

Reclaiming Identity: A Feminist Analysis of Trauma and Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*

Srividya Lakshmi K

Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India;
SRM Institute of Science and Technology, Dept. of Language, Culture and Society, Ramapuram, Chennai, India

Priyadarshini M.C*

Department of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India

Sheik Hameed N

Department of English, B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Vandalur, Chennai, India

Manimozhi R

Research Department of English, A.D.M. College for Women (Autonomous), Affiliated to Bharathidasan University,
Tiruchirappalli, India

Abstract—This paper offers a feminist analysis of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and *God Help the Child* (2015), exploring the intersection of trauma and resistance in Black female identity. Drawing on Black feminist thought, particularly Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Judith Butler, the study examines Sethe and Bride's psychological experiences as reflections of Black women's struggles for self-definition within oppressive systems. *Beloved* highlights the trauma of slavery and its impact on Black motherhood, while *God Help the Child* addresses internalised racism and the performative nature of beauty standards. Through acts of resistance and identity reclamation, Morrison's protagonists assert self-love as a transformative force in healing from intergenerational trauma.

Index Terms—Black Feminism, trauma, motherhood, colourism, resistance

I. INTRODUCTION

Toni Morrison's novels intricately explore the relationships between race, gender, and trauma in the lives of African American women. Her storytelling reveals the muted realities of Black feminine suffering, highlighting how these women are oppressed physically, mentally, and as constructs. This analysis integrates feminist and trauma approaches in examining *Beloved* and *God Help the Child*, concentrating on the emergence and dissolution of Black female identity due to enslavement, colourism, and maternal disattachment. The paper draws on Black feminist thought, especially the works of Bell Hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Judith Butler, arguing that in Morrison's narrative, resistance is not presented as defiant struggle, but rather unconscious acts of survival, self-reclamation, and storytelling. Morrison's feminist framework centres on her transformative vision of Black motherhood, which creates a sharp departure from prevalent Western notions that romanticise a mother as nurturing, selfless, and emotionally unwavering. Morrison's mother figures are defined by trauma and oppression, as she depicts them as emotionally stable nurturers.

In *Beloved*, Sethe's haunting act of infanticide emerges as a desperate form of maternal agency within the brutal conditions of slavery, symbolising both the horrors of maternal dispossession and the radical lengths to which Black mothers have gone to protect their children. In *God Help the Child*, Sweetness's emotional detachment from her daughter, Bride, reflects the internalised colourism that distorts maternal love in a racially stratified society.

Morrison's portrayal of motherhood in both texts resists the myth of the selfless Black matriarch and instead reveals motherhood as a conflicted, politicised space where identity is negotiated and reclaimed (Yan & Li-hui, 2017). Through her exploration of maternal alienation, racialised trauma, and the intergenerational transmission of pain, Morrison reframes the concept of resistance. Her protagonists do not merely endure; they assert their humanity through acts of care, memory, and narrative. By centring the lived realities of Black women and their struggles for self-definition, Morrison's work becomes a powerful feminist statement that challenges patriarchal and racist discourses while affirming the resilience and complexity of Black female identity. To unpack Morrison's approach, it is useful to consider Adrienne Rich's influential distinction between *motherhood* as a patriarchal institution and *mothering* as a personal, potentially

* Corresponding Author. Email: priyadarshinimc@veltech.edu.in

empowering experience. As Rich notes in *Of Woman Born* (1976), "The institution of motherhood is...a male-defined construct...whereas the experience of mothering is a source of female power" (Rich, 1976, p. 13). Lauri Umansky, drawing from Rich, elaborates on this tension by differentiating between the "negative" feminist discourse where motherhood is viewed as oppressive and the "positive" discourse that envisions a liberatory potential in non-patriarchal mothering (Umansky, 1996, pp. 2–3). Morrison's fiction aligns with the latter, asserting Black mothering as a politically charged act that not only nurtures children but also fosters resistance against racial commodification and internalised inferiority.

In *Beloved*, Morrison portrays Sethe's act of killing her daughter as a harrowing expression of maternal agency within the grotesque bounds of slavery. This act, while morally complex, represents a mother's desperate effort to reclaim ownership over her children's fates: "If I hadn't killed her, she would have died, and that is something I could not bear to happen to her" (Morrison, 1987, p. 200). Sethe's trauma reflects the historical dehumanisation of enslaved Black mothers, whose maternal bonds were routinely violated. Morrison does not glorify Sethe's decision but rather situates it within a broader historical context that highlights how slavery distorted maternal love into something violent and desperate. The ghost of *Beloved*, then, becomes not just a literal haunting but a metaphor for intergenerational trauma and the struggle for maternal self-redemption. Similarly, in *God Help the Child*, the character of Sweetness illustrates how internalised racism corrupts maternal love. Sweetness distances herself emotionally from her daughter, Bride, due to the latter's dark skin: "It's not my fault. It's not my fault. It's the Lord's. Or the Devil's. Who knows?" (Morrison, 2015, p. 43). Here, Morrison critiques the lingering effects of colourism and systemic racism, showing how a legacy of racial self-loathing shapes maternal rejection. Yet, through Bride's journey of self-discovery and healing, the novel also gestures toward the possibility of reclaiming identity outside the bounds of maternal validation.

