

OF PSYCHO-EMOTIONAL TRAUMA: THE PROTECTOR BECOMES A PREDATOR IN ZELDA LOCKHART'S FIFTH BORN

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ABSTRACT

Black feminism introduces a new mode of reading and listening to trauma fiction. This article engages trauma theory through Black Literature allowing to refine and address crucial problems concerning the representation of trauma and strategies of survival amid patriarchal society. The study focuses centrally on persuasive depiction of a troubled childhood reflecting on the phenomena of abusive parenting and sexual violation resulting in psychological and emotional trauma. The conduct of the father is also examined for he not only is a perpetrator as he satisfies his lust by abusing his daughter but goes one step below by becoming a predator as he misses no chance to suppress her. This contemporary literary incest-narrative searches for causes of wounds and chaos in the life of a silenced and abused child. The narrative demonstrates how masculinity is used as a means of oppression in human interrelations along with the tragic endeavour of the protagonist who struggles to attain integrity while coping with disgrace and loneliness.

Keywords: Father; Love; Open; Pain; Trauma;

1. Introduction

Black woman's marginalization is vividly portrayed in American literature. Black woman has always suffered from male control, pressure, and suppression in

and outside the family. Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born*, is taken as one of the black American's literary masterpieces and one of the most outstanding works of contemporary literature of black feminism which focuses on absolute male-domination and woman's quest for basic human-rights and dignity.

Zelda Lockhart is a contemporary African-American writer, her debut novel *Fifth Born* (2002) won a finalist award from the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Foundation. A talented writer and public speaker, who lives in North Carolina where she lectures and facilitates a variety of workshops to empower individuals to self-define themselves through the process of writing. *Fifth Born* is set in Mississippi and Missouri in 1970s which deals with a harrowing theme of family violence and abuse. It is a sensitive and vivid account told from the perspective of school going girl, Odessa Blackburn.

2. Literature Review

Zelda Lockhart holds a PhD in Expressive Arts Therapies, an MA in Literature and a certificate in writing, directing and editing from the New York Film Academy. In 2019, Lockhart did extensive research on healing of trauma victims. She concludes her research in following words, "Further examination into the healing transformation of biblio-fusion expressed by participants in this study, may provide an extension of narrative method through which to explore intergenerational healing, an under-researched goal of Black feminist womanist theory. Life stories passed down to the next generation of Black girls, like passing down antibodies through the umbilical cord, mean the next generation might benefit from the manner in which the wounds of the previous Black mothers were healed. Such methods may have the ability to equip Black women with individualized artistic tools to stop the inertia of multigenerational trauma set in motion for Black women as a result of the Transatlantic slave trade" (2019, 177).

In an interview to Smith Mckoy, published in Obsidian the writer acknowledges, "Yeah, my own history, my family is very steeped in secrets. It's part of our family legacy. For whatever reason, I was born the child in my family that everybody just wanted to be quiet; don't ask any questions. So, I was very quiet growing up but I paid attention to everything, a lot like Odessa. A lot of her history is a mix of my story, other people's stories, and just things that I've heard from other peoples pasts about how the secrets in the family really made it complicated as adults to be able to move on with certain issues in their lives or be able to go back and figure out some things that have gone on so they can move forward" (2007, 138).

Factually African American women are raped at a 20% higher rate than white women, Latinas, and Asian/Pacific Islanders (Miller, 2023, 13). According to the Violence Policy Center (2017), African American women are two and a half times more likely to be murdered by the men they know.

Magdalena Łapińska (2020) explores the correlation between geography and emotion in Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born*. The article attempts to illustrate the connection of the city and the country to the characters' abuse, with the role of urban and non-urban areas in African American literature. The theory of Emotional Geography is linked with geographical spaces and emotions. Therefore, the article focuses on the significance of the main character's repeated escapes from the city and her shifting perception of the city and the country. The abuse of the character is analyzed in light of the role that the city and the countryside play at certain points in the story. The investigation provides an illustration of the view that Zelda Lockhart rebels against the traditional roles of urban and rural areas in African American literature. While Natasha Thomas (2021) writes an article titled "How do you play when you're prey? A personal exploration into black creative healing" in which she articulates, "Zelda is a renowned author and has been described as a literary 'midwife'" for she helps other Black Women to explore "personal plot" to process their own lived experiences and traumas. (6)

Lockhart's *Fifth Born* has not been examined intensively by the scholars. This enabled the researcher to recognize the gap which the present research is going to fill up. This research seeks to identify how a father victimizes an unfortunate child who is born out of hatred.

