

Alienation and Depression: The Duality of Psychic Neurosis in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

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Abstract—This research studies alienation and neurosis in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*. The concepts of alienation and neurosis are going to be applied within the scope of psychoanalysis. These concepts help interpret the characters, namely the female protagonist Lula Ann Bridewell and her parents, and their resistance against people who taunt them for being black. This injustice causes the protagonist and her parents to be alienated from the society; and later they become psychically neurotic. Therefore, the research attempts to demonstrate how the characters' depression and neurosis are caused by this experience. For this reason, three objectives are going to be achieved: 1) To examine alienation as an unconscious psychic phase which results in social fragmentation in the novel, 2) To investigate depression as an abnormal behavioural phase which causes neurosis when the alienation experience is triggered back, and 3) To analyse neurosis as a psychic disorder and the last conscious culmination of the characters' psychic plights and marginalization. The research fills the gap concerning the characters' psychic disorders as impetuses of their alienation and neurosis. The research's methodology, consequently, relies on the application of Sigmund Freud's concepts of alienation and neurosis. Thus, the research's findings lie in the exploration of psychic alienation as a result of the characters' depression.

Index Terms—alienation, depression, Morrison, neurosis, psychoanalysis

I. INTRODUCTION

This research will analyze alienation and neurosis in Morrison's *God Help the Child*. It will study the conditions that caused the protagonist's feelings of alienation and neurosis. It will also concentrate on Morrison's depiction of the social and family conditions that complicated the protagonist's alienation and neurosis. The discussion of the literary insights of the concepts paves the way for better understanding of the methodological application. In so doing, the research will elaborate the argumentative denotation of the concepts. Therefore, psychoanalysis has been chosen as the main conceptual framework utilized in the study; and Freud's concepts of alienation and neurosis will be applied within the wide scope of psychoanalysis. Being so, the purpose of this research is to highlight the basic information about the concepts and their critical significance to interpret the selected novel. Illustrative examples will be cited in order to explain the fundamental notions of psychoanalytic explanation of alienation and neurosis as well as their illegibility to be applied to infer the protagonist's psychic feelings. For this reason, the selected novel is going to be studied from a psychoanalytic perspective through interpreting the literary clues of alienation and neurosis being portrayed in the course of the novel's plot.

Furthermore, the orientation of psychoanalysis would put the reader in the remedial mood of the psychological therapeutic strategies that might alleviate the protagonist from further psychic disorders. In this context, the research will specifically apply Freud's conceptualization of psychoanalysis and the psychic stances used to treat serious psychological complications, especially alienation and neurosis. By accessing these critical implications, the reader might feel at ease with the research's significance and its conceptual methodology that is going to be followed in the analysis. Moreover, the research concentrates on the Freudian attempts to tackle contemporary psychic maladies that would be found in the psychic disorder of the protagonist. The application of the Freudian attempts to analyze these mental problems might be elaborated by the discussion of the relationship between psychoanalysis and the protagonist's feelings of alienation and neurosis. On that account, the research will first discuss the protagonist's alienation through its depressive implications and how is formed by social and personal experiences. Then, it will discuss neurosis as another indication of psychic problems from which the protagonist suffers to a great extent.

II. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A. Alienation

The crux of this relationship is that individuals – who have self-concepts – are anxious and alienated at the same time. Anxious and alienated personality culminates in the choice of institutionalized delinquents. However, the non-institutionalized group comprises those marginal female adolescents. The non-institutionalized group has the most obvious tokens of self-derogative allegations. Moreover, they equate the highest degree of the mutual relationship between alienation and psychic disorder. The non-institutionalized group comes before the legitimate shape of subcultural group where the non-delinquents do not make any kind of self-derogative judgment about the self (Dorn, 1969, p. 532). In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the sense of alienation is closely associated with Bride's homelessness as she goes astray in the streets. Rain, who is another character in the story, recounts Bride's alienation because she does not find a safe refuge for her living:

You had to find out where the public toilets were...; how to avoid children's services, police, how to escape drunks, dope heads. But knowing where sleep was safe was the most important thing. It took time and she had to learn what kinds of people would give you money and what for, and remember the back doors of which food pantries or restaurants had kind and generous servers. The biggest problem was finding food and storing it for later (p. 174).

