

The Journey from Trauma Victim to Trauma Survivor: Exploring the Healing Therapy in God Help the Child and Mysterious Skin

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Abstract

This paper attempts to unfurl the buried pangs of childhood abuse and trauma experienced by the characters in the novels God Help the Child and Mysterious Skin. It opens doors to the real world of childhood wounds that become imprinted on the child's sense of self as a result of emotional neglect and abuse. This study attempts to consider trauma as a call to survival. It constructs the journey of a trauma victim to a trauma survivor by employing the healing technique of relationship as therapy. The creation of a space where a trauma victim feels free to talk about his or her emotions, is of paramount importance in the process of healing. The transformation of the traumatized self into a trauma survivor is quite difficult and at the same time magical in a different sense. Abused or damaged children internalize oppression and feel unworthy and engage in self-loathing. This is a vicious cycle in which the victims will eventually become victimizers. This study reveals how the characters confront pain and suffering and ultimately reclaim their lives. It analyses and explores the ways to heal from the horrors of the past. This study investigates the transformative trajectory of recovery, elucidating the progression from a trauma victim to a trauma survivor.

Keywords: Trauma, childhood, abuse, wounds, healing, recovery.

1. Introduction

Trauma is a reaction to a severely unpleasant or distressing incident that outweighs an individual's capacity to cope, causes feelings of helplessness, undermines their sense of self, and restricts their ability to experience a full range of emotions and experiences. Trauma can elicit a diverse array of initial responses, including weariness, perplexity, grief, unease, irritability, emotional numbness, detachment, disorientation,

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physical stimulation and muted affect. The immediate aftermath of traumatic experiences yields complex reactions in survivors, which are shaped by their personal histories, the presence of natural support networks and healers, their own and their close family's resilience and life competencies, as well as the reactions of their broader social environment. Successful trauma recovery entails the ability to navigate present circumstances effectively without being dominated by lingering thoughts and emotions from past experiences.

Trauma recovery doesn't mean completely erasing memories or emotions linked to the distressing event. Rather, it involves moving forward and embracing life with positivity, ensuring that the traumatic experience no longer dominates one's emotional state or daily existence. The journey of healing from trauma should be approached as a gradual process, undertaken in purposeful stages over time. Ultimately, the objective of trauma recovery is to restore a sense of agency to survivors, allowing them to regain command over their lives and emotional well-being.

Toni Morrison is heralded across the globe as the first African-American writer to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. Her artistic works evoke admiration and a sense of beauty by revealing the underlying grace and optimism within African American society. *God Help the Child* is the eleventh novel by the American writer Toni Morrison. The narrative chronicles the life of a female child. The young girl, who possesses dark skin and blue eyes, experiences neglect and abuse from her light-skinned parents, who are ashamed of her appearance. Lula Ann Bridewell, who refers to herself as "Bride," is described as blue-black and beautiful, a woman whose presence commands attention wherever she goes. During her childhood, her mother Sweetness subjected Bride to punishment for her dark skin, which ultimately led to the

dissolution of her marriage. Sweetness's husband, Louis, found himself unable to develop affection for a child with skin as dark as Bride's. Consequently, Bride matured without experiencing love, tenderness, affection, or apology. Sweetness explicitly states that she perceived her actions as protecting her child from a world that would be even more inclined to penalize Bride for the darkness of her skin. It is evident that her choices have been influenced by the inferior status associated with being Black in a white-dominated society—a context in which lighter skin is correlated with increased social mobility.

Scott Heim is an American novelist from Hutchinson, Kansas. His first novel, *Mysterious Skin* was published in 1995. It was subsequently adapted into a film of the same name by director Gregg Araki and Antidote Films. The movie starred Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Brady Corbet, Elizabeth Shue, Michelle Trachtenberg, and Mary Lynn Rajskub. *Mysterious Skin* recounts the experiences of two pre-adolescent boys who endured childhood sexual assault and explores the diverse effects on their lives as they advance into young adulthood. One boy becomes a reckless, sexually adventurous prostitute, while the other escapes into a reclusive fantasy of alien abduction. Brian Lackey, who is eight years old, is discovered bleeding under his house's crawl space, having been through something so traumatic that he cannot recall the previous five hours.

Throughout the years, he gradually recalls details from that night, but these fragments are insufficient to explain what happened to him, and he begins to suspect that he was the victim of an alien encounter. Neil McCormick is fully aware of the events of the summer of 1981. Neil, wise beyond his years and curious about his developing sexuality, discovered what he saw as love and guidance from his baseball coach.