3. Research Methodology

Qualitative method of research is used to examine the selected text. The primary text chosen to conduct the research is *Fifth Born* by Zelda Lockhart. This study has adopted an expository stance for analysis of effects of abusive parenting and sexual violation which consequently result in psychological and emotional trauma. Descriptive and exploratory research design is used to answer the following research questions:

- How the father victimizes the helpless child in the selected text?
- Which survival strategies does Odessa engage to forget the tormenting memories of inhuman incidents?

4. Theoretical Framework: Incest

Incest is a sin in Christianity and socially a crime but people remained silent about it for centuries. It is because it brings shame to the male members of the family and mars the reputation of the family in the community. Elizabeth Barnes (2002) records that before 1975, there were just thirty works on the subject of incest but from 1975 to 1998 about eighty books were published. In recent years much work has come to the forefront due to the rise in feminism. In *Introduction to Incest and the Literary Imagination*, Barnes traces the tradition of incest about which she believes that it has been a domain of social scientists but scholars in humanities have recently analyzed cultural meanings of trauma, incest, narratology, memory and history. She takes the names Afro-American writers: Maya Angelo,

Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker are the ones who made incest as a central subject of their work. This book covers a wide range of time-periods from medieval to contemporary era employing a variety of methodological approaches.

The afflicted women are silenced through oppression and marginalization which results in turning them voiceless. In a state of voicelessness, it becomes challenging to express the psychological trauma which by its nature is *unspeakable* narrative of the victim. Black woman writers are the first to highlight the serious issue of domestic violence, especially incest, which is kept secret to save the perpetrator from disgrace and family name from humiliation. Maya Angelou's autobiography *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (1969) and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) are the first two writings through which women reacted to the physical and psychological harm being brought to them by their blood relations.

Talking about incest, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong says that incest incessantly repeats in African-American tradition not because it is supported by black culture but because it is an appropriate metaphor of a "subjugated group powerless to change the larger society would turn on itself" (1993, 43). Pierce-Baker highlights "uncanny silence surrounding the trauma of black rape" (2000, 18), a void because the survivors have closeted themselves. She tends to suggest that black women must learn to unveil their pain by trusting others to restore their sanity. One of the causes of silence of black women is that they want to preserve the racial pride. She also incorporates voices of men who have supported raped females to create a sense of community which generated self-love among survivors.

Similarly in *Telling Incest*, Janice L. Doane and Devon L. Hodges think that by mid 1990s women's incest stories drew the attention of litterateurs. They defined incest in relation to "historical contexts, cultural politics, and kinds of reception" (2001, 2). It is argued that the experience of incest, which is a heinous crime and an evil act, must be acknowledged as true not as a narrative based on false memory. But unfortunately the survivors are accused as lairs, seducers, hysterics and victims. These writers have shifted the blame of incest from black family to the violence of a paternalistic white culture. Appreciating the liberating role of literature, Monica Michlin asserts that literacy gives empowerment as it changes the world of the writer and affects the reader's consciousness too. She thinks that "sexual abuse, poverty, illiteracy and racist white gaze" (2006, 178) are inter-related. The writer makes us "see those whom society continues to consider as ugly, contemptible, exploitable and disposable, as *precious* human beings" (2006, 184) (emphasis in original). Commenting on the reason of appearance of incest narratives, Gillian Harkins writes,

The rise of small feminist and lesbian presses made publication accessible for women who had previously been excluded from mainstream presses, and success of a few best sellers made even mainstream publishing possible for a select group of women. Once the publishing industry grasped the

possibilities of this new market, more and more women were empowered to speak out and contradict the masculinist silencing of incest in print. (2009, 3)

5. Textual Analysis

The narrative is told from the perspective of a three year old Odessa whose world occupies her father, Bernice and the memories of her dead grandmother. Odessa finds her father most of the time drunk and dirty, she feels that there is “dullness behind his eyes from so much wanting and not enough getting” (Lockhart, 2002, 15). These lines act as a flash forward as they tell the lustful nature of her father, whose eyes have grown dull because of constant greed. She is certain that there is a “hint of evil” (Lockhart, 2002, 15) which reminds her of *dolls* whose eyes never close even at the fall of darkness. She associates her father to dolls who are lifeless and heartless but give a false impression of living beings, which remain awake even at night-time like evil powers of the universe.

