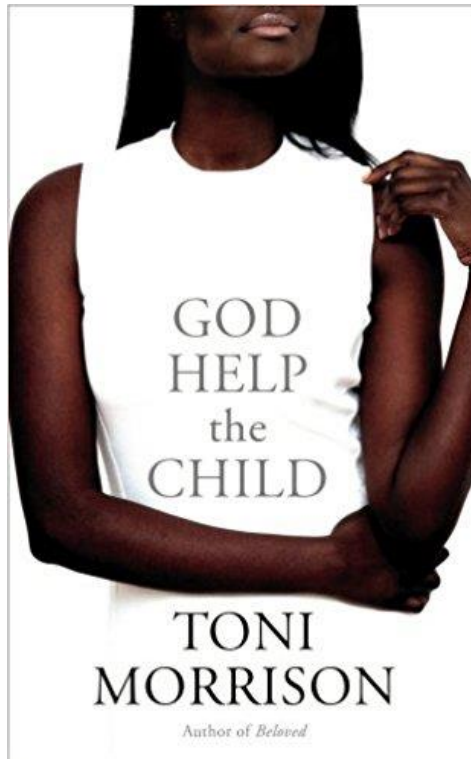


## Domestic Violence in Toni Morrison's *God Help the Child*

Dr. S. Horizan Prasanna Kumar

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/God-Help-Child-Toni-Morrison/dp/0701186054>

### Introduction

Agreeing to the United States Department of Justice's Office the definition of domestic violence is an array of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain control over another intimate partner. Many forms of abuse are included regardless of socioeconomic background, education level, race, age, sexual orientation, religion, or gender.

Violence against African American females, young and old, is an irresistible concern in the novels of Toni Morrison. The present-day study explores the possible whys and how's of this violence, which is, in fact, towards and by black females; it also goes into the ways in which black women survive their oppression. Outlining the roots of this violence to the days of slavery that justified the inhuman treatment of blacks by their white masters, black women are seen to be the nastiest sufferers as they have been doubly oppressed because of their race and gender. They also

have to bear the brunt of their men's emasculation by whites. Black female children face abuse in their own homes as well as from their own community. However, black women have devised their own strategies for coping with their oppression; these strategies have enabled many of them to survive their tribulations and come out of their marginalized state.

### **A Surge in Violence**

As with most things in the world, there seems to be a surge in the occurrences of physical and psychological trauma out of the domesticity of a seemingly normal household. There are alarming events like murder, rape, assault and abuse taking place which rattle and unsettle our minds. While these acts of violence attract wider attention and action, there are nerve wracking incidents of violence taking place domestically between men and women in a relationship, whether 'sanctified' by tradition or living 'in' together. Though late, remedial measures have been in force in many parts of the world. Most importantly, educating on the existence of the various forms of dangers involved in domestic abuse and violence, equipping victims to seek help and making help accessible are some of the ongoing efforts against abuse and violence.

### **Women's Emancipation**

Women's emancipation has accorded them with various rights and privileges, but many are still bound in suffocating relationship which has been eroding their self-worth slowly by the years. Though some seek legal aid and have ensued battles for permanent respite, many prefer to keep domestic violence hush-hush. This is predominantly done with the family's honour in mind, the future of the children in the family and the lack of economic independence of the woman involved. It would be wrong to generalise issues of domestic nature without accounting for the culture of a particular region. While the mores and beliefs of a particular culture influence the behaviour of men and women in a domestic relationship, the basic essence of abusing one's partner is in most cases universal in nature. Religion and culture accords certain pre-set roles for men and women and in most cases, it ends up providing men with authority over the women they live with. For years, it has been taken for granted that men rule over everything including their women and any method adopted to subjugate them is not to be questioned.

