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An Ambivalent Mother is an Abusive Mother: A Study of Toni Morrison's God Help the Child

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Keywords: Maternal Ambivalence, Maternal Resilience, Psychological Abuse, Sarah LaChance Adams, Toni Morrison

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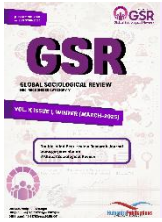

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Contents

Abstract

This research article carries out a thematic analysis of the selected work of contemporary fiction using Sarah LaChance Adams' theory of Maternal Ambivalence. The research engages with Toni Morrison's God Help The Child, which depicts an abusive relationship between mother and child, analyzing how narratives like this negotiate the construction of cultural perceptions of motherhood, as well as the reigning societal expectations of mothers. By examining fictional accounts, the paper explores the symbolic and metaphorical representations of abuse between mother and child in literature, uncovering the deeper psychological and socio-cultural implications embedded within the text. Drawing on theories from motherhood studies using Brown and Clarke's model of textual analysis, the paper investigates the interplay of power in the patriarchy as well as the existence of maternal identity in the status quo, thus illustrating how literary representations of abuse contribute to broader discourses on women's roles and societal norms.

Keywords: Maternal Ambivalence, Maternal Resilience, Psychological Abuse, Sarah LaChance Adams, Toni Morrison

Introduction

The traditional roles assigned to a woman as a carer and nurturer are in complete contradiction to that of an abuser. "The construction of maternal identity is a cultural process influenced by various factors… social stereotypes, political and racial contexts… and is examined as a sense of life and social duty" (Olalde-Mathieu, 2023). Contrary to popular belief, being ambivalent towards motherhood is as innate and natural as the much revered 'maternal instinct' (Masur, 2024). Ancient civilizations were always cautious around their goddesses as these female deities were perceived as creators as well as destroyers. They were revered for their abilities and were surrounded by mystery because of their power to wield life or death. With the evolution of society, these ferocious beings

were tamed by patriarchy and converted into benign female archetypes. Contemporary women are denied an expression of their aggression, hence when a mother abuses her child physically, emotionally, or psychologically, she is treated as an anomaly and is ostracized. The terrible female characters like Judith or Lady Macbeth or the murderous Medea were subjects of literature but the purpose was to teach women a lesson (Holm, 2023), to provide them with an example of what will happen to them if they do not conform to the role assigned to them of a loving, sacrificing mother. Women as Virginia N. Wilking concludes were no longer treated as feisty beings with will and emotion but as mere "victims: first held hostage by dragons later imprisoned in modern doll houses" (Wilking, 1990, p.143). Though Medea's killing of her children is a very violent act, abusing the child should not be surprising considering the prevalence of violent and aggressive tendencies among women throughout history.

Literature Review

"The societal glorification of maternal archetypes imposes significant emotional burdens on mothers who defy established norms, leading to inner conflicts laden with guilt, uncertainty, and the struggle to balance personal aspirations with societal expectations" (Routray, 2024).

The ambivalent abusive mother shows up in almost all of Morrison's fiction. The child abuse portrayed by Toni Morrison in all its forms has been the topic of scholarly discourse but the focus has always been the child. How does the victim of abuse suffer? How does abuse hinder a child's normal cognitive and emotional development? How is the young, vulnerable mind destroyed by abuse? The destruction and the disaster have a far-reaching impact on the community as it stands aside, compliant to the abuse and doing nothing to stop it (Damaskopoulou, 2022). The abusive mothers in Toni Morrison's novels do not indulge in physical abuse, only the child's sense of self is killed. The mother-child relationship is ambivalent in its truest sense. "Just because someone can be a mother does not mean they want to be a mother… ambivalent mothers are complete, in spite of their failures" (Cardenas, 2024). The mothers in Morrison's novels are an extension of their children as she herself calls them "exposed wounds". Mothers are supposed to be the primary source of solace and love for their children. When a mother abuses her child she breaks the trust and the damage it inflicts fractures the child's perception and his relationship to the world. Since the child cannot trust the mother, his worldview alters permanently rendering him incapable of forming and maintaining normal attachments. The early years of a child's neurodevelopment are fast-paced and are greatly influenced by the quality and quantity of the caregiver's experience. If a child's needs are not met during this period, their sense of stability and security is altered. Frequent interactions with stress in formative years lead to children becoming unable to regulate their emotional self, they become more reactive and are unable to adapt later in life, resulting in mood disorders.