5.1 Violence by the Father & Mercilessness of Bernice

One night, her father returns home deeply drunk. The mother does not let him come in the bedroom in fear that he may wake up the baby-boy so he sneaks into the room of Odessa, who is trying to sleep. He first takes hold of her favorite rag doll which her grandmother has given, squeezes it and then forces himself on her. He covers her small face with his large oily and sweaty hand so that no sound may come out of her mouth. A child of five cannot make out what and why the father is doing this to her. She not only undergoes trauma but gets extremely confused. Due the weight of an adult and extreme physical pain, she feels as if “[she] floated there in the void between awake and sleep” (Lockhart, 2002, 38). In state of unconsciousness, she takes refuge in the “lap” (Lockhart, 2002, 38) of her grandmother who has given her a rag doll which is made up of all her quilts suggesting that she will always be there with her no matter how harsh the circumstances will be. She can hear the grandmother’s voice which “trailed off as [she] watched the white puff of clouds sailed past the moon, the rhythm of her chair consoling [her] into a deep sleep” (Lockhart, 2002, 38). The wound of Odessa is an open wound because the caretaker, Bernice, is sleeping in next room. She must have been listening to the muffled sounds of the child but she lets the husband satisfy his lustful desire and completely ignores the trauma of the child.

The father behaves like no less than a predator, a wild animal as he wipes off his hand on child’s shirt. He treats her inhumanly by holding up the exhausted child and putting her down with her face downward on the bed. He tells her forcefully to keep her mouth shut, as mostly incestuous fathers do. She wants to cry because the physical pain multiplies with the emotional shock and psychical trauma but the fear of the father is not letting any sound come out of her mouth. Though she cannot make out what has happened to her but she wishes to die like an insignificant creature, earthworm, as she wishes her “body should curl into itself

over and over until [she] disappear[s]” (Lockhart, 2002, 38). In the morning, when the father is sitting on the dining table for breakfast, Odessa feels the voice of her father “throb[s] inside [her] ear” (Lockhart, 2002, 39). The word *throb* is associated with pain as it is not a smooth feeling. His ruthlessness has left a permanent mark on Nakie’s face along with Odessa’s mind and body. She uses the word *ripping* for the predator’s inhuman act. She literally feels that the father has torn her apart using the doll as a tool, the memoir of grandmother which she cherishes, as it helps her to withstand the pressures of life. The blood stained Nakie has lost her identity as it has become an ugly reminder of the painful encounter with her father so she throws it away. She is facing intense trauma. Trauma, Leys explains, is “originally the term for a surgical wound, conceived on the model of a rupture of the skin or protective envelope of the body resulting in a catastrophic global reaction in the entire organism” (2000, 19). She covers her entire blood stained body with the bed sheet and wishes to become one with inanimate objects of the room.

5.2 Hallucinations & Intrusive Thoughts

She is hallucinated as she still feels the pressure of her father’s hand on her face due to which she cannot resist or make a noise. Victims of trauma are fated to re-experience the menacing event repeatedly, not in actuality, but through hallucinations. Though the incident happened last night but it is fresh on her mind as it has stopped in time and has become an ongoing process. The characteristic of trauma is that it is “an overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled, repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena” (Caruth, 1996, 11). It is disturbing for her to find herself cold and sticky so to divert her attention she looks out of the window and finds consolation in the natural world. She watches the movement of the turtle which helps in relaxing her. Her breathing gets steady. As a survival strategy, she looks deep into her imaginative world thinking about change of seasons. On hearing father asking for another serving of wine from Bernice while sitting in the next room, she still finds herself trembling.

The entire incident makes Odessa so disturbed that she starts seeing strange nightmares in which she finds grandmother shoveling in the garden but instead of finding last year’s bulbs she finds body-parts of dead people. When Odessa calls her, it appears as if the grandmother cannot hear her because she does not give any response to her. She keeps on digging oblivious of the fact that she is harming the graves. The traumatic state of Odessa is reflected in the following lines:

I allowed my mind to step gently into the darkness of my memories. I was five, but I couldn’t remember, and so I ran through the songs, images of those days with still nothing but almost audible shadows, objects biting and pinching at my insides. (Lockhart, 2002, 91)