Scholars like Andrea O'Reilly have emphasised the political dimensions of Black mothering in Morrison's work, asserting that "in loving her children, the mother instils in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses that naturalise racial inferiority" (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 11). Morrison's representations disrupt stereotypical images of the Black matriarch, strong yet self-effacing, by imbuing her mothers with agency, emotional depth, and contradictions. These women are not moral archetypes but complex figures navigating a society structured to erase their autonomy (Rajkumar & Vijayakumar, 2024). Ultimately, Morrison reclaims Black motherhood as a multifaceted identity that carries both trauma and resistance. Through Sethe and Sweetness, and through the daughters who have the burden of their mothers' choices, Morrison articulates a feminist vision in which mothering becomes a means of survival, defiance, and identity reclamation in the face of historical and contemporary oppressions. As Patricia H. Collins aptly argues:

African-American communities value motherhood, but the Black mothers' ability to cope with race, class, and gender oppression should not be confused with transcending those conditions. Black motherhood can be rewarding, but it can also exact a high personal cost. The range of Black women's reactions to motherhood and the ambivalence that many Black women feel about mothering reflect motherhood's contradictory nature. (Collins, 2000, p. 133)

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Morrison's work has been widely studied within feminist and postcolonial frameworks. In *Beloved*, scholars have highlighted the use of memory and haunting as strategies for dealing with historical trauma (Henderson, 1991; Wyatt, 1993). Caruth (1996) emphasises that trauma is often experienced belatedly and manifests in recurring memories or silences, an idea reflected in the character of Sethe, whose trauma returns through the ghostly presence of her deceased daughter. In contrast, *God Help the Child* has been read as a modern meditation on the legacies of colourism and the commodification of Black female bodies (Page, 2017; Schreiber, 2010). The novel is frequently viewed as Morrison's critique of the socio-cultural aesthetic and moral judgments inflicted upon Black women. Hooks (1981) and Collins (2000) discuss the internalised racism and beauty osmosis within patriarchal structures that hold dominion over Black women. Morrison's female characters, especially Bride, are shaped in *Autobiography of My Mother* by Butler's (1990) theory of performativity, transforming in relation to her external environment, which, for Bride, denotes a traumatic dislocation and subsequent reconstruction. These works provide the basis for a detailed feminist approach to trauma and identity in Morrison's selected novels.

In Keita's (2018) analysis, she looks into the depiction of the terror of being black in *God Help the Child* by Morrison through the angles of abjection and trauma. She advocates that Morrison "conjures and exorcises the terror of being a Black person" so that her protagonists can confront and heal from the racial trauma. Likewise, Ramirez (2015), explores the concept of toxic motherhood in *God Help the Child*, highlighting how racism affects maternal relationships. She notes that the novel "explores the damaging effects of racism on motherhood and the dramatic impact of toxic mothering upon children." Furthermore, Beaver (2012), analyses *Beloved*, focusing on how slavery disrupted mother-child relationships. She observes that "Morrison explores the fact that slave mothers often were not allowed to raise or nurse their children, and shows the damage it does to the mother-child relationships." Keane discusses one of her reviews of Morrison's *God Help the Child*, noting a shift in perspective regarding trauma. She states, "The narration of *God Help the Child* betrays an impatience with the residues of trauma that hold back its characters from loving anew" (Keane, 2019).

Hameed and Wan Fakhruddin (2023). This paper delves into feminist identity in *Beloved*, emphasising the harrowing past of slavery and its impact on Black women's identities. Mayberry (2021). Mayberry's chapter in *The Critical Life of*

Toni Morrison examines *God Help the Child*, discussing themes of trauma and identity. She provides insights into how Morrison's later works continue to explore the complexities of Black womanhood. Likewise, Ramtani analyses *God Help the Child*, focusing on internalised colourism and its effects on maternal relationships. She highlights Sweetness's justification for her treatment of her daughter, stating, "How else can we hold on to a little dignity?" (Ramtani, 2017). To the core, Gay (2015) discusses the complexities of maternal love in *God Help the Child*, noting that Sweetness "will apologise for her child's dark skin" but not for her worldview or parenting methods. Similarly, Amissine (2018) distinguishes African feminism from Western feminism, emphasising that African feminism "underlines the notion of motherhood and is not 'anti-men'," which aligns with Morrison's depiction of maternal roles that are culturally rooted rather than oppositional. In the same vein, Badejo (1998) asserts that African feminism "embraces beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power," highlighting its unique characteristics compared to Western feminism and reinforcing the depth of Morrison's female characters. O'Reilly (2004) contributes to this discourse by discussing the political dimensions of Black mothering in Morrison's work, asserting that "in loving her children, the mother instils in them a loved sense of self and high self-esteem, enabling them to defy and subvert racist discourses." Moreover, Rich (1976) in *Of Woman Born* provides a foundational framework for understanding Morrison's maternal figures by distinguishing between motherhood as a patriarchal institution and mothering as an empowering experience.