Ten years later, he is a teen hustler, a terrorist of sorts, completely unaware of the perilous path his life is taking. His recklessness is driven by idealized memories of his coach, which unexpectedly change when Brian seeks Neil's assistance and, eventually, the truth.

Cathy Caruth calls the experience of trauma— “peculiar and paradoxical,” and describes trauma as...—an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (Caruth 11) and provides a definition that—trauma is described as the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena (91). Cathy Caruth describes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as—an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena (57-58). Traumatic events are caused by external factors, which have social, historical, political, and moral implications. However, it is important to recognize that each person is unique, with different experiences and thus varying levels of tolerance to trauma. A traumatic experience can be mild, severe, or completely destructive, depending on the individual's spirit.

Trauma alters brain development, causing structural and hormonal changes that result in negative physical and mental outcomes. Children's brains are extremely malleable because they are still developing the internal connections that will allow maturing children to acquire new skills and adapt to changing environments. The malleability of the young brain is a strength; it can assist children in coping with novel, even

traumatic situations. In contrast, if stress and trauma are repeated, the brain adapts in ways that make learning and socialization difficult. Repeated exposure to toxic stress in childhood can have long-term developmental consequences. Constant stress has the potential to induce hyper-arousal, causing children to overreact to non-threatening triggers. It can also cause dissociation from the traumatic event, in which the child emotionally shuts down and feels cut off from the outside world. Chronic childhood abuse takes place in a familial climate of pervasive terror, in which ordinary caretaking relationships have been profoundly disrupted (Herman 108). Children rely solely on their parents or caregivers. Their world revolves around them because they are the primary providers of love, safety, nourishment, encouragement, acceptance, positive attention, and support. Even though most parents want the best for their children, some may emotionally, psychologically, or physically harm them due to stress, poor parenting skills, social isolation, racial self-loathing, a lack of available resources, and so on, or because they themselves have been victims of abuse. When a child is harmed by his or her primary caregivers, the breach of trust at the heart of the infant's relationship with the world significantly increases the victim's trauma. The traumatised child engages in self-blame and loathing. Traumatic events have the potential to disrupt children's self-concept, how they perceive the world, and how they react to their surroundings and fellow beings. Traumatic experiences are imprinted on the child's memory and continue to haunt him/her in a variety of circumstances. This deeply embedded event is a disturbance that the child carries with him or her at all times, reappearing even when the child does not want to remember it. Trauma has the powerful ability to destroy a child's physical, emotional, and intellectual development, particularly when it occurs early in life. Children

who have experienced trauma are frequently misunderstood and labelled as oppositional or depressed.

The novel *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison is a novel rooted in the real world of prejudice, abuse and buried childhood wounds. Morrison analyses the atrocities of child abuse extensively in the work. Almost all the characters have witnessed or been the primary or secondary victim of sexual assault, emotional or psychological abuse, neglect, molestation, etc. Morrison emphasizes how childhood abuse and neglect lead to psychologically broken adults. The author highlights in the novel how dysfunctional families have a significant impact on children's identities, relationships with their communities, and wider society. The oppressive institution of patriarchal motherhood often exerts violence against children, which can be manifested in child neglect and abuse. Lula Ann's mother, Sweetness, a light-skinned black, — with good hair, what we call high yellow, (Morrison 3) has — been poisoned by that strain of colour and class anxiety still present in black communities (Walker), the legacy of slavery and its aftermath. Sweetness feels terribly embarrassed and scared of her baby's — midnight black, Sudanese black skin (Morrison 3). When nursing her daughter, she feels disgusted and contemplates about killing her or donating her to an orphanage.

Sweetness fails to provide her daughter Lula Ann with an appropriate and supportive environment, since she transfers the contempt she feels for her own race to her child. Racial discrimination has a significant influence on her life and parenting. She is unable to provide her daughter a positive racial image because of her self-loathing. Lula Ann's sense of self is destroyed by her strictness and lack of affection. And yet, Sweetness wants to believe that she was trying to protect her child from a racist society. We can see her feelings of guilt

when she attempts to convince herself that she was not a bad mother. Her words, at the beginning of the narrative, —but it's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's not (Morrison 7), are revealing. Despite recognizing her lack of maternal love and nurture, she does not take full responsibility for the damage and pain she has inflicted on Lula Ann. She does not take her out much as she is afraid of people's reactions at seeing the black girl. Neither does she attend school events. These instances truly portray the maternal deprivation Lula Ann endures in her childhood. When a child is hurt by his/her primary caregivers, the violation of the trust at the core of the infant's relationship with the world dramatically increases the level of trauma that the victim endures. Lula Ann remembers how Sweetness avoided touching her dark skin, —distaste was all over her face when I was little and she had to bathe me (Morrison 31). She deliberately misbehaved so her mother would chastise her. However, Sweetness found ways to punish her without touching her. The daughter yearns for her mother's touch but Sweetness deliberately avoids situations of touching her own child.