The young mother in Morrison's *Tar Baby* physically abuses her son. She uses cigarettes to burn her baby boy and pins to prick his little body. Margaret, the mother, is unable to deal with the loss of self that comes with being a mother. She loved the child, no one believed her but the child "wanted everything of her and she did not know what to give" (Morrison, 1981, p.58). There are many factors that contribute to Margaret's loss of self but being a mother serves as the tipping point. She is an enigma as a mother who harms her child all the while convincing herself that the baby did not suffer much. The majority of Morrison's mothers can be accused of neglect; they abandon their children either as babies or as teenagers. Cholly is abandoned as a baby in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), which results in a distorted sense of self. In *Paradise* (1997), Pallas is neglected by her mother during her adolescence and Seneca is five when she is abandoned by her mother; In *Sula* (1973) Hannah Peace neglects her children as does Pauline Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970). The depiction of mothers abusing and neglecting their children is most poignantly done in Morrison's *God Help The Child*, which has every shade of abuse directed towards children. Throughout her fiction, Morrison has been talking about child abuse, it seems by the time she pens *God Help The Child* the mother-child

relationship is in severe crisis and her novel is a cry to bring attention to the situation which is steadily worsening.

Toni Morrison's fiction focuses on motherhood. She keeps on returning to it in her novels, her interviews, her talks, and articles. Morrison's stance on motherhood is an integral part of her philosophical position on feminism. The motherhood she portrays in her fiction is an antithesis of the institutionalized motherhood prescribed by mainstream culture as well as the traditional feminist discourse propagated by the dominant sections of society. Andrea O'Reilly declares Morrison's motherhood as a "site of power for women" allowing women to practice motherhood as "a political enterprise with its central aim being the empowerment of children" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.1). Through her novel, Morrison proposes steps that mothers can take to protect their children in a world that is biased towards their skin color, teaching them to be on guard and stay safe, and challenging the existing dogma around race and gender that is prevalent and that aims to traumatize them. Morrison's mother has agency and authority, she borrows from the traditions of "matrifocality, cultural bearing, social activism, providing a home place and other mothering" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.19). Morrison further elaborates and develops these traditions as specific characteristics which she terms as "ancient properties and the funk" allowing motherhood to be a source of power. Morrison revels in motherhood describing it as "the most liberating thing" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.19) that could have happened to her. In one of her interviews, she relished the idea that as a mother "I could not only be me, whatever that was, but somebody actually needed me to be that". Her idea of motherhood is in complete contrast to the prevalent understanding of the institution of motherhood. The traditional discourse especially in the Western context celebrates the all-giving, all-sacrificing mother. These mothers tend to give themselves up to become good mothers and struggle to find their identity again. Morrison on the other hand iterates that motherhood liberated her. While redefining the existing theory of motherhood and motherwork, she defines the black mother as "the ship and the harbor" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.19). She views motherhood as a societal and cultural construct that shifts with time and varies with place. There is no universal definition of motherhood, nor is there an essential maternal experience, as Siobhan McIlvanney suggests,

> if we continue to deny the many forms that mothering takes and the negative, at times violent, emotions to which it gives rise, and diminish the importance of social context and status in the act of mothering, we will continue to see mothering as an unassailable ideal rather than the experience of real women (McIlvanney, 2023, p.9).

