



**Who Caused the Trauma of Emily and Pecola?
Childhood Abuse in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and
Morrison's *The Bluest Eye***

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Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to re-read Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to investigate the abusive forces that cause respectively Emily's and Pecola's traumas. This is not a comparative paper, it seeks to examine each text separately in the light of trauma theory and children trauma theory, specifically Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*. Also, the paper will explore how trauma symptoms (as sleep disorder-C-PTSD-helplessness-asthma-avoidance...) echo the degree of abuse intensity. The tackled works show that abuse may happen in an undeliberate manner because of the abuser's ignorance, lack of experience, harsh economic conditions or because the abuser himself/ herself is a victim of abuse. The rationale behind choosing these texts is that both literary texts speak about two girls as victims of abuse and neglect because of their family and society. It is very crucial to see how abuse shatters their identities. Also, both works expose different types of abuse (physical, social and psychological). Moreover, the severity of trauma symptoms for both Emily and Pecola is decided according to their abuse intensity. The paper discloses both the sensitivity of the abuse issue and the deliberate intention of many social institutes (as school and marriage) to hide abusive practices and silence the abused. As Zeinab Monir says, "Traumatic narratives are often silenced and repressed by the social norms that resist any tendencies to disgrace the society" (729).

Key words: Trauma theory, children trauma theory, abuse

Who Caused the Trauma of Emily and Pecola? Childhood Abuse in Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Introduction:

Family is responsible for molding children to be healthy, stable individuals. It is the family structure that directly influences children to be socially accepted members. Jane Anderson in her article, "The impact of family structure on the health of children" stresses how crucial it is for a child to grow up in a stable family, secure home with loving biological parents. (378) Sherie Newman adds in "The Importance of Self-Esteem" that both family and school are responsible for the development of the self-esteem of children. Ana Don Brown mentions in her article, "Children's Self-Esteem and Parental Influence" that children develop their attitudes and character traits from the way their parents treat them. They also reflect on the life they live with their parents. "Parents are the gatekeepers of negative and positive self-talk. ...children are not born with negative or positive self-talk" (Brown 1). The "gatekeeper" refers to parents' powerful influence to shape their children's personality, either positively or negatively. Parents have the authority to channel what to affect their children. Both family and social institutes are the main factors in shaping children.

Tillie Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* were selected for this paper because both texts portray the struggle of two girls as victims of physical, social and emotional abuse and neglect. Both texts manifest the damaging impact of both family and social institutes on the two girls. The two literary works display how trauma symptoms of both Emily and Pecola echo their abuse intensity. Abuse, in both texts, starts early at home and it becomes life-threatening till it shatters their identities.

It is essential to the paper's argument to define abuse and neglect. According to the American School Counselor Association's Position Statement: Child Abuse, (ASCA, 1999) abuse is "the infliction of physical harm upon the body of a child by other than accidental means, continual psychological damage or denial of emotional needs". On the other hand, neglect means "the failure to provide necessary food, care, clothing, shelter, supervision or medical attention for a child" which means "lacking adequate supervision... irregular/illegal absences from school" (1). While abuse means applying physical, emotional or psychological harm to the child, neglect means caregivers' failure to provide the child with essential needs to survive and thrive. Abuse contains aggressive performances, but neglect refers to indifference and carelessness of the caregivers.

Children's emotional abuse, sometimes, happens as a result of parents' casting personal issues on them. Parents who are indulged in "relationship difficulties" (Kumari 597) fail to provide the children with their needs. In Tower Crosson's words, those parents will make children feel "worthless, flawed, unloved, unwanted" (62). Emotional abuse doesn't only stop at downgrading the child, but it extends to complete rejection and child discrimination. The pressure of emotional abuse will trigger physical symptoms as "speech disorders"(18), asthma and types of allergies.

The main aim of this paper is to re-read Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to question the abusive forces that cause respectively Emily's and Pecola's traumas. This is not a comparative paper, it examines each text separately in the light of trauma theory and children trauma theory, specifically Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery*. Also, the paper seeks to identify the relation between trauma symptoms (as sleep disorder-C-PTSD-helplessness-asthma-avoidance...) and abuse intensity. Another inquiry of the paper is about the abuser himself/herself. How far is the abuser conscientious of his abuse? In other words, is the abuser aware of the dreadful impact on the victim when inflicting abuse? Moreover, what are the factors that may create an abuser?