Lula Ann's boyfriend Booker also struggles with childhood trauma. He is a—tortured black trumpet player [. . .] who has his own dark past regarding child abuse. Booker's older brother, Adam, whom he admired was murdered by a paedophile and serial killer during their childhood, a tragedy to which Booker has remained attached. Thus, Booker is a secondary victim, who is deeply affected by a sexual assault in his childhood. The murder of his brother breaks his heart, and his happy tight-knit family is crushed as a result of it. His traumatic recollections haunt his whole life afterwards. Since then his life has been weighed down by his traumatic memories. As he's so traumatized and afflicted by what

happened to his brother, Booker ends up standing up for victims of sexual abuse and becomes a punisher of their victimizers.

Scott Heim's 1995 novel *Mysterious Skin* is structured around a trauma: the childhood sexual abuse of two boys by their Little League coach. It is the chronicle of two young men struggling to come to terms with the sexual abuse they both suffered as children. The narrative unfurls in a series of short first-person chapters, rotating among its two clear protagonists, Brian Lackey and Neil McCormick, their friends Eric and Wendy, and Brian's sister Deborah. Placing at its foundation Brian and Neil's childhood sexual abuse by their Little League coach, *Mysterious Skin* unleashes the echoes of trauma with breath-taking power, demonstrating various ways its devastating effects as they are felt by the abused. Both events take place in wet, claustrophobic spaces allowing no room for Heim and Neil to get away. Both incidents evoke baseball-related childhood memories. The force of trauma strikes Neil, causing the daily experience of life to become distorted. The lost time, however, is what Brian believes to be the true indication of his difference, and he explains it with a story about alien kidnapping. Just weeks after the abuse, Brian sees a UFO, which triggers the incorporation of his trauma into this science fiction tale. The possibility that it was merely a dream appears to be left open by his strange account of the incident. Because he is unable to confront the brutal sexual abuse Brian endured as a child, he turns to symbols and imagery found in the collective consciousness of the culture—the dinner-plate UFO, for instance—and more. Ten years later, Neil becomes a self-destructive male-prostitute. He has recurrent dreams about being touched by a strange bluish hand. He next interprets this bluish hand as alien. It is clear what happens to Brian is a form of repression he had because of his inability to bear the striking

traumatic memories. Brian finally found out that it is Neil, the boy in his odd dreams, and then they met after ten years.

Children always turn to their primary care-givers for affection. In *Mysterious Skin*, the father figures of Brian and Neil possess no role in providing paternal love. Both Neil and Brian live only with their mother since their childhood until their adulthood, although their mothers give much affection yet it is never enough for them. The bond with father does not grow along their development or in other words, father figures, here, has no role. Neil's mother is his primary caregiver during his early years; his father is unknown. Even though his mother has relationships with her boyfriends, it does not help him in the least. There is no sign that the father figure loves him. In contrast, Brian's father and mother are there, but he is rejected by his father due to his lack of athletic ability. This incident causes his father to leave the family, and he has no influence whatsoever on Brian's personal growth. The lack of the father figure indicates that both kids are wounded by the deprivation of paternal affection. The dysfunctional family experienced by Neil and Brian is the triggering factor which puts them into a repressed condition. In other words, the dysfunctional family exacerbates situation and they are unable to handle the unresolved conflict related to abuse.

2. Relationship as Therapy

The goal of trauma healing is to give victims a feeling that they have regained control over their lives again. Judith Herman identifies three stages that trauma victims move through as part of the healing process: safety, acknowledgement and reconnection. These processes have guided the creation of many trauma healing techniques. The first step for most techniques is to provide a safe space. A feeling of safety will encourage victims to open up and reveal details of their traumatic experience. Retelling the details of one's story can