Similarly, Morrison insists that there are many versions and variants of motherhood that are marginalized and eradicated when one tries to come up with a single definition. There are many forces interplaying when mainstream scholars try to define motherhood, thus rendering other definitions and experiences illegitimate. If inspected, even the dominant discourse on motherhood has undergone a transformation with the passage of time. The Victorian mother had to be pious, a Madonna, chaste, and emanating holiness. In contrast, the African slave mothers, in the Americas, were perceived as mere breeding machines. The world wars left society hankering for the happy, smiling mother who stays at home specifically in the kitchen to cook, wash, and bake. With the advent of the Sixties, mothers in the US were expected to be sensitive and in touch with their inner being. The things common in all these models of motherhood are that they all focus on white middle-class women and require women to give up their identity, subjectivity, and agency if they are to be good mothers. Morrison defines motherwork differently; for her it compromises on "preservation, nurturance, cultural being and healing" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.32).

Morrison's Theory of Motherhood as discussed by O'Reilly in her book *Toni Morrison and Motherhood* (2004) provides a unique perspective on motherhood. This perspective can be traced throughout her fiction. "The ancient properties and the funk", when they exist and when they do not, can be observed along with the consequences. The tasks a mother is to perform are not simplistic and are in fact to be performed in a racist world. Her fiction mourns the

mother who, in the face of animosity, is unable to fulfill her "mother work". What Morrison portrays is not the success of a mother's task but the grief, the anger, the guilt, and the ambivalence a mother experiences desperately struggling to perform her role. Novels like *The Bluest Eye* describe a mother's feeling of despair at not being able to nurture and protect her child. Morrison's mothers like Ruth and Margaret are examples of resistance against a society that hinders a mother's efforts to ensure the well-being of her children. Toni Morrison's fiction is a eulogy of mothers who are unable to mother; it paints their despair and their struggles against the forces that prohibit their motherwork.

Theoretically, Toni Morrison propagates mothering as the source of power for women with a focus on empowering children, bringing them up as individuals at peace with their identity. In her fiction however, the trajectory is not highlighted as simply. There is a clear disparity between her philosophical views on motherhood and the mothers she pens. The mothers she portrays do not deliver what the mother ought to, according to her maternal theory. However, both in her philosophy and in her fiction, she stresses the significance of motherwork by providing heart-wrenching details at the private as well as community level and the deconstruction that ensues when a mother is unable to or not allowed to carry out her duty. Morrison in her fiction does not prescribe how the mother should perform this most crucial task. Her novels portray in agonizing detail the factors and the circumstances at both personal and societal levels that hinder a mother's job thus leading to stunted growth of the child. Various stakeholders in society repeatedly shame women for expressions of emotions other than unbridled joy, which leads to women remaining silent and ultimately unable to ask for the support they require (Jefferies, 2016). Morrison portrays what is important by showing the effect of its absence. She explores the complexities of motherhood in her fiction, for example, Sethe's love for her children in *Beloved* though natural drove her to filicide, or the act of protecting her baby by abandoning her in *A Mercy*, or the self-annihilation in *Sula*, mutilation in *Beloved*, the presence of a toxic mother contributing to her child's self-hatred in *The Bluest Eye*, the smothering of a daughter in *Sula*, Ruth nursing the dead child in *Song of Solomon* and many more. Her novels talk about what it is like to mother and also what it is like to be mothered. Andrea O'Reilly sums up the contribution of Morrison's fiction succinctly:

> [she] emerges as a social commentator and political theorist who radically through her maternal philosophy, reworks, rethinks, and reconfigures the concerns and strategies of… women's emancipation in America (O'Reilly, 2004, p.xi).