This experience is an indication of her alienated psychic state. In a similar way, Kopetski (1998) discovers the psychological elements of alienation in "Identifying Cases of Parent Alienation Syndrome – Part II," Kopetski (1998) argues that alienation is deeply related to parents. She (1998) describes this psychic phenomenon as the "parent alienation syndrome" that is formulated by persons who have some psychological complications. These complications come into being through pain and conflict that are converted from the state of intrapersonal into interpersonal conflicts (p. 1). To demonstrate this transformation development, individual who suffer from any form of pain or conflict are inclined to be atrocious. They transform their own personal attitudes to others. In this sense, their pain and conflict become interpersonal i.e., it is conveyed to other people via heinous reactions. In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, suffers from this kind of alienation, especially when she is ostracized by her parents and society at the same time:

It's not my fault. So you can't blame me. I didn't do it and have no idea how it happened. It didn't take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong. Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black. I'm light-skinned, with good hair, what we call high yellow, and so is Lula Ann's father (p. 12).

Bride and her friend Rain share the same alienation experience. The narrator describes their intimate relationship as sisters because they help and protect each other. For example, Bride saves Rain from inevitable death by gunshot: "my heart was beating fast, Rain recalls after Bride had left, because nobody had done that before. I mean Steve and Evelyn took me in and all but nobody put their own self in danger to save me save my life. But that what my black lady did..." (p. 180). This harsh alienation experience is caused by the family and society that marginalize them. Similarly, Freud (1920), in *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, contends that the concept of alienation is the sign which demonstrates that the inhibited wish reveals itself stronger than the form of censorship, that it achieves its wish-fulfillment though the censorship, or was about to achieve it through. Accordingly, we grasp that what is wish-fulfillment; and what the inhibited wish could present is for us, who are on the part of the dream-censorship; whereby only an agonizing sensation becomes the main cause of antagonism (p. 190).

Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the protagonist, Bride undergoes harsh experience as she interacts with other people in different places, like school. This harsh experience makes her alienated: "you could be sent to a juvenile lockup for talking back or fighting in school, a world where you'd be the last one hired and the first one fired. She couldn't know any of that or how her black skin would scare white people or make them laugh and trick her" (p. 75). Therefore, alienation and psychic disorders are simultaneous; and what gets true for the undistorted alienation we might consider to be factual also of those dreams which have experiential specific distortion, and of the other dreams of antagonism whose painful impressions very probably represent approximations of the concept of alienation (Freud, 1920, p. 191). Thereupon, the psychological appropriation of the alienation reality is often also a dream that results in waking; when people habitually interrupt hinder before the inhibited wish of the dream has archived its whole fulfillment in contrast to the censored suppression. In this way, the achievement of the dream fails. Yet, it does not change its psychic nature (p. 191). The concept of alienation, consequently, is obtained by scrutinizing the dream work.

The concept of alienation is used in psychoanalysis to describe behavioral disorders. It is commonly associated with the way in which psychic abnormality comes out. It involves many kinds of upset feelings, such as worry, uptight and so forth (Johnston, 2006, p. 4). Presumably, the concept of alienation is considered as a combination of disturbed feelings. These feelings are formed by certain situations or tragic events which leave their negative psychic imprints upon persons. Freud (1920), for example, felt that the first moment of alienation is fear, as stimulation exceeds the agitated psyche's capacity to handle it. In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the protagonist becomes alienated when she confronts social bias on the basis of color. She could not cope with the society that vehemently neglects her: "color is a cross she will always carry" (p. 20).

In *Emotional Vertigo between Anxiety and Pleasure*, Quinodoz (1994) asserts that alienation is comes out of emotional alienation. Quinodoz (1994) says that the concept of alienation refers to the essence of physical sensation (2). In sum, Quinodoz (1994) ascribes the appearance of alienation to the body. The physical feeling of alienation leads to anxious echoes. The internal alienation feeling influences the external body sensations. Yet, Freud (1920) has another

idea regarding the internal position of alienation. He examines alienation as the main cause of other psychic disorders, like repression.

Alienation has a great factor in constructing repression. In *Inhibition, Symptoms and Alienation*, Freud (1926) claims that: “It was alienation which produced repression. . . . It is always the ego’s attitude of alienation which is the primary thing and which sets repression going” (p. 118). Additionally, alienation arises from the danger of losing the love object: “Alienation arose originally as a reaction to a state of *danger* and it is reproduced whenever a state of that kind recurs. . . . [What are the dangers?] . . . when a child is alone, or in the dark, or when it finds itself with an unknown person instead of one to whom it is used — such as its mother. These three instances can be reduced to a single condition — namely, that of missing someone who is loved and longed for” (p. 119). To explain, dangerous situations and incidents might cause psychic alienation. Danger makes persons anxious at certain moments and situations. For this reason, alienation has been occupying the field of psychiatry since it is a kind of disorder that includes other disorders such as panic disorder (Tone, 2012, p. 2). In Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, family is a crucial factor in creating Lula Ann’s, or Bride’s, alienation: “[A] stranger more than that an enemy” (p. 16). But I may have done some hurtful things to my only child because I had to protect her. Had to. All because of skin privileges” (p. 78). This is because her father views her as an inferior person.