Additionally, Umansky (1996) elaborates on the tension between negative and positive feminist discourses on motherhood, a tension reflected in Morrison's complex maternal characters. To further this, Singh (2016) analyses the destruction of motherhood in *Beloved* as she explains the ways in which women had to part with their offspring to enslavers. Such an act lingers delicately in contemporary understandings of motherhood. In addition to this, Fatoumata (2018) investigates the poetics of Blackness in *God Help the Child*, focusing on how Morrison transmutes the terror of being Black into healing and redemptive narrative. In more or less the same manner, López Ramírez (2015) analyses the novel's toxic motherhood and its effects on racism and internalised colourism—the maternal bond within these is deeply affected. From a viewpoint of narrative development, Keane (2019) points out the priority shift in *God Help the Child*: Morrison moves away from the earlier sympathetic portrayals of trauma, which suggests a new phase in her writing about pain and healing. Together with this, Hameed and Wan Fakhruddin (2023) provide descriptions of *Beloved* showing the fight and flight of Black women out of slavery while nurturing feminism and racial oppression. This strand is continued by Mayberry (2021), who examines how *God Help the Child* reinforces trauma and identity discourse to narrate the protagonist's self-acceptance and empowerment journey.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative approach, which is best suited for the interpretative work experienced in literary analysis. The study mainly concerns itself with the novels *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison as focal texts to analyse the intersection of feminism, trauma, and identity pertaining to bowing to racial violence. These two selected novels, which are nearly three decades apart, are systematically sampled based on their chronological order in Morrison's body of work. *Beloved* is an early attempt to capture the lingering psychological ramifications of slavery, and *God Help the Child* is her last meditation on the internalised racism and colourism across generations. In this analysis, the focus will be on the narrative framework, characterisation, and symbolic imagery, particularly on the ways Black female trauma is performed and how she resists embodiment. The analysis from these angles fosters the development of trauma, memory, and feminist interpretation centred on the social and psychological outcomes of the main actress's experiences. The approach is multifocal, bringing together the aspects of text interpretation with theoretical analysis that seeks to reveal the ways in which Morrison shapes her narratives of survival, resistance, identity reclamation, and self-definition in demasculated terms. Through the exploration of perspective changes, fragmentation of the narrative, and symbolic motifs, the analysis aims to illuminate the part of storytelling as an act of witnessing and a means of gaining power.

IV. DISCUSSION

A. Tracing the Shadows of Historical Trauma and Collective Memory

The novel epitomises Toni Morrison's *Beloved* depicting trauma and memory in diverse aspects, placing the narrative within the frameworks of sociological, psychological, and historiographical notions of injury, harm, and collective suffering. Sethe's distressing trauma is central to the story: the lifelong struggles of a mentally and spiritually imprisoned former enslaved woman, her past ensnaring her present, Samir (2020). *Beloved* is not just a haunting figure representing infanticide, but a ghostly manifestation of fragmented memory and unhealed trauma. Morrison's nonlinear narrative, dynamic viewpoints, and rich symbolism of the story paint not only the infliction of trauma, but also how it is woven into the patterns of time. The characters' psychological splintering mirrors these narrative strategies, especially Sethe's frail attempts to face the burdening horizon of her past, suffixed with merciless violence and grief-filled history, Suganya et al. (2025). As a community, addressing an isolated individual's traumatic memories that must be dealt with publicly illustrates Morrison's avoidance of trauma narration as burdensome only attributed to a single person and emphasising slavery-centred trauma as a collective heritage. Critical scholarship has long recognised *Beloved* as a seminal text that bridges literary storytelling with trauma theory and memory studies. Scholars argue that Morrison's engagement with the

legacy of slavery reveals the impossibility of fully reconciling with a past that continues to echo in the present (Hssairi, 2024).

The novel functions not only as a literary exploration but as a theoretical commentary on racial injustice, historical memory, and the lasting psychological damage of systemic oppression. The trauma endured by Morrison's characters, particularly Black women, cannot be isolated from the socio-historical contexts of racism and sexism. Indeed, Morrison foregrounds how Black women are doubly marginalised, with their identities fractured by both racial discrimination and gendered expectations. The convergence of individual and collective trauma is central to understanding the novel's deeper messages on memory, healing, and the reclamation of identity (Udoette, 2024). The significance of trauma in *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* extends beyond literary narrative into psychological realism. Morrison's portrayal of trauma resonates with clinical understandings of the condition. In psychoanalytic terms, Sigmund Freud described trauma as an experience so overwhelming that the mind fails to process it, resulting in prolonged psychological disturbance. Similarly, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as a catastrophic event that is not fully grasped at the time of occurrence, later returning in the form of intrusive memories or hallucinations. Sethe's post-traumatic behaviours and the spectral return of Beloved vividly illustrate this conceptualisation. Moreover, *God Help the Child* highlights the emotional trauma of childhood neglect as it pertains to Bride and her mother, Sweetness, who emotionally abuses Bride by disowning her because of her dark skin. This kind of rejection inflicts enduring psychological wounds that adversely shape Bride's ability to form healthy relationships throughout her life (Wang, 2020).

Morrison highlights how some of the earliest psychological scars, particularly concerning one's race and appearance, become deeply embedded and shape one's self-esteem as well as one's sense of self. Trauma, in Morrison's stories, is not only inflicted physically; it also includes emotional neglect and social abandonment. The narrative put forth by developmental psychology corroborates and expands upon the literary vision presented by Morrison, stating that abuse, separation, or absence of maternal love results in deep-rooted trauma, which is especially unforgiving in early childhood and can undermine the child's psychosocial development. Studies indicate that a vast majority of children experience trauma before the age of sixteen, often through witnessing or enduring maltreatment or emotional deprivation. Emotional abuse and neglect, though sometimes less visible than physical abuse, can have equally damaging, long-lasting effects (Subzal & Ahmed, 2021). In *God Help the Child*, the Bride's emotional starvation due to colourist rejection reflects this dynamic, underscoring how racism operates within family structures and perpetuates intergenerational trauma.