Repeated thoughts do not leave Odessa. She has been struggling with her previous episode of trauma when again father assaults her. This time he does it in broad daylight using shrieks of his leather belt. Odessa is embarrassed not of herself but she is thinking of her younger brother Jessie in whose presence this assault is going on. She is thinking of his little mind which will be filled up by confused memories of her bruised sister. When people ask Bernice about Odessa's open and obvious wounds, Bernice hides the sin of her husband by saying that she has fallen from many steps down to the basement. In Odessa's tormenting memories, she is still going through pain of her previous incident; now the father has unbelievably assaulted her second time. Last time he has been drunk and in sheer madness and oblivion of beer which he has taken in abundance, the destructive act has taken place. This time, it is a very conscious act of the father and there is resistance on the part of Odessa too because now she is comparatively older and stronger than the last time. This time the only sound that she hears is that of her heartbeat, while her hands have tightly covered her ears. Her inside is screaming but no sound is coming out of her mouth. She has become a vivid example of trauma which is defined,

as the exposure to life-threatening experiences (actual or perceived) where a person is faced with overwhelming feelings of helplessness and terror at the possibility of annihilation: life and death moments, accompanied by abandonment, isolation, hopelessness, shame, and invisibility. These include experiences that engender a fear of disintegration and threaten a person's psychic survival far beyond the moment of actual threat. (Benamer, 2006, 2)

5.3 Survival Strategies

Strategically, she numbs herself and imagines flying away over rooftops and reaches the academic atmosphere of her classroom where she is sitting silently with her head down on her desk. She goes into a state of semi-consciousness for the trauma is too heavy to withstand. In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra writes, "Trauma brings about a dissociation of affect and representation: one disorientingly feels what one cannot represent; one numbingly represents what one cannot feel" (2014, 42). When she gets back to consciousness, the house is filled up with filthy stinking smell of her father's evil deed. She feels as if some heavy weight is pressing her lungs. Putting her hand on her mouth she cries quietly on her helplessness and vulnerability. Her bruised thighs again remind her of the death of Leland, as it can be said about painful memories that "some memories are fixed in the mind and are not altered by the passage of time . . ." (Van der Kolk, 1995, 172). She has not yet forgotten the last incident as it keeps

reverberating within her mind, and now sorrowfully this incident has taken place for the second time.

The way in which Odessa is behaving is a characteristic strategy employed by incest survivors. She says, “I wanted to be numb, to wash myself and not care about what had happened, to look at Deddy and better at the game of forgetting than he was, look him in the eyes. . .” (Lockhart, 2002, 111). Only by behaving in this manner, she can move on, otherwise she will collapse as many daughters do when they are raped by their fathers. Now the painful memories of her life are increasing with the passage of time. The father is victimizing her; he is scapegoating her in quest for regeneration, as LaCapra says, “It is important to investigate the role of victimization in history as well as of a scapegoating, quasi-sacrificial construction of it which is linked to a quest for regeneration or redemption through violence” (2014, 219), on the contrary “empathy is the counterforce to victimization,” (2014, 219). The present sorrow has added to the first sorrow of falling down from her baby bed with her Nakie doll and receiving bruise on her left eye, the second one being assaulted by her father when he was deeply drunk, the third painful memory is the father killing his real brother with a knife in his own house and finally the present incident comes as a death blow to her.

5.4 Invasive Feelings of Loss and Failure

With the help of church songs, she pushes herself to the bathroom to wash away the dirt from her body. She is turned all black and blue because there are bruises and cuts all over her body. She has to wash off the wickedness of her father with hot water and she is doing it repeatedly as she thinks that the stinking smell of her father has touched her soul. She is so mentally disturbed that she says, “I had lost track of time” (Lockhart, 2002, 112). She covers all her bruises by her dress but what to do with the face. Just as Bernice has used the carpet to cover the blood stains of Leland similarly Odessa also uses the rug of the room to cover the dampness of her father’s evil deed. Incidentally Gretal comes in, so she poses to be very normal though her body is “clenched in pain” (Lockhart, 2002, 112). She remembers Bernice, who also after the aggressive attitude of her husband, used to hide her bruises and try to remain in darkness so that no one can see bruises on her body. The memory of father’s hairy chest and other body parts “all swirled in [her] aching head” (Lockhart, 2002, 116).

Odessa tries her best to hide her anxiety and fear, especially before her father. When, one day, father brings hunted rabbits to home and forces her to cut, she does it boldly and defiantly. He tells it in a very meaningful tone that hunting someone is not an easy job. He very clearly relates his stance “if you want to eat, you got to kill” (Lockhart, 2002, 130). These words tell his cruel attitude towards Odessa. He has literally destroyed her peace of mind for the sake of temporary enjoyment. She cannot really concentrate on any other matter of life. She does not