Alienation, accordingly, indicates a certain defect in the behavioral attributes of personality. Alienation includes whimsical reactions towards situations, events, people actions motivations and so forth. The formation of human personality depends largely on the latent structure of human psyche. Psychological practitioners attribute some psychological problems to the genuine peculiarities of the psyche and its control over the personality’s decisions and behaviors. The general outcome of psychic disorder is a sum of psychological defects defines the reactionary aspects of people. One of the psychic disorder’s outcomes is alienation. It appears when people suffer from certain psychological problems and when they become prone to some social problems. Accordingly, it represents a group of diseases that give final impression about people’s personalities. At this point, the idea of psychic disorder becomes conceptual; it is understood as a critical concept.

The concept of alienation involves several kinds of psychic abnormalities. Jenkins et al. (2012) for example, provide two kinds of psychic disorders (p. 1811). They basically relate to health and mental sanity (p. 1811). Jenkins et al. claim that these psychic disorders emanate from social and economic backgrounds (p. 1811). At this point, alienation could be caused by economic conflicts among specific nation. To connect this to the research analysis, in Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, Bride becomes psychically alienation due to social and family circumstances. The concept of alienation is used to analyze personality strange behaviors. It functions as a definitive tool to put forth a comprehensive conceptualization of the lurking manners of people’s psyches and the motives which led to some pernicious diseases in such psyches. Therefore, the harmful sequences of psychic disorder originate in the personality’s reactions towards other people or things. Such reactions are associated with some psychic disorders.

In *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Freud (1920) argues that alienation is a psychic disorder that is classified with the general theory of neuroses. He (1920) says that irritation represents one aspect of neurosis. He (1920) cites examples of this case according to the psychic states he found in his treating episodes. There are some persons whom he finds difficult to term them as ill. These persons tend to expect disasters. Freud (1920) blames them “for being over-anxious or pessimistic” (p. 347). The expectation of these patients’ nervous feeling is considered “alienation neurosis” that he classifies them in the groups of true neuroses (p. 347). Moreover, Freud (1920) ascribes the appearance of alienation to the interruption of strange acts and the related issues. Freud (1920) elaborates the existence of alienation as a physical neurosis. He (1920) contends that persons tend to alienation because they “reserve” their practice in unethical matters. Therefore, women with passive conduct is caused is specified by the treatment of her husband. When women have disposed negative gratification, they are more reactive to the significance of men via alienation (pp. 350-51). In sum, Freud (1920) argues that neurosis is leads to alienation as a psychic disorder. In Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, the cause of Bride’s alienation is her black ethnicity as a nigger girl who lives in bitter life conditions:

[I] built up immunity so tough that not being a “nigger girl” was all I needed to win. I became a deep dark beauty who doesn’t need Botox for kissable lips or tanning spas to hide a deathlike pallor. And I don’t need silicon in my butt. I sold my elegant blackness to all those childhood ghosts and now they pay me for it. I have to say, forcing those tormentors—the real ones and others like them—to drool with envy when they see me is more than payback. It’s glory (p. 101).

The concept of alienation is, therefore, used to analyze the psychological dimensions of the female personality. It incarnates the female tendency to gain his mother for personal needs. It undergoes the stage of repression that leads to neurosis. Freud (1920) postulated the majority of his ideas about the influence of the alienation on the neurotic stage. Most conspicuously, it stands for the unconscious desire that appears on the conscious mind through neurosis. Moreover, it exemplifies the “parental metaphor” for the family ties between the parents and their sons (Zerjav, 2010, p. 205). In Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, the protagonist faces the harshness of life by being independent; and she tends to be self-reliant without the aid of anybody: “each time she came I forgot just how black she really was because she was using it to her advantage in beautiful white clothes” (p. 79). Such independence is created by her desire to be free her psychic alienation. The significance of discussing the relationship between alienation and neurosis will be beneficial for

the research's theoretical application of the concepts of neurosis and alienation; and the concept of neurosis will be applied in the next section.