B. The Haunting of History: Trauma and Identity in Beloved and God Help the Child

In *Beloved*, Morrison constructs a narrative that unearths the deeply rooted psychological trauma of slavery through the spectral figure of Beloved, who serves as both a literal ghost and a metaphor for the repressed horrors of the past. Set in post-Civil War America, the novel reveals how the scars of slavery remain etched into the consciousness of formerly enslaved individuals. The protagonist, Sethe, though physically free, is mentally imprisoned by the violent legacy of slavery. Her act of infanticide, killing her daughter to spare her from enslavement, stands as both a tragic assertion of maternal agency and a manifestation of historical horror. As Hooks (1981) asserts, slavery not only exploited Black women physically but also stripped them of their maternal rights, rendering motherhood a site of profound vulnerability and commodification. Sethe's desperate act, though morally ambiguous, reflects an attempt to reclaim autonomy in a system designed to deny her that very power. The ghost of Beloved Sethe's reincarnated daughter epitomises the notion of "acting out" trauma, a concept elaborated by LaCapra (2001), where the trauma resurfaces in disruptive, repetitive behaviours rather than being cognitively processed or "worked through." Beloved's presence at Bluestone Road dismantles the fragile stability Sethe has tried to create, forcing her to confront suppressed memories and unresolved guilt.

Caruth (1996) argues that trauma resists full assimilation into consciousness and often returns in the form of haunting memories, which demand acknowledgement and narration. Morrison utilises the supernatural not as escapism but as a literary device that intensifies the confrontation with historical realities, compelling both Sethe and the reader to reckon with the persistent echoes of racial violence. Moreover, Morrison illustrates that trauma is not only individual but communal through symbolic spaces like the Clearing, where Baby Suggs preaches self-love, and the communal exorcism of *Beloved*, the novel gestures toward a collective confrontation with historical memory. These moments function as rituals of communal catharsis, highlighting the social dimension of healing and the necessity of shared acknowledgement of pain. As Samir (2020) emphasises, *Beloved* "narrates slavery as an inherited trauma, one that embeds itself in memory and must be addressed collectively for recovery to begin".

In contrast, *God Help the Child* shifts the temporal and thematic focus to a contemporary context, addressing the traumas stemming from internalised racism and childhood neglect. The protagonist, Bride, is emotionally abused by her mother, Sweetness, solely for being dark-skinned, which mirrors the legacy of racial hierarchies internalised within Black communities. Morrison critiques the illusion of a post-racial society by exposing how colourism, an extension of white supremacist beauty standards, continues to shape the self-worth of Black girls and women. Bride's quest for identity and validation, often through her appearance and romantic entanglements, reveals the long-term psychological damage inflicted by early emotional trauma (Donia & Haikal, 2022). Much like Sethe, Bride must confront her past to reclaim her selfhood. Her transformation is marked not only by physical changes, her body begins to regress into that of a child, but also by an emotional journey that forces her to reckon with the roots of her self-loathing. As Wang (2020) observes, Morrison "traces the psychological implications of trauma through the protagonist's bodily responses," suggesting that

unresolved emotional pain manifests physically. This somatic portrayal of trauma aligns with feminist trauma theory, which sees the body as a site where oppression and identity struggles are inscribed.

C. *Intergenerational Trauma and Feminist Resistance*

Toni Morrison's novels intricately explore the enduring and intergenerational impact of trauma, particularly on Black women. These stories portray not only how social and individual misfortunes are passed down from one generation to the next but also how Black women wrestle with systemic violence, erasure, and generational suffering while working to reconstruct their sense of self. It is within the framework of historical consciousness and feminist critique that one can appreciate Morrison's work as revealing trauma, in whatever form—slavery or colourism—is always present in the psyche and poetics of her characters. In *Beloved*, Sethe, an ex-enslaved woman, is depicted as a ghostly figure holding onto the painful trace of infanticide, which was done to protect her daughter from the horrors of slavery.

The ghost of her daughter, Beloved, returns not only as a supernatural presence but as a symbolic embodiment of unresolved trauma. This haunting dramatises Dominick LaCapra's concept of "acting out" trauma, wherein the traumatic past re-emerges repetitively and compulsively, obstructing healing (LaCapra, 2001). Moreover, Caruth (1996) argues that trauma "is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known," a view echoed in Morrison's fragmented narrative structure, which mirrors the disorientation of traumatic memory. As Steenkamp (2020) notes, *Beloved* "forces the reader into a nonlinear experience of pain, where memory and reality blur, reflecting Sethe's psychological fragmentation".