Theoretical Framework

Sarah LaChance Adams in *Mad Mothers, Bad Mothers & What a "Good" Mother Would Do* talks about "the ubiquity of maternal animosity" and how it is generally ignored or played down by scholars. An ambivalent mother feels herself being pulled in two opposite directions. She feels her desires and ambitions working against herself when they are not in favor of their children's wellbeing. At this juncture, a mother experiences the urge to harm and protect her child at the same time (Adams, 2020). Adams discusses the instance where maternal ambivalence is at its extreme in three parts, the mutuality, the conflict, and the ambiguous intersubjectivity. She explains that mothers do not always relish the sacrifices and self-effacement that are expected of motherhood. A mother might desire an existence that is at odds with maternal duties. The child's age and his needs along with the absence of any other caretaker, determines the mother-child relationship. Even if the mother wants to care for the child, she loses her anatomical integrity, her movement is restricted, her work time is ridden with mom guilt, there is negligible intellectual stimulation, and hardly any time is available for self-care. This lack of agency moves the mother to an unstable place, the greater her despair and frustration, the greater the manifestation of it (Adams, 2010). The physical and emotional abuse carried out by ambivalent mothers is an example of this phenomenon. Sarah LaChance Adams has quoted mothers from various walks of life who were driven to different extremes when going through this phase. This conflict starts at the conception of the child and continues throughout the child's growing up years

leaving the mother feeling like "a husk of her former self" (Adams, 2014, p.35). The ambivalent mothers, as Adams reports, feel the urge to shake the baby to make it go quiet or to throw it out of the window when the crying gets unbearable. A mother narrates the manifestation of her ambivalence.

I have felt many times over the years that I was capable of hurting him… I have spanked him, yanked him, grabbed him too hard… I have managed to stay on this side of the line (Adams, 2021, p.555)

The mother declares that though she has hit the child but never crossed the line, what LaChance Adams reveals here is that a mother, particularly an ambivalent mother can easily cross over to the dark side and abuse her child physically, psychologically, and emotionally.

Discussion

Toni Morrison's novel *God Help The Child* explores motherhood from a crucial perspective; that is how a racist society impacts a mother's attitude towards her child and how the child's personality is altered for the worse as a consequence. Morrison has already used the latter in many of her novels. It is in *God Help The Child* that Morrison explores through Sweetness' character how the skin color and class struggle make a mother ambivalent towards her child and this love-hate relationship manifests itself in physical and psychological abuse. The mothers in *God Help The Child* personify toxic destructive as well as positive mothering. Mothers oscillate between positive, nurturing beings adhering to the prescription that society, religion, and society handed them and self-annihilating mothers destroying their children physically and emotionally being unable to sustain the pressure of being the all-sacrificing, self-effacing mother. "Failure to bestow *'perfect'* motherhood can provoke a range of disordered constructions of love… this can manifest as maternal ambivalence and mother-infant attachment issues which, in turn, may contribute to profound, lifelong implications for maternal and child mental health" (Silverio, 2021). Sweetness, one of the mothers in *God Help The Child*, is conscious of her interracial status. She seems to be proud of it but at the same time cuts a tragic figure hanging between the two worlds belonging to none, lurking at the margin. She is a personification of D. W. Winnicott's 'good-enough mother' who serves her children well by occasionally falling short in caring for them. "…a mother is always, inevitably, disappointing, she prepares her children for a disappointing world" (Harnett, 2019). Morrison's mothers have committed horrible acts against their children but their acts are generally considered as acts of resistance. Sweetness is different. She has low self-esteem, suffers from self-loathing, and is a toxic mother, all of which stems from her inability to adhere to her roots and her ineffective assimilation of the patriarchal prescription of the mother which renders her powerless and hence ambivalent, as Adrienne Rich points out in *Of Woman Born*. The power dynamics of society are reflected in the power dynamics between a mother and child, "…Powerless women have always used mothering as a channel… to return upon the world what it has visited on them" (Rich, 1995, p.38).