B. Neurosis and Depression

The concept of neurosis is used in psychoanalysis to describe behavioral disorders. It is commonly associated with the way in which psychic whimsical actions come out. Being so, the concept of neurosis is considered a combination of repression and phobic feelings. These feelings are formed by certain situations or tragic events which leave their negative psychic imprints upon persons. It is often argued that Freud discovered the unconsciousness, but it is more accurate to say that he and other psychoanalysts mapped its spaces and mechanisms. The results of research on psychoanalysis have crept into literary and cultural criticism and theory, contributing numerous terms, concepts, and problems that go beyond those critics who claim to be psychoanalysts. Freud (1896), in *Heredity and the Aetiology of the Neurosis*, argues that neurosis relates to memory. He (1896) claims that remembering distressing personal experiences in the past affects the persons who tend to recall them in later time periods. Previous experiences and excitations lead to the conscious outbreak of repression. This is due to the fact that these experiences are effective in the process of releasing repression in the conscious mind (p. 387). As a result, persons with distressed experiences resort to repress such experiences. Accordingly, neurosis is a psychic disorder that comes after violating repression by remembering or the return of past experiences. In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, Bride is tormented by Sofia. Accordingly, she becomes neurotic due to such cruelty and mistreatment: "being beaten up by Sofia was like Sweetness's slap without the pleasure of being touched. Both confirmed her helplessness in the presence of confounding cruelty" (p. 135).

Freud (1922), in *The Ego and the Id*, claims that repression gets away from ego through resistance. This is because it communicates with both id and ego (p. 15). The ego, which resolves the conflicts between id and super-ego, tries to maintain and accept the desired object by repression (p. 19). Consequently, the ego attends to repression via resisting the inhibited immoral past desires. This is the unconscious process of repression. In contrast, triggering the past desires and recalling them back make persons psychically disordered. Their behaviors become abnormal. Thereupon, neurosis is the culmination of such kind of psychic disorder in the light of Freud's arguments. But I will orient Freud's (1922) argumentative notions about the role of remembering past experiences as the main cause neurosis. That is, violating repression through triggering the past leads to the conscious appearance of neurosis that results in alienation as a psychic disorder.

Violating repression could come in the form of emotional reactions towards the past desires. One of these emotional reactions is guilt. When these emotions are aroused, the transitional phase of repression starts off; i.e., repression leads to neurosis. Freud asserts that guilt is one of the obsessional forms of neurosis (Freud, 1922, p. 42). To clarify, guilty persons keep remembering the immoral past desires. The unconscious mind used to repress these desires. However, when persons remember these desires, they trigger back the past experiences. Then, the desires return back in the form of a conscious reaction, namely, neurosis. In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the protagonist is greatly influenced by her childhood memories that made her extremely alienated: "a child, maybe two years old, screaming and crying while standing in the backseat of the crack heads' Toyota" (p. 72). Personalities with neurosis might be victims of war, for example, and war experience results in neurotic behavior (Bogacz, 1989, p. 232).

Most strikingly, the theoretical method depends on the experimental method. To explain, when psychological specialists determine the real motives of neurosis through clinical experimentation, they help the patients to get rid of their neurosis. But in the theoretical method, specialists extend the scope neurosis as a psychic disease. And then, they document their generalizations and conclusions about neurosis future purposes i.e., their interpretations of neurosis would facilitate the clinical treatment of neurosis when new neurotic forms might appear in the future. Moreover, the concept of neurosis designates the conditional varieties of mental disorders (Isin, 2004, p. 223). Consequently, Freud (1922) is the forerunner of theoretical method. However, He (1922) postulates the majority of his arguments about neurosis in the light of some experimental sessions with his patients who had developed mental disorders. The various cases of the patients enabled him to document their psychic conditions in theoretical insights. In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the culmination of Bride neurotic actions are her mistreatment. She is often beaten and slapped: "Sofia Huxley Bride thinks, 'I reverted to the Lula Ann who never fought back. Ever. I just lay there while she beats the shit out of me I didn't make a sound, didn't even raise a hand to protect myself when she slapped my face then punched me in the ribs before smashing my jaw with her fist then butting my head with hers'" (p. 60).

In *Studies on Hysteria*, Freud (1895) obviously tends to associated depression with neurosis (p. 100). Freud (1895) contends that neurosis is a psychic disorder that manifests in the nervous symptoms. Such nervous attitude is a result of stress. Consequently, the concept of alienation is a kind of an attack that takes place in nervous situations (p. 112). The concept of alienation is, therefore, a psychic disorder that represents the persons' predilection to be stressed. Feeling of stress makes persons prone to psychic abnormality since alienation is considered a perilous psychic disorder. In this way, anxious people feel bothered when they are victims of annoying situations. Freud's (1895) conceptualization of the idea of alienation copes with the fact that when persons fall victims of certain undesired actions they become depressed; and consequently anxious. However, Freud (1895) claims that the concept of neurosis is not only connected with stress, but also to neurosis. In this manner, alienation comes out of different affairs (p. 222). In Morrison's *God Help the Child*, the protagonist is greatly moved by her memories of alienation, which makes her neurotic: "Bride

quickly dashed a bright memory of Sweetness humming some blues song while washing panty hose in the sink, little Lula Ann hiding behind the door to hear her. How nice it would have been if mother and daughter could have sung together” (p. 148).