The novel does not confine trauma to the individual. The African American community surrounding Sethe partakes in collective rituals such as the exorcism of Beloved that become necessary for communal healing. These acts of shared confrontation with pain and loss reflect what Gilmore (2017) describes as "ritualised resistance," where community-based interventions become mechanisms for reclaiming history and identity. Through these rituals, Morrison foregrounds a Black feminist ethic of care and solidarity, highlighting that recovery is not possible in isolation. The legacy of trauma in *Beloved* is also portrayed through the lens of postmemory, a term coined by Marianne Hirsch to describe the inherited memory of trauma experienced by subsequent generations. Denver, Sethe's daughter, is a vessel of this inherited pain. Isolated and burdened by her family's history, Denver's journey toward independence and social integration symbolises the potential to interrupt the cycle of transmitted trauma. As Pittman (2019) observes, Denver's transformation is "a narrative of resilience in which individual healing mirrors the reconstruction of collective identity." Morrison revisits these themes in *God Help the Child*, shifting from historical slavery to modern expressions of trauma caused by colourism and parental neglect.

The protagonist, Bride, is emotionally abused by her mother, Sweetness, for her dark skin, an act rooted in internalised racism. Sweetness believes that emotional detachment will fortify her daughter against a racist society. However, this maternal rejection scars Bride, who grows up seeking external validation through beauty and romantic relationships. As Kehinde (2021) asserts, "Bride's identity becomes a performance, structured around how others perceive her blackness and desirability." The bride's emotional and physical regression into a childlike state is emblematic of the resurfacing of early psychological trauma. This regression forces her to relive her past and piece her identity together once more. Morrison provides a metaphor for the ways unresolved childhood trauma plays out in adulthood by using the Bride's bodily change alongside Herman's (1992) three-stage model of trauma recovery—synthesis of deficiency, estrangement, and the establishment of safety, remembrance, and reconnection. Viewing it this way, Bride's self-acceptance and subsequent return to her roots represent a woman's act of defiance to patriarchal standards of value and womanhood, of which she has been socially conditioned to internalise.

D. *Colourism, Rejection, and Performativity*

Toni Morrison scrutinises the self-destructive legacy of colourism alongside its psychological impact on Black identity within today's society. Bride, the central character, suffers emotional rejection at the hands of her mother, Sweetness, who is light-skinned. Bride's deeply rooted racism drives her to emotionally reject her mother's love due to the contorted "blue-black" skin tone she was born with. This rejection fuels an unending endeavour towards seeking love and acceptance. She outwardly assimilates into the white world of corporate America, using her beauty and business accolades to mask the unspeakable torment from childhood psychologically. As a result, Bride's sense of self morphs into an increasingly objectified suffering narrative crafted. Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, in which gender and identity are not stagnant phenomena but rather dynamic constructs perpetually performed through social repetition, captures this succinctly. The bride personifies this as she haphazardly builds a palatable self of Eurocentric beauty standards. "Self-assured" as she may appear, this illusion dissipates when she becomes devastated after the romantic relationship she invested in tangentially evaporates. This disintegration catalyses a post-physiological regression, where instead of blooming into womanhood, she further constricts into a prepubescent form. The bodily transformation epitomises the collapse of her performative identity, ensuing from inward introspection, forcing Bride to reconcile with the emotions she has repressed for years. As highlighted by Awad (2021), Morrison employs physical regression as a means of narrating the journey toward the inner child, which reveals the vulnerability of identities formed through socialisation.

Toni Morrison scrutinises the self-destructive legacy of colourism alongside its psychological impact on Black identity within today's society. Bride, the central character, suffers emotional rejection at the hands of her mother, Sweetness, who is light-skinned. Bride's deeply rooted racism drives her to emotionally reject her mother's love due to the contorted "blue-black" skin tone she was born with. This rejection fuels an unending endeavour towards seeking love and acceptance. She

outwardly assimilates into the white world of corporate America, using her beauty and business accolades to mask the unspeakable torment from childhood psychologically. As a result, Bride's sense of self morphs into an increasingly objectified suffering narrative crafted. Butler's (1990) notion of performativity, in which gender and identity are not stagnant phenomena but rather dynamic constructs perpetually performed through social repetition, captures this succinctly. The bride personifies this as she haphazardly builds a palatable self of Eurocentric beauty standards. "Self-assured" as she may appear, this illusion dissipates when she becomes devastated after the romantic relationship she invested in tangentially evaporates. This disintegration catalyses a post-physiological regression, where instead of blooming into womanhood, she further constricts into a prepubescent form. The bodily transformation epitomises the collapse of her performative identity, ensuing from inward introspection, forcing Bride to reconcile with the emotions she has repressed for years. As highlighted by Awad (2021), Morrison employs physical regression as a means of narrating the journey toward the inner child, which reveals the vulnerability of identities formed through socialisation.

The spectral existence of *Beloved* forces Sethe to revisit her history and subsequently her past from a different angle. The trauma silencing her is shattered. Sethe's life becomes a canvas of struggle and oppression; a repeating cycle akin to Butler's performative reiteration, yet stemming from a deep-seated violence inflicted by race. "Sethe's maternal identity is one forged in the crucible of slavery's destruction of kinship... making motherhood both sacred and suspect," argues DeLombard (2007). Morrison uses *Beloved* to vividly portray the conflict between the inner self and the self-constructed as a result of social and historical trauma. Moreover, *Beloved* presents Denver's coming-of-age as a journey toward breaking inherited performativity. Denver, born into a legacy of pain and silence, initially internalises the family's isolation. However, she eventually steps beyond the confines of her haunted home and seeks community. Her emergence into the public sphere marks a symbolic shedding of inherited trauma and an embrace of a more autonomous identity. This transformation parallels that of the Bride in *God Help the Child*, where healing arises not through performance but through vulnerability, truth-telling, and reconnection.