think about her school, her teachers and friends but all the time her mind is centering on one idea, the destruction his father has brought to her life; and how she can strategically manage to avoid his presence by keeping herself distanced from his evil hands. She says, “[f]or the rest of that winter and the following spring I managed to stay out of Deddy’s way” (Lockhart, 2002, 133). Now she is growing young but the beauty of life is not attracting her attention instead she says that she window-shopped to escape the dreariness she felt inside the house”, where the smell of Leland’s blood couples with her father’s stench. This fills her mind with confusion and listlessness. The father’s repeated attacks have made her life *dreary*, a feeling of which children of her age are completely unaware of. Her elder siblings have won scholarships of Mississippi State University but her mind is ruminating on the painful thoughts of her physical destruction, Leland’s blood and the ways of avoiding her father to prevent any other incident of serious nature. While thinking about her life she says, “[w]ith Deddy I had learned to stay out of the way, but I had craved Mama’s touch since the time I knew words, before walking and crawling” (Lockhart, 2002, 136). Avoiding her father and wishing the love of her mother has become a dilemma of her life. She is all the time switching between these two codes of life. She feels so much anger for her father that she imagines to hide the bottles of beer under the seat of the car to create trouble for him. These are just fantasies as practically she cannot speak before him. These are just wishful thoughts which she imagines to relieve herself of the pain. She considers her father to be responsible for the pain that she experiences. Such assaults damage self-worth of the victim as they “may contribute to shame and related feelings that range from embarrassment to mortification and humiliation. These instigators include feeling incompetent, stupid, damaged, defective, dirty, exposed, small, weak, out of control, powerless, helpless, unloved and unlovable” (Allen, 2005, 70). These fantasies are playing positive role as they are not letting her lose mental balance.

5.5 The Burden of Voicelessness

The protagonist is feeling so low for the inhuman action of her father that she is feeling sorry for what she is. People are generally proud of their identity but she is feeling bad about it, her existence and even her life. She wants to run away like a slave who breaks all the shackles of slavery to enjoy life with full freedom. The slave is ready to do anything. He is ready to risk his life for the sake of freedom similarly her life among Blackburns is too suffocating and she also wants to run away at the cost of her life. She sorrowfully thinks, “I felt sorry for who I was” (Lockhart, 2002, 139). The presence of *Deddy* is not only stifling but is also getting on her nerves, that is why to avoid her nervousness she is counting the drops of rain and the keys of piano. Instead of finding relaxation with rainwater she feels as if her “mind got noisy with rain” (Lockhart, 2002, 139). The escape into the imaginative world is essential as the pressure of the situation is getting very intense so she decides to run away far from the humiliating environment. As she

runs away in trees, she remembers Leland's arm lowering to pick her up. Whatever little interaction she has with Leland, she feels closer to him because of his love and care which he expresses for her. She cannot erase this idea from her mind that such a gentleman has been killed by his father over which he has never felt regret. She feels herself so traumatized that while going to Mississippi she "wanted so desperately to disappear" (Lockhart, 2002, 153). She finds the rest of the family happy. She is the only one among the family who is restless and enjoys no peace of mind and no physical security. She runs away in search of peace of mind but fears how her parents might react when she will return. She apprehends that the mother will slap and whip her "with a green switch from behind the house" (Lockhart, 2002, 154), while the father will beat her like as she is his wife and treat her like a prey he has hunted.

Ella Mae, her real mother, in the very first meeting asks the young girl of twelve that what is ailing her to which she replies "Family supposed to be good to you, but they be the main ones to keep you chained up and scared to death" (Lockhart, 2002, 155). She says this while keeping her head down so that the listener might not see the water coming from her nose. To this Ella-Mae replies, "And when your own kin hurts you, it hurt worse than the same transgression comin[sic] from other folk" (Lockhart, 2002, 155).

6. Conclusion

This incest narrative focuses on a disturbed childhood of Odessa who is traumatized by abusive parenting and sexual assaults. She searches for causes of wounds but is unable to get the clue till the end of the novel. Thinking about her relationship with her father she considers herself to be as weak and helpless as a hunted rabbit which the father brings to home to rip apart ruthlessly, separating the skin from the flesh and bones, cutting the non-eatables part away, dumping the waste in backyard and then waiting for it to be cooked and eaten up by him. He is a hunter outside his home and a predator that misses no chance to harass and molest his own child inside his home. She struggles hard to wrestle with his absolute domination but finds herself exhausted so decides to run away disregarding the consequences of the escape. The painful absence of love makes her run far away which fortunately unites her with her real mother. She is released from captivity of silence and absence of love. From the life of servitude, disgrace and loneliness she goes into the loving arms of her mother who owns her unlike her father whose sadist behavior is affecting her mental health.

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