### **Domestic Abuse - *God Help the Child***

Domestic abuse does not limit itself to that between spouses or partners, but it extends and sometimes involves the other members of the family, especially children. Of note, the negativity between couples has a weird way of wiring itself into the psyche of children, whose nature and character are shaped by this. In *God Help the Child*, Morrison brings in every character with a small back-story for each, regarding their family. This enables in perceiving the actions of the characters as a latent reaction to events of yesteryears. These stories are of Bride's mother Sweetness and her estranged husband Louis; Rain's prostitute mother; Booker's abuse victimised family; Sofia's prim Christian household; and Queen and her husband(s). While the story revolves around the relationship between Bride and Booker and the incidents arising out of their falling apart, the role of all these families on the molding and characterisation of these lovers is unmistakable. Set in total contrast to these grief-stricken families is the couple Steve and Evelyn living a serene, minimalistic life in the woods.

## **Lula Anna Bridewell**

Lula Anna Bridewell, born to Sweetness and Louis, brought on great disappointment with regard to her colour. The couple was light skinned blacks, almost yellow, and expected their child to be born with a much lighter skin tone. As nature would have it, Bride, she Lula called herself, was full black skinned, 'blue black', probably a throwback to her ancestors. But both parents are in denial as to the throwback being from their respective families. This causes contention between the couple. Sweetness remembers how Bride's arrival broke their marriage.

My husband, Louis, ... looked at her like she was from the planet Jupiter... I knew we were in trouble. That's what did it – what caused the fights between me and him. It broke our marriage to pieces. We had three good years together but when she was born he blamed me and treated Lula Ann like she was stranger – more than that, an enemy.

He never touched her. I never did convince him that I ain't never, ever fooled around with another man. He was dead sure I was lying. We argued and argued till I told him her blackness must be from his own family – not mine. That's when it got worse, so bad he just up and left ... (Morrison 5)

## **Behaviour Detrimental to Marriage**

The couple engages in behaviour that could be detrimental to marriage – doubt, blame and lack of trust and forgiveness. Blacks have fought a war of races in which skin colour played the primary role. Human tendency to denigrate a person based on skin tone has been rather innate, and it took years of protest and efforts at acclimatization to overcome apartheid. With changing outlook, blacks started to find a foothold in the white nation. Eventually hybridisation of races led to evolution of a skin tone lighter than black but browner than white. This couple were themselves a descendent of black parentage, but a part of white blood in them found voice to put down their own child for being black. Instead of cherishing this child who is a reminder of their heritage, they show disgust. Louis leaves Sweetness on account of Bride, with suspicions of infidelity, yet after some point sends money in way of maintenance. Though Sweetness raises Bride, she is so embittered that she does not touch the child or involve in any of the motherly gestures. She makes Bride call her by name instead of 'mother' or 'mama'. "It was safer. Being that black and having what I think are too-thick lips calling me "Mama" would confuse people" (Morrison 6). This results in a lifetime estrangement of the mother and daughter. Bride plays her duty as a daughter by paying for Sweetness' maintenance at the elderly care home. Of note, Sweetness remains a self-righteous woman, justifying her decision to raise Bride the hard way and priding herself that this has what made Bride a successful woman.

## **Bad Marriage Gives a Bad Childhood to the Child Born Out of It - Sofia**

A bad marriage gives a bad childhood to the child born out of it. Bride pays the price for being born black many times in her life. Her father's estrangement and her mother's callousness give Bride a sense of despair and she determines to earn her mother's goodwill through any means. In order to get a feel of her mother's hands, she behaves in ways which invite slapping or spanking. Bride is happy to receive it which meant her mother is touching her, but Sweetness was careful

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not to do so and used other means of punishment. She is able to endear herself to her mother completely when she agrees to testify that Sofia the school teacher has abused children in her class. Though this is not true, Sweetness talks Bride into doing so which results in Sofia's conviction. Sofia is paroled after 15 years on the grounds of her exemplary behaviour in the jail.