Sweetness' dilemma is transmitted through the mother line. Morrison uses her characters to address how the drop of blood running through the veins can alter and affect a mother-child relationship. The one-drop rule impacts the mother's identity allowing her or forcing her to choose between seamless and much-wanted assimilation or painful segregation. Sweetness' motherline is an example of the phenomenon. Her grandmother cut off ties with her black relatives so she could be taken as white, whereas she is what is generally referred to as "mulatto". This is only for those with the right kind of hair. Sweetness' mother Lula Mae on the other hand in spite of her light skin color embraced her blackness. Lula Mae could do things and get away with them which other women of her heritage never could not, but in the end, she had to swear upon a Bible reserved for black people while she was getting married. Sweetness inherits her grandmother's light skin and yellow-golden hair. She grows up in a white middle-class neighborhood, with no black female role models around her to instill a sense of pride in her heritage, she is racially biased preferring light skin, considering light skin to be more dignified clearly lacking any sense of pride in her black self. She was a closeted racist who was forced out

when Lula Ann was born. Sweetness, the mother, is shocked at this manifestation of "unmistakable African ancestry" in her daughter. Her broken self-esteem does not allow her to form a positive relationship with a daughter who is as dark as midnight. The fact that from the start Lula Ann or Bride, is born Sweetness knew that "something was wrong. Really wrong." (Morrison, 2015, p.3). She is shocked when the baby keeps on getting darker with every passing day. Sweetness' horror at Lula Anne's "Sudanese black skin with eyes having something witchy about them" (Morrison, 2015, p.6). She is repulsed by her own child, revolted at the thought of nursing her, comparing her to a "pickaninny sucking my teat" (Morrison, 2015, p.5), and hovers between nurturing her and the possibility of abandoning her or killing her.

The society Sweetness lives in, discriminates on the basis of skin colour, segregating black-skinned people. It is understandable then that the dominant or mainstream idea of what is beautiful or socially acceptable gets incorporated into the black consciousness. Looking like white people, and interacting with them helps Sweetness battle the self-disgust she feels but suppresses. She wants to assimilate so that she is part of the mainstream. She realizes that she needs to be beautiful according to the standards of white aesthetics. She fits the bill with her yellow hair and light skin but with the birth of her daughter, she is reminded rather drastically of which skin color and hair texture has the hegemony where beauty is concerned. All the self-loathing, the disgust and disdain she has for her inheritance, is projected onto her little baby girl. Lula Ann with her "terrible color" and "wild hair" and her "thick lips" is the epitome of African features, her heritage which she ignores and detests. The physical appearance and their attitude towards it become an intergenerational trauma. Lula Ann inherits her mother's obsession with looks. She remembers her mother's boudoir, her dressing table, the lotions and potions, and the aids to beauty littered all around in a dimly lit room. Cosmetics and their wardrobe are an integral, most defining part of their existence. Both mother and daughter define themselves with reference to what they put on their faces and bodies and the picture they paint and present to the world. Lula Ann later makes a career out of selling women's acceptable beauty packed in a product jar.

In an oppressed society, the parenting style of the oppressed class is authoritarian and non-nurturing, because the focus is on keeping the children safe. They are strictly disciplined and controlled. There is hardly any love and warmth shown to the child in this authoritarian style of parenting much like the patriarchal institution of motherhood which also propagates high control and less nurturing. Mothers who love their children can instill a sense of self-warmness in their children. A mother who lacks self-worth or who questions her existence and is ashamed of her heritage will lack the strength necessary to bring up healthy children both mentally and physically. Mothers who are ashamed of their race, skin color, or the skin color of their children or their appearance in general are ambivalent in their role as mothers. They cannot perform their job of nurturing and empowering the children resulting in generation after generation of abused and traumatised children. A mother who is ambivalent shows less affection for her children or is unsteady in her affection and at times the love may be outright missing. This waning warmth results in personality disorders and behavior problems in children. Such children suffer from fragile self-esteem and various complexes because they feel unheard, unseen, and unloved while growing up.