E. Storytelling, Sisterhood, and Resistance

In *Beloved*, the power of storytelling is central to the recovery of self and memory. Sethe, haunted by the trauma of slavery and the loss of her daughter, initially avoids recounting her past. Yet, it is through storytelling, spoken memories, shared pain, and communal witnessing that healing begins. Morrison illustrates that telling the truth of Black suffering resists historical narratives that have silenced and dehumanised Black people. Paul D's demand that Sethe "put [the story] where the pain is" (Morrison, 1987, p. 86) encapsulates the novel's ethical call for confronting, rather than repressing, trauma. Sethe's ultimate recovery begins when the women in her community gather at her doorstep to exorcise the spirit of *Beloved*. This act is not simply spiritual; it is symbolic of the reclaiming of collective agency. As Wyatt (1993) observes, this exorcism is a "ritual of female community" that asserts the necessity of solidarity among Black women in healing and in reclaiming identity from the grasp of historical violence. Storytelling here becomes embodied in a communal ritual that enables survival and redefinition. Moreover, Morrison complicates the notion of historical truth by utilising a fragmented, multi-voiced narrative structure. Characters' perspectives are woven into the fabric of the novel, reflecting how trauma defies linear chronology and demands multiple, overlapping testimonies. This narrative form resists the dominant archival logic of history, positioning oral memory and personal storytelling as counter-histories that speak from the margins.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison explores the devastating consequences of the absence of nurturing female relationships. The protagonist, Bride, is raised by a mother, Sweetness, who withholds affection out of fear that her daughter's dark skin will subject her to societal rejection. Sweetness's coldness, while portrayed as a misguided form of protection, leaves Bride emotionally desolate and disconnected from her body and self-worth. Unlike *Beloved*, where sisterhood is eventually found in the community of women, *God Help the Child* shows a solitary figure seeking reconnection through fragmented relationships (Rajkumar & Vijayakumar, 2023). Yet, it is through unexpected connections with other marginalised figures, Booker, Queen, and Sofia, that Bride begins the long process of emotional rebuilding. These relationships serve as surrogate forms of sisterhood, emphasising the significance of empathy and shared vulnerability. As Harkin (2016) points out, Morrison's characters often "navigate trauma through relationships that reconstitute the self in ways that challenge the norms of care, kinship, and love" (p. 204). Queen, in particular, functions as a maternal surrogate, providing Bride with the compassion and care that her biological mother denied her. Queen's simple acts of feeding Bride, keeping her warm, and allowing her space become revolutionary acts of healing, echoing *Beloved's* theme that recovery is not only individual but relational and embodied.

Morrison redefines resistance not as overt political rebellion but as a quieter, yet equally radical, assertion of survival, dignity, and love. Her Black female characters resist annihilation not with weapons but with memory, care, and the reclaiming of their bodies and stories. In both novels, Morrison challenges Western ideals of individualism by emphasising interdependence as a strength and love as a form of resistance. In *Beloved*, Sethe's refusal to forget even in her pain is itself a resistance against the historical erasure of enslaved women's voices. Her love, though flawed and destructive, is born of a world that sought to strip her of the right to mother, feel, and choose. As Krumholz (1992) asserts, Morrison presents "love as the site of both oppression and resistance," making it a complex and potent force in the struggle for Black womanhood. Similarly, Bride's eventual confrontation with her past in *God Help the Child* represents a shedding of performative beauty and capitalist validation. She learns that survival requires vulnerability to speak, to feel, and to be cared for. As Berman (2019) notes, "Bride's narrative embodies a turn from spectacle to substance, from performance to

presence" (p. 315). This return to emotional truth and bodily presence is Morrison's feminist call to reimagine Black identity as self-authored, nurtured, and healed through communal and emotional engagement.

V. CONCLUSION

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* offer profound meditations on Black female identity by foregrounding the entangled legacies of historical and contemporary trauma. Through the voices and experiences of her protagonists, Sethe and Beloved, Morrison dismantles hegemonic narratives surrounding motherhood, beauty, and female subjectivity. As this study has shown through the lenses of Black feminist theory and trauma studies, both novels illustrate how trauma is inscribed on the Black female body and psyche, but also how storytelling, memory, and communal care emerge as transformative forces of resistance and empowerment. Sethe's harrowing decision to kill her daughter rather than return her to slavery is at once a manifestation of trauma and an assertion of agency. In recalling this act, she insists, "I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (Morrison, 1987, p. 236). Sethe's refusal to forget even the most painful aspects of her past is Morrison's reminder that healing requires the reclamation of memory, not its erasure. As Pratt (2022) argues, Morrison "foregrounds trauma as a generational inheritance, one that Black women confront through acts of narration, remembrance, and ritual" (p. 112). The exorcism of Beloved, orchestrated by the women of the community, becomes a symbolic reclaiming of the maternal body and a collective reassertion of Black womanhood.