Sofia, a teacher, has been wrongly accused by the children in her class for abuse, Bride being one of them. Sofia's family does not venture to stand by her and also believe that she must have committed the mistake. For the kind of holiness they exuded, they lacked the basic tenet of Christianity – forgiveness, though Sofia was innocent. Sofia observes about her family and their response to her incarceration thus:

... they never wrote, called or visited. I wasn't surprised. They were always hard to please. The family Bible was placed on a stand right next to the piano, where my mother played hymns after supper. They never said so, but I suspect they were glad to be rid of me. In their world of God and Devil no innocent person is sentenced to prison. (Morrison 68)

### **Prison Time**

Having had no exposure to books at home except the Bible and Christian literature, Sofia uses her prison time well to enhance her knowledge of books. Though she remembers her family with a biting bitterness, she attributes her calm, composed behaviour in the prison to this upbringing. Sofia remembers with regret how in an effort to escape her mother's imposing austerity she married Jack, "the first man who asked" her and ended up in "obedience, silence, a bigger blue-and-white corner" (Morrison 76). The punishments she received for wetting her underwear or playing with boys just got extended into her marriage life through her husband. Sofia's life is thus one sordid account of identity loss, in both the maternal and the matrimonial houses.

### **Bride**

Bride visits Sofia to assuage her guilt-stricken conscience, with some money and travel tickets to make up for the time of life lost in incarceration. Little did Bride realise the implication of this unmindful gesture and thereby invites severe physical violence from Sofia. Sofia is unhappy with unleashed display of her pent up emotions in the form of violence, quite in contrast to the quiet behaviour she had put up in the prison. Yet, she feels thankful to Bride for helping her get rid of the suppressed hurt and anger through this act. This enables her to take up the task of caring for the invalids with a peaceful heart and soul, and she devotes herself completely to this service claiming that thus she can heal the wounds she inflicted on Bride.

"...that black girl did do me a favor. Not the foolish one she had in mind, not the money she offered, but the gift that neither of us planned: the release of tears unshed for fifteen years. No more bottling up. No more filth. Now I am clean and able" (Morrison 70).

### **Bride and Booker**

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Bride's pursuit of her boyfriend Booker, who leaves her unannounced to an unknown destination leads to meeting a family in the woods, the couple Steve-Evelyn and their adopted daughter Rain. Steve and Evelyn have distanced themselves from the urban lifestyle and live on simple resources of the nature around them. The couple shares a quiet relationship between them and exists in harmony with nature. They can be perceived as people who have run away from the harsh realities of life. Their inability to hear about Rain's past seems to stem from the fact that they are in denial about the existence of the gruesome facts of life. Rain remarks about them, "Evelyn is real good to me and so is Steve but they frown or look away if I say stuff about how it was in my mother's house or if I start to tell them how smart I was when I was thrown out" (Morrison 104). Their uneventful life is too mundane even to Rain who had survived an abusive mother. Rain's mother, a prostitute, had no qualms asking her daughter to engage in prostitution. On refusal and revolt, Rain runs away. Nothing is known or mentioned of Rain's father. These psychologically deranged people had contributed an innocent child to the world and filled its childhood with neglect, abuse and hate. Rain develops an aversion to the cops also, terming them 'pigs' and tries to avoid being 'rescued' by them. Apart from her mother and the cops, she has to keep at bay the inappropriate comments made by the boys of the locale, with reference to her parents. "Hey, Rain. Who's your mammy?" (Morrison 105). Bride feels for the fact that though Sweetness hated her, she never abandoned Bride unlike Rain's mother.

Booker and Bride shared a relationship which cannot be comprehended by outsiders. She practically had no knowledge of Booker's life and activities when not with her. This seemed to be good for her but she is taken aback when he leaves unannounced. It is later understood that Booker had been uncomfortable with Bride's plans to visit Sofia with gifts. Booker, obviously, did not know the part Bride had in Sofia's conviction, and himself a sibling of a victim, abused and murdered by a child abuser, is disgusted by the fact that Bride wants to meet Sofia (convicted for child abuse). This error in understanding each other leads to a rift between the lovers, but with perseverance, Bride wins back her love. When Booker loses his brother Adam to sexual abuse and brutal murder, he is unable to come to terms with it.

"Bald. Normal-looking. Probably an otherwise nice man-they always were. The "nicest man in the world," the neighbors always. "He wouldn't hurt a fly." Where did that cliché come from? Did it mean he was too tender to take the life of a disease-carrying insect but could happily ax the life of a child? (Morrison 111).