Sweetness brings her daughter up in a very strict and controlled environment. The little girl receives no love or affection from her mother, she is left emotionally bereft, hence the bond between mother and daughter is destroyed even before it is fully formed. The emotional connection forged during the early and formative years of a child's life is totally absent in Lula Ann's upbringing. Love, warmth, and affection in Lula Ann's life are replaced with disgust, aversion, and loathing. She recalls Sweetness shuddering at touching her daughter's skin. Lula Ann recalls making blunders and dropping things just to make her mother angry enough to hit her because this way she would have to touch her. The little girl was desperate for her mother's touch, who found other ways to punish her daughter so as not to touch the

skin that she loathed. Bride remembers fondly the time when she bled on her sheet and her mother slapped her as it was a rare moment of physical contact by a mother who goes to extreme lengths to avoid touching her daughter's hateful skin. This withdrawal of affection scars Lula Ann for life. It is a subtle form of abuse which has the most profound consequences. She remembers desperately longing for her mother's touch, her mother's embrace, her mother's loving look, none of which ever came her way. She hid behind doors to see her mother's unguarded self, singing or humming, longing to sing with her but all she remembers is her mother screaming at her or the look of utter disdain on her face when Lula Ann makes a mistake. This desperation for her mother's love leads Lula Ann to very dark places. She becomes a key witness against a teacher who is wrongfully accused of sexually abusing her students. Lula Ann finds it very easy to lie because the attention she receives from everyone makes her mother look at her with something like approval. The day Lula Ann points towards Ms. Huxley in the courtroom, Sweetness not only smiled at her but held her hand in front of everyone, a rare gesture. Sweetness is an ambivalent mother, she detests the role assigned to her. She resists it when she has no choice and when she can no longer ignore the existence of her child, the ambivalence she feels surfaces and manifests itself in the form of psychological and emotional abuse of Lula Ann. Her ambivalence arises from her fear of rejection from the society she desperately wants to be part of. She is very conscious of the stares and frowns directed her way when she goes out with Lula Ann. Sweetness directs her child not to call her by any terms of endearment like Mama or Mother or Mummy. The little girl is to call her mother by her name not wanting people to know the relationship between them. Sweetness avoids all school functions, all games and parent-teacher meetings, and transmits her fractured sense of identity to her daughter leaving her with low self-esteem and severe attachment issues. When Lula Ann changes her name, Sweetness scornfully declares that a change of name would not get rid of her skin color claiming that her complexion is "a cross she will always carry" (Morrison, 2015, p.7).

Sweetness' love-hate relationship with Lula Ann begins right after she is born. The bewilderment she displays, the confusion, the denial, and the effort to assign blame somewhere clearly show that she struggles to bond with her baby girl. When a new mother exclaims on seeing her newborn "It's not my fault… I have no idea how it happened" (Morrison, 2015, p.3), something odd is at work. The love that is to pour naturally according to the traditional, societal, and religious discourse is nowhere to be seen. The innate maternal instinct is replaced by woe at the little girl who makes her mother declare that "something was wrong. Really wrong" (Morrison, 2015, p.3). She is scared of her skin colour and disgusted by it denying any association with it. The angst she shows for her daughter's skin color is a reflection of the frustration she and her people have been going through. To avoid the oppression, Sweetness worked hard at her appearance, her manners, and her language. She could easily pass for a white person but then Lula Ann is born, thereby spoiling her perfect world. From the moment she is born Lula Ann is a source of embarrassment for her mother. She almost loses her mind for a moment and is on the verge of killing her by holding a blanket over the baby's face and pressing it. After this urge to kill the baby passes, there's an urge to give her up, to abandon the baby, "I was scared to be one of those mothers who put their babies on church steps" (Morrison, 2015, p.5). She did not kill the child or abandon her but she withdrew her maternal self, initially by refusing to nurse the baby. The love, warmth, and connection that is to develop when a mother nurses the child is denied to Lula Ann. She grows up wanting all these things, looking to form a connection with her mother for which she paid a huge price and which left a huge gaping hole in her personality. There are instances of mutuality and conflict simultaneously as is usual in the case of ambivalent motherhood. Sweetness wants to get rid of the child and then decides to bottle-feed her as she cannot bring herself to nurse the child. Lula Ann's skin color becomes a bone of contention between Sweetness and her husband. Louis, like his wife, is upset at Lula Ann's midnight complexion refuses to acknowledge her as his daughter, and leaves. This creates financial problems for Sweetness and gives her

