ACE) is used in this study to analyze how the novel depicts adverse childhood experiences. The novel *God Help the Child* (2015) is a literary work that reveals a detrimental childhood for those who experience it, namely individuals under 18 years of age.

The point is that the protagonist has received adverse childhood experiences (ACE) since she was a baby. She received this bad treatment due to the difference in skin color from his parents that he had. The adverse childhood treatment he experienced was obtained from the closest people, such as his father, mother, and friends at school. The setting shown in this novel shows that society still does things related to adverse childhood. The low awareness of concern for how childhood will impact one's growth causes it to continue to this day.

To sum up, adverse childhoods are very common in childhood life these days. This happens because some parents or people around them tend not to care about how adverse childhood will impact the child's life later. Studies find that this situation causes children to accept various bad treatment by the people around them easily. Some of them involve physical, verbal, and emotional violence. This study found that the main character, a woman with dark skin, received terrible treatment due to her skin color. The main character experienced various adverse childhoods, even when she was just born. Adverse childhood can occur anywhere, in public spaces, schools, and at home. The main character experienced an adverse physical and verbal childhood from those closest to her, such as their parents, friends, and those around her. In other words, adverse childhood can attack the individual even when they are in their own house, where that place is considered the safest place for them. This situation makes the main character's subconscious, who lives with the shadow of an adverse childhood, respond to the reality she faces as an adult. The final results of this study show that adverse childhood experiences by children will have an impact on their lives in the future. This can

be seen from how the main characters' adverse childhood experiences can impact how they deal with the realities of life while growing up.

The researcher would like to offer some recommendations for future research based on the results and conclusions of this study. Only the main character, who used self-defense techniques due to a difficult childhood, is the subject of this study. There are still a lot of topics in this book that can be examined using different critical theories and methodologies. According to this research, the researcher advises the following researcher to examine additional factors that have yet to be examined. It will inspire further scholars by examining various elements. But it doesn't matter if the following researcher uses the same theory to examine *God Help the Child*. The next researcher can develop the earlier analysis into a more in-depth analysis, for instance, by evaluating every character in the novel. Additionally, to improve upon this study within the same theoretical framework, future scholars can hunt for shortcomings in this analysis that can be added to and supplemented. Additionally, researchers expect that this study can aid in analyzing future studies connected to adverse childhood experiences.

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