In *God Help the Child*, Morrison shifts from the historical to the contemporary, examining how colourism and internalised racism fracture identity. Bride's rejection by her mother, Sweetness, for being "too black", initiates a lifelong performance of perfection rooted in capitalist beauty standards. Her declaration, "I looked good... better than ever. And suddenly I was happy. Totally happy" (Morrison, 2015, p. 6), is later undermined by physical regression and emotional collapse. As Bride confronts her past, she is stripped of her performative femininity and forced to rebuild her self-worth through vulnerability and emotional introspection. This shift parallels what Okonkwo (2021) calls "a move from spectacle to authenticity, an act of feminist reclamation in the face of neoliberal commodification of Black beauty" (p. 143). Morrison's feminist lens also complicates traditional conceptions of motherhood. Sweetness, unlike Sethe, attempts to protect her daughter by aligning with societal prejudice, stating, "It's not my fault. It's the way of the world" (Morrison, 2015, p. 3). Yet Morrison critiques this complicity, revealing how internalised racism becomes a generational cycle of harm. In contrast, the maternal surrogacy offered by Queen to Bride becomes a redemptive space, illustrating Morrison's vision of care beyond biology—a care rooted in empathy, healing, and presence.

Recent studies reinforce Morrison's portrayal of storytelling and sisterhood as crucial tools of resistance. As Johnson (2023) observes, "Morrison crafts sisterhood not as mere camaraderie but as a political structure through which Black women reclaim narrative control and refuse erasure" (p. 189). Whether through Sethe's community or Bride's reconnections, Morrison reimagines survival as a collective endeavour that challenges dominant patriarchal and racial ideologies. Ultimately, *Beloved* and *God Help the Child* illustrate that reclaiming identity requires a courageous confrontation with trauma in its rawest forms. Morrison's protagonists resist victimhood not through spectacle, but through acts of remembrance, bodily care, and emotional truth. Their journeys show that survival is itself a radical form of resistance, especially when undertaken in a world that seeks to silence and fragment Black women's stories. As Morrison writes in *Beloved*, "It's not evil. Just sad. Something sad" (p. 107), a line that encapsulates her empathetic rendering of pain not as weakness, but as the soil from which strength emerges. Through a rich interplay of narrative, memory, and affect, Morrison redefines resistance as the radical act of existing lovingly, truthfully, and visibly in a hostile world. Her work continues to shape contemporary feminist discourse by centring Black women's voices, making space for their grief and their triumphs, and transforming trauma into a site of reclamation and rebirth.

REFERENCES

- [1] Amissine, I. E. (2018). African feminism and motherhood in African literature. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 8(9), 49–54.
- [2] Awad, A. M. (2021). The Black female body and the crisis of identity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 6(3), 60–66. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.63.8>.
- [3] Badejo, D. (1998). African feminism and the politics of power: Yoruba examples. In O. Nnaemeka (Ed.), *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (pp. 161–177). Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.
- [4] Beaver, M. (2012). Maternal separation in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 2(9), 1–4.
- [5] Berman, J. (2019). Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*: Reading the Black female body in pain. *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, 44(3), 302–320. <https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlz024>.
- [6] Butler, J. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- [7] Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [8] Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- [9] Donia, R. M. T., & Haikal, N. (2022). Childhood trauma and the quest for self-realisation in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Childhood and Women's Studies*, 2(2), 18–33.

- [10] Fatoumata, K. (2018). The poetics of Blackness in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*: Conjuring and exorcising racial trauma. *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, 11(3-4), 109–126.
- [11] Gay, R. (2015, April 16). *Mother's ruin: God Help the Child by Toni Morrison review – a tale that feels thin*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/16/god-help-the-child-toni-morrison-review> (Accessed: 2025-10-31).
- [12] Hameed, O. R., & Wan Fakhruddin, W. F. W. (2023). Realisation of feminist identity in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Alice Walker's *The Colour Purple*: A perspective based on womanism. *International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences*, 13(1), 712–728. https://hrmars.com/index.php/papers_submitted/21579.
- [13] Henderson, M. G. (1991). *Toni Morrison's Beloved: Re-Membering the Body as Historical Text*. In *Comparative American Identities: Race, Sex, and Nationality in the Modern Text* (pp. 62–86). Routledge.
- [14] Keane, M. (2019). Review: *God Help the Child* by Toni Morrison. *Orbit: A Journal of American Literature*, 7(1), 1–4. <https://orbit.openlibhums.org/article/id/1994/>.
- [15] Kehinde, A. (2021). Performing Blackness in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Journal of Literary Studies*, 37(2), 23–39.
- [16] LaCapra, D. (2001). *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- [17] López Ramírez, M. (2015). Toxic motherhood and the echoes of slavery in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *Grove: Working Papers on English Studies*, 22, 101–112. <https://revistaselectronicas.ujaen.es/index.php/grove/article/view/2700>.
- [18] Mayberry, S. N. (2021). Toni Morrison's late style and the trauma of history in *God Help the Child*. In S. L. M. Shaver & J. Duvall (Eds.), *The Critical Life of Toni Morrison* (pp. 183–196). Leeds: Legenda/De Gruyter.
- [19] Monica Udoette. (2024). Re-inventing the past as "Re-memory": Trauma, motherhood and history in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *SAPIENTIA Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Development Studies*, 6(3), 207–216.
- [20] Morrison, T. (1987). *Beloved*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- [21] Morrison, T. (2015). *God Help the Child*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- [22] O'Reilly, A. (2004). *Toni Morrison and Motherhood: A Politics of the Heart*. Albany: SUNY Press.
- [23] Page, Y. (2017). The skin she's in: Colourism and Black female subjectivity in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *CLA Journal*, 60(2), 145–162.
- [24] Pittman, F. (2019). The inheritance of silence: Intergenerational memory and resilience in *Beloved*. *Studies in the Novel*, 51(3), 380–397.
- [25] Rajkumar, S., & Vijayakumar, M. (2024). Travails of abduction, adoption, and migration: Retelling the myth of Sita in Bharti Kirchner's *Shiva Dancing*. *The International Journal of Literary Humanities*, 23(1), 127.
- [26] Rich, A. (1976). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- [27] Ramtani, S. (2017). Internalised racism and colourism in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 7(9), 276–280.
- [28] Samir, N. (2020). Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: An Analytical Study. *Beni-Suef University Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2(1), 9–38.
- [29] Schreiber, E. J. (2010). *Race, trauma, and home in the novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- [30] Singh, S. (2016). Slavery and the devastation of motherhood in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*, 6(9), 144–147.
- [31] Steenkamp, D. (2020). Fragmented memory and the discourse of the haunting in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. *The Journal of Literary Trauma Studies*, 5(1), 15–31.
- [32] Suganya, et al. (2025). "We Are Abject to Society": Sociocultural Discourses of Single Women in Nair's *Eating Wasps* and Malladi's *The Nearest Exit May Be Behind You*. *The International Journal of Critical Cultural Studies*, 24(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18848/2327-0055/CGP/v24i01/17-32>.
- [33] Umansky, L. (1996). *Motherhood Reconceived: Feminism and the Legacies of the Sixties*. In E. Long (Ed.), *From Sociology to Cultural Studies* (pp. 1–25). Oxford: Blackwell.
- [34] Wang, L. (2020). An analysis of Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child* from the perspective of trauma theory. In *Proceedings of ICELAIC 2019* (pp. 844–847). Atlantis Press.
- [35] Wyatt, J. (1993). *Reconstructing desire: The role of the unconscious in women's reading and writing*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.