His inability to cope and his reaction to the loss irk his own family members who have taken things in stride and moved on. Booker hates his family for doing so. He suggests a scholarship be established in Adam's name in memory, which is met with criticism from his father and siblings. "Booker had been raised in a large, tight family with no television in sight" (Morrison 111). Such was Booker's upbringing, strict, with no external entertainment, and the only reading materials were the newspapers. He is hurt at a deeper level and it evokes emotions in him which are not quite normal. Disgruntled, after an argument with his father, he leaves the house. He is touched by his aunt Queen's gesture at Adam's funeral who suggests holding on to Adam's memory until time is right to let go.

After many adventures, Bride finally discovers Booker's location and finds that he lives near his aunt Queen in Whiskey. After confessions and affirmations on part of both the lovers, they reconcile with little help from Queen. Queen had quite an adventurous marital life with different husbands and their many children. "She had a last name that no one remembered since she was rumored to have had many husbands – one a Mexican, then two white men, four black men, one Asian, but in a sequence, no one recalled" (Morrison 117). Yet, she finds herself a lonely woman with only memories to fend for herself. Bride ponders that "All those husbands and still all alone" (Morrison 147). She has children from these different marriages and keeps track of their lives too. "Two live with their fathers and their new wives; two in the military – one a marine, one in the air force; another one, my last, a daughter, is in medical school. She's my dream child. The next to last is filthy rich somewhere in New York City. Most of them send me money so they don't have to come see me." (Morrison 147). Queen suffers the guilt of ignoring this dream child, Hannah's complaints regarding her husband's abusive behaviour. This is why she supports Booker in his remembrance of Adam as an honour to the victim and a remainder for reckoning.

### **Sweetness and Queen**

Sweetness and Queen prove to be mothers who have sidelined their daughters' needs for basic understanding and recognition. As a result, they both suffer estrangement. Their relationship with their husbands is tumultuous in ways afflicting the children. Their daughters show financial concern as if paying the debts of motherhood and do not intend to pay in kindness. This cannot be found fault owing to the precious amount of childhood wasted due to the callousness of the parents and their domestic hassles.

### **All Families Touched by Domestic Violence**

Domestic violence has touched all of these families in different proportions, but the end result has always been the same – a hurt child. Sofia's and Booker's families were typical Christian households without the overt noisy attributes of many socially downtrodden families, but their encounter with disturbing events and their reaction to that creates ripples in the minds of the children and violence emerges. Sofia's violent outburst on Bride comes with years of suppression of true emotions. Similarly, Booker's reaction to abuse is quite violent, as if in retribution to Adam's murder. Bride and Rain are part of broken families with a fair share of abuse and denigration from their own mothers and the unspoken curse of absent fathers. Bride and Rain outgrow the pain afflicted by their parents in crude but constructive manner and display resilience for external situation. Sofia and Booker on the other hand display explosive reactions, probably due to their innocence and the fact that they had no role in the abusive situation and the victimisation.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, *God Help the Child* parades substantial hopefulness. There is no doubt that the psychological and emotional childhood scars that inhabit this narrative are somehow finally fixed. Most of the main characters, true survivors of child abuse, experience a purifying transformation in their lives. Rain finds in the hippy couple the possibility of growing up and healing from her childhood wounds. All the characters of Morrison one way or another, carry the

burden of childhood pain: “[A] set of connections, which extend from her [Bride] to Booker and on to a semi-feral girl named Rain [. . .]: a cycle of abuse, of molestation” (Ulin, 2015). Morrison “carefully explores the nature of victimhood and the consequences of domestic violence through a series of fascinating and believable narrators.” (Iqbal, 2015). Toni Morrison does not hide from exposing the severe realities children face, and how the traumatic past is constantly shaping their lives. *God Help the Child* is a tribute to all the myriad victims of domestic violence, an ongoing shocking drama that does not have an end. She returns to questions of race and manages to lay bare how much slavery and its legacy still today impact blacks’ lives, uncovering the emotional and psychological chokehold their histories have on them.

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