be therapeutic and allows those memories to be incorporated into the victim's life story. Telling the story in front of the other person can result in recognition, regret, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Establishing safety with survivors of long-term child abuse can be a very difficult and time-consuming process. Almost invariably, self-care is seriously disturbed. Chronic suicidality, self-mutilation, eating disorders, substance abuse, impulsive risk-taking, and recurrent participation in risky or exploitative relationships are just a few examples of the various ways that self-harming behaviour manifests. The survivor recounts the trauma during the second stage of recovery. He or she narrates it in full, in detail, and in depth. The survivor's initial account of the event may be repetitious, stereotyped and emotionless. Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, the patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organized, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context. The road to trauma- healing therapy is the creation of a space where the victim feels free to talk about his or her traumatic experience in small, planned, and manageable portions. Through this technique, the traumatised person will eventually be able to cope with his or her emotions and deal effectively with trauma-related triggers. In *God Help the Child*, the two adult characters, Bride and Booker are affected by the lack of an attachment figure during their childhood. As a consequence, their traumatizing experiences remain a blockage and complicate their adult lives. They have an urge to be accepted and understood by an attachment figure. Receiving recognition and understanding from a grownup leads the character towards recovery. When for example Bride expresses her trauma, Booker is her attachment figure, and has the role as witness to her story, in addition to acting as her caregiver. They bring their past into the present and allow it to control their lives.

Eventually as an adult, Bride tells Booker about her rape. She finds herself in the second stage of the three-leafed witnessing process and Booker is there to help her. It is as if Bride's reservoir of memories and feelings eventually breaks as she dares to trust Booker. Finally, Bride is able to tell someone about her traumatized experience and the blockage ceases. He helps her realize the nature of her inadequate mother, but he also gains Bride's trust and thus makes her open up.

Booker's emotional connection to Adam fortifies the experience of trauma. Booker has to face the corpse of his dead brother. The absence of his clothes and shoes gives rise to traumatizing images in Booker's imagination and he understands that Adam's death was not an accident, but murder. Adam's death is the blockage that causes Booker's life to stagnate. His way of coping with the loss of his brother has made him sensitive towards people who do not act in the best interest of children. Still, unlike Bride, Booker gains support from his aunt, Queen. She is there for him in his mourning. Although she is not the person of closest proximity, in geography, during this stage in Booker's life they develop a close relationship, and she takes the role as a secure and comforting attachment figure.

In Scott Heim's *Mysterious Skin*, Brian finally finds out that it is Neil, the boy he saw in his odd dreams, and then they meet after ten years. Neil, as asked by Brian, recalls his forgotten memories and explains how the coach raped them to make the abuse seem normal and acceptable. Brian's frustration intensifies, leading him to break down in tears while seeking solace in Neil's arms. Individuals who have experienced a traumatic childhood often face significant psychological challenges in the aftermath of trauma. Despite initiating the healing process, they may repeatedly encounter situations that trigger recollections of past traumatic events. In such instances,

the capacity for psychological self-defence becomes essential. This form of self-defence involves confronting, rather than avoiding, emotionally distressing experiences that reactivate trauma-related memories. By actively engaging with these emotions and processing the discomfort they elicit, individuals can facilitate emotional recovery and gain psychological resilience through the reflective experience of recalling the trauma.

The novel concludes with angelic voices singing the Christmas carol Silent Night, as Brian and Neil lean on each other for support on the couch in the very room where the childhood sexual abuse occurred. One boy shares his narrative while the other listens, reconstructing and giving meaning to his life story. This portrayal emphasizes the role of companionship in the healing process, as mutual support fosters emotional recovery. Clinically, disrupted attachment patterns commonly observed in trauma survivors must be acknowledged and addressed during therapy. Within a therapeutic space where individuals feel genuinely loved, cared for, trusted, and heard, emotional wounds can be gradually healed. This supportive environment facilitates personal transformation, empowering trauma survivors to develop resilience and face the complexities of life with greater emotional strength.

3. Conclusion

Healing from trauma can only occur when the individual becomes consciously aware of their traumatic experiences. However, the process of acknowledging trauma can itself be distressing, as it requires confronting painful memories and emotions. Recovery involves the emergence of a renewed sense of self, necessitating the reconstruction of personal identity beyond the trauma. As the healing process unfolds, the individual must reconcile with this transformed self and strive to move forward with greater emotional strength.

Effective trauma recovery is characterized by the ability to live in the present without being consumed by intrusive thoughts and overwhelming emotions tied to past experiences. It does not entail the complete erasure of memories or feelings associated with the trauma but rather the capacity to integrate these experiences into one's life narrative without allowing them to dominate emotional well-being. Trauma recovery is best understood as a gradual, multi-stage process that requires sustained effort over time. Crucially, healing occurs within the context of supportive relationships where the individual can rebuild trust and emotional connections. Through this relational framework, the traumatized person can reconstruct core psychological faculties, including trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity, and intimacy, ultimately emerging stronger and more resilient than before.

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