K. Sridvidya Lakshmi is working as an Assistant Professor in the Department of Language, Culture and Society at SRMIST, Ramapuram. She has 18 years of teaching experience. She has published over 32 research articles in International Journals and Conferences in the areas of Afro American Literature and Technical English. She has published four book chapters and authored a Book published by an international publication in 2023 titled "ELEMENT OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE," the book is for the benefit of undergraduate and postgraduate students to enhance their language expression skills and communication abilities. She has presented more than 14 research papers at an International Conference. She is a Cambridge Speaking BEC Examiner and a member of ELT@I. She has completed more than eight NPTEL and COURSERA courses. She is a faculty coordinator for the Model United Nations.



Priyadarshini M C is an Assistant Professor and Research Supervisor of English, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr. Sangunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai. She has 7 years of experience in teaching. Notably, she was honoured with the BEST FACULTY AWARD, RESEARCHER AWARD from the IARA group. She serves as a Cambridge University Business English Certificate (BEC) Speaking Examiner, and she is also a freelance trainer with IELTS. Her research acumen can be understood with her impressive track record of 25 publications, which include books, book chapters, and 4 papers in Scopus-indexed Journals with a high impact factor. She has participated in International Conferences, 10 National Conferences, 10 seminars and 25 workshops. She is the most sought resource person and she has delivered more than 10 invited talks.



scholarship.

N. Sheik Hameed is a dedicated and experienced educator with over twelve years of teaching expertise in English. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor of English at B.S. Abdur Rahman Crescent Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, India. He earned his PhD in English Literature from Annamalai University, specialising in British Literature. His research interests span Literature and Medical Humanities, and he has published several articles and book chapters in Scopus, Springer, and Nature Group journals. Certified with a 150-hour TESOL/TEFL qualification, he has taught a wide range of courses, including Communication Skills, Soft Skills, and Workplace English, for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. In addition to teaching, he serves as a Language Editor in the Office of the Dean of Research and actively contributes to academic committees and mentoring. His work reflects a passion for innovative pedagogy and interdisciplinary



Faculty Development Programs.

R. Manimozhi is an Associate Professor and Head of the Research Department of English at A.D.M. College for Women (Autonomous), Nagapattinam, Tamil Nadu. She served as Vice-Principal (Academic) from 2017 to 2022 and as the Co-ordinator of the IQAC during the same period. With 18 years of teaching experience and 8 years of research experience, her research interests focus on the Fictional World, Feminism in Indian English Novels, and Psychological Aspects in Novels. She completed a Minor Research Project under the UGC XII plan titled "Emerging Womanhood in Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* and *Fugitive Histories*." Dr. Manimozhi has published 24 research papers and one book review in Scopus/International Peer-Reviewed/UGC Care list journals, with 18 articles published in books with ISBNs. She is an editor for the books *Lime Light – An Anthology of Prose, Biography, Poetry, Short Story, and One-Act Plays* and *Unheard Voices: Essays on Disability Studies in Indian English Fiction*. She has presented 29 papers at national and international seminars and conferences, delivered 10 invited lectures, and organised multiple workshops and seminars, including UGC-sponsored National Workshops, TANSCHÉ-sponsored International Conferences, and NAAC-sponsored National Seminars. As IQAC Co-ordinator, she organised 23