In *The Neuro-Psychoses Defense*, Freud (1894) argues that the concept of neurosis is a result of the conscious interaction between neurosis and psychosis. Furthermore, he argues that the concept of alienation is an outcome of phobias (p. 14). The psychical mechanism of neurosis escorts the existence of phobia. Since neurosis is a conscious psychic moment, it reflects the psychic feelings of person who suffer from depression. In this manner, fear triggers repression back to the conscious mind. Neurosis is caused by personal problems i.e., family problems. In his therapeutic methods, Freud (1894) can help the patients mitigate the severity of their neurotic complications. Consequently, the ultimate meaning of neurosis is symbolical. It is a symbol of people’s everyday problems. These problems accumulate in the internal factor of neurosis unravels the external manifestations of neurotic symptoms. Hence, Freud (1894) tests the case of these symptoms by following the theoretical method, or in his words, the etiology of neurosis (p. 304). In the light of Freud’s (1894) arguments, the problems that cause neurosis accompany people’s everyday lives. They encounter some dilemmas that make them psychically neurotic. Similarly, Borovecki-Jakovljević and Maticić (2005) discuss the critical dimensions of Freud’s alienation. They (2005) argue that the alienation has a great influence on the development of neurosis; and when there is no solution for the depression, and alienation “becomes a nucleus of the neurosis” (p. 351). It is quite understandable, here, that neurosis precedes the existence of alienation stage. That is, it paves the way for neurosis as a psychic disorder. Consequently, it accompanies the existence of both repression and isolation (alienation). In Morrison’s *God Help the Child*, Bride is the victims of her psychic alienation. As a result, she becomes provoked by people who make her feel as if she is a strange person; and she gets angry. This reaction is the core of her neurotic psychic state: “disappointed by the unexplained breakup, Bride went furious, raged and starts derogating Booker saying, ‘I guess I threatened his ego by doing some Samaritan things not directed to him. Selfish bastard. I paid the rent not him and the maid too. When we went to clubs and concerts we rode my jaguar or in cars I hired’” (p. 29). Thus, her psychic neurosis is the outcome of her depressed alienation created by family and social marginalization.

III. CONCLUSION

This research has studied alienation and neurosis in Morrison’s *God Help the Child* in the light of psychoanalysis. The study of alienation and neurosis has been tackled by applying Freud’s psychoanalytic arguments. The significance of this study is to offer a different reading of alienation and neurosis that represent the psychic state of the novel’s protagonist. Academicians, therefore, might interpret the selected novel by applying psychoanalysis since the essence of the approach as a critical field would enable them to benefit from the topic of this chapter. In this sense, the reader gets accustomed to the notions of psychoanalysis and its implication of alienation and neurosis in the broader fields of literary theory. In addition, the researchers would understand the latent conceptual importance of the discussion. The research’s application of the concepts of alienation and neurosis could be used interchangeably with other concepts in future researches on the selected novel.

One of the psychological complications developed by alienation is neurosis. As such, the concept of neurosis has been explained by discussing the concept of alienation and some depression insights in the current research. Like the concept of alienation, the concept of neurosis has been illustrated by depending on some psychoanalytic arguments, especially Freud’s discussions of the concept of neurotic behaviours and how they make the characters act in a strange way. However, the concept of neurosis has been explained to demonstrate the protagonist’s whimsical feelings that are caused by depressive alienation due to family and personal experiences. It has been applied to shed light on the scenes of alienation and neurosis as in the case of the harsh family conditions imposed upon the novel’s protagonist. Consequently, it has been used to explore the protagonists’ psychic alienation and its negative effect on her relationships with other characters. Furthermore, the research has explained the concept of neurosis in order to demonstrate how the protagonist behaves in a strange way because she is a victim of family and social deprivation. As a psychological concept, neurosis indicates the agitated state of people who constantly feel that they are not stable. In this manner, the research accentuated her behaviours that reflect her true neurotic state developed within her family and social milieus. Thus, her neurotic psychic state is formulated by her depressive alienation, which makes suffer from psychic disorder.

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