another reason to detest the existence of Lula Ann. While searching for a place to live, she leaves the child behind considering her an obstacle in obtaining respectable accommodation. She takes away the child's right to call her mother and refers to her as being "witchy", she mourns her status of "abandoned wife" but fails to realize that she also is abandoning her daughter by emotionally withdrawing and subjecting her to toxic mothering. Sweetness vows to be "… very careful in how [she] I raised her. I had to be very strict, very strict… Lula Ann needs to learn how to behave… to keep her head down… not to make trouble" (Morrison, 2015, p.7). Her authoritarian parenting style gives rise to several complexes in Lula Ann's personality. She tries very hard, to please her almost impossible-to-please mother. In this effort, she even testifies in court and puts an innocent woman in jail on charges of sexual abuse of minors. Lula Ann chooses to look away when she catches her mother's landlord sexually abusing a little boy because she knows that if she says anything the landlord will kick them out and her mother will have another reason to despise her existence. Lula Ann's moral compass points towards pleasing her mother. There is no right and wrong for her, she just strives to gain her mother's approval which she received only once in her lifetime. The little girl lives her life with the constant dread of doing something that would displease her mother. She walks on eggshells; floundering and making mistakes in her anxiousness to make Sweetness approve of her. There are so many rules to remember but "she never knew the right thing to do or say or remember what the rules were" (Morrison, 2015, p.78). There were times when she was scolded for keeping the spoon in the cereal bowl and then there were instances where she was shouted at for placing it next to the bowl. She never knew what her mother would approve of "What were the rules and when did they change" (Morrison, 2015, p.79). Sweetness did not like physical contact with her daughter and Lula Ann could tell that "distaste was all over her face" when Sweetness would give her a bath. Even during the bath, she strives not to touch the bare body but uses a washcloth to rub the little girl and then rinse her. Lula Ann remembers praying that her mother would slap her face or spank her only so that she would touch her. She makes intentional mistakes so as to get punished but Sweetness knew how to punish the child without laying a finger on her. Sweetness would lock the child in the room, send her to bed without food, or scream and shout at her. There were many ways to break Lula Ann's spirit and Sweetness employed them all until Lula Ann realized that "obedience is the only survival choice" (Morrison, 2015, p. 32). To please her mother Lula Ann appears in the court to testify though she was very frightened and she "… behaved and behaved and behaved brilliantly" (Morrison, 2015, p.32) because after her performance in the court "Sweetness was kind of mother-like" (Morrison, 2015, p.32).

The mutuality of existence that an ambivalent mother experiences with her child is present in the case of Sweetness and Lula Ann. Sweetness confesses that she regrets, at times, the way she used to treat Lula Ann. Sweetness' strictness and control according to her were to protect her daughter. The maternal pendulum oscillates and the mother feels the need to explain her behavior mostly to herself and she convinces herself that it is to "… protect her [Lula Ann]. She didn't know the world" (Morrison, 2015, p.41). Sweetness is ashamed of being black, she hides her heritage and teaches the same lessons of shame to her daughter. She teaches her daughter to avoid a situation if she can and to find an alleyway to cut the way short if there's trouble on the main road. Sweetness thought she was protecting her daughter but actually, she is teaching her daughter to obey her if she wants to please her and never to defend herself. This lesson learned during her childhood surfaces when Lula Ann, now known as Bride, is beaten by Ms. Huxley and she lies on the ground and "reverted to Lula Ann who never fought back… didn't make a sound… didn't raise a hand to protect me" (Morrison, 2015, p.32). Sweetness' life lessons were a course in low self-esteem: the way she looked at her daughter became Lula Ann's perception of herself, and the way she talked to her daughter became Lula Ann's internal voice. Lula Ann aimed at surviving, coursing through without attracting attention. She chose community college instead of university, and always applied for jobs where she would stay hidden from everyone else since she never had the confidence to ask for what she really wanted.