Trauma Theory:

James Berger asks the following relevant question that requires an answer: "why...should there be such interest in trauma?" (571), trauma represents a very sensitive topic due to the spread of numerous inexplicable, abusive deeds, family rupture, and violence crimes as a result of childhood trauma. Researching trauma helps social institutes to recognize reasons of trauma and the possibility of prevention. Moreover, trauma studies highlight issues of abuse, neglect, violence and poverty. Fassin and Rechtman adequately argue that "Trauma has become a major signifier of our age... It is the scar that a tragic event leaves on an individual victim or on a witness – sometimes even on the perpetrator" (XI). The previous extract stresses that trauma, as a painful incident, is a characteristic of our age, and its impact may reach out from the victimized to the victimizer, and even to the eyewitness. The expansion of trauma's effect highlights the severe damage of traumatic incidents.

Trauma theory has best been investigated by many scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Michelle Balaev, and Dominick LaCapra. In her renowned book about trauma, *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth defines trauma as an "overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena" (181). Caruth believes that trauma's impact is not immediate, but is postponed to reappear with unpredictable, intense symptoms to "haunt the survivor later on"

(4). Trauma is more than a physical healable wound, it is, "a mental injury that is difficult to heal" (Monir 735). Add to this, Sarah Anderson believes that trauma is, "a reaction to events so terrible, so painful", (4), these extraordinary events are beyond the individual's mental comprehension.

Traumatic events may take varied responses, in Michelle Balaev's words, as "cognitive chaos and the possible division of consciousness" (150). The word "chaos" shows how trauma will mess up the life of traumatized people where "a traumatic event disrupts attachments between self and others" (149-150). In additions to the mess, traumatic incidents destroy the ties between the abused individual and his surroundings, which eventually alienates that individual into his/her lonely world. Still with Balaev, she underscores in her article "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered" that trauma happens with the collaboration of "social, semantic, political, and economic factors" (7-8). Trauma is not an isolated incident, it happens within a context of several surrounding elements. LaCapra provides an intriguing perspective about how trauma works as "reliving of trauma that collapses the past into the present, making it seem or feel as if it were more "real" and "present" than contemporary circumstances" (377). LaCapra refers to the persistent power of the traumatic experience to disorient and haunt the individual's present awareness, imprisoning it in the form of the past trauma that will be recognized as the only "real" truth.

So, the persistent occurrence of trauma will result in apparent symptoms as Noelle Smith mentions, "trauma symptoms have been shown to mediate the relation between the occurrence of traumatic events and NSSI" (Nonsuicidal Self-Injury) (41). Trauma symptoms are the middle stage between the traumatic incident and the "self-injury". And the intensity of these symptoms will vary according to the acuteness of the abuse. The symptoms will range from "Intense fear, helplessness, or horror, and clinically significant distress or impairment in one or more areas of functioning" (43) to "anger, disgust, guilt, shame" (44). Allen Meek adds that trauma symptoms may appear as "intrusive memories, nightmares, compulsive acting-out and flash-backs" (5). Trauma symptoms are mandatory to reflect the individual's severe conflict between "the necessity to remember" the traumatic incident and "the importance to forget ...its horrors" (Monir 725). Both "necessity" and "importance" refer to the urgency of symptoms to appear.

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (Children Trauma Theory)

Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) is a significant book about trauma in general and childhood trauma in particular. The book expands the scope to understand trauma and provides guidance on how to assist survivors in their healing process. Herman explains how traumatic incidents, "are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life", they evoke feelings of "helplessness and terror" (24).

Traumatic events engulf the life of ordinary individuals psychologically, physically, mentally and socially, leading to complex-post-traumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD). The following discussion will display the principal points in Herman's book in relevance to child abuse, then identify the salient features that will be employed in supporting the argument of the paper.

First, when Herman compared between repeated traumas in the life of children and adults, she explained that repeated trauma "in adult life erodes the structure of the personality already formed, but repeated trauma in childhood forms and deforms the personality" (70). Repeated trauma has a crucial influence that shapes and destroys children's personalities. When exposed to repeated abusive events the child will struggle to have "trust in people who are untrustworthy, safety in a situation that is unsafe, control in a situation that is terrifyingly unpredictable, power in a situation of helplessness" (70). Living in abnormal contradictions between what is there and what is supposed to be there, the child exerts efforts to cope with his abuse through unconscious defense mechanisms.

Second, the abused child's feelings of betrayal is another pivotal point in Herman's discussion. She describes feelings of a sexually abused girl where one of her parents is the abuser and the other witnesses abuse with no attempt to protect her. This leads the child to "feel that she has been abandoned to her fate" (73). The abused girl does not only feel parents' abandonment, but also the betrayal of caregivers who never protected her. This abandonment feeling is more harmful to the traumatized individual than the abuse incident itself because it is "a sign of indifference" or a "complicit betrayal" (