Sweetness, though claiming to commit what can only be defined as child abuse under the guise of protecting Lula Ann, is actually concerned that Lula Ann brings her shame. During the trial, all she worried about was how Lula Ann would fail her. The child tried really hard to please the mother and acted beyond her age "She behaved like a grown-up" (Morrison, 2015, p.42) Sweetness reveals proudly. She fails to notice the burden the little girl has taken upon herself just to please her mother, to win her approval. Sweetness, completely oblivious of the psychological trauma being inflicted upon the little girl and the psychopathic tendencies Lula Ann showed, is focused on "fixing her wild hair" (Morrison, 2015, p.42) and dressing her up so that she looks presentable. All she could think about was that Lula Ann could put her to shame by forgetting what she had been told to say or would stutter or stumble. Sweetness is proud of Lula Ann's composure. She doesn't consider it a matter of concern that all the other children who have to testify are crying. Lula Ann "looked scared but she stayed quiet". Sweetness is only concerned about the kind of fame and attention Lula Ann's testimony would bring her, after all, "It's not often you see a little black girl take down some evil whites" (Morrison, 2015, p.42). At this point, Sweetness even acknowledges Lula Ann's blackness which she has tried to beat out of her. Sweetness gets flashes of clarity and at such times she tries to convince herself and the readers that in spite of how she felt towards her daughter and how she treated her, she was not "a bad mother… may have done some hurtful things to my only child" (Morrison, 2015, p.43). As Lula Ann becomes Bride and moves away, Sweetness realizes the hot and cold treatment she gave her daughter, "At first I couldn't see past all the black to know who she was and just plain love her" (Morrison, 2015, p.43). Sweetness knows what she did to her daughter "What you do to children matters. And they might never forget" (Morrison, 2015, p.43). The lesson is learned but at the cost of a childhood destroyed a personality damaged, and a psyche fractured. Lula Ann grows up to forge a new identity for herself, gives herself a new name, Bride, and dresses up only in white to make up for a shortcoming her mother always blamed and hated her for. Though Bride becomes successful, she always wants to prove a point, and always longs for her mother's approval. Every time she achieves something, she has to convince herself out loud and refer to her mother as well; "I am successful and pretty, really pretty, so there! Sweetness" (Morrison, 2015, p.53). Abuse follows Bride in her adulthood although she dresses up in a way that makes her stand out. She craves the attention she has been denied as a child; the affection that her mother never showered her with, and she now looks for people's praise.

In addition to Lula Ann's abuse in *God Help The Child*, the little girl "Rain" also goes through horrific abuse at the hands of her mother who throws the little girl out of the house in the pouring rain and refuses to let her back in the house because Rain, the five-year-old refused to provide sexual services to one of the customers her mother had brought. Rain recounts her story in a calm and casual tone and declares that she would "chop her mother's head off". The abuse she went through has turned her into someone who relishes the idea of inflicting pain on her abuser, she talks of killing her mother and tries to visualize "how it would look - her eyes, her mouth, the blood shouting out of her neck. Make me feel good just thinking about it" (Morrison, 2015, p.102). Both Sweetness and Rain's mother are ambivalent mothers. Their ambivalence stems from different sources and is governed by different factors but the manifestation of their ambivalence is abuse: emotional, psychological, and physical abuse which turns children into dysfunctional adults who inherit trauma and spend their adult lives trying to break the cycle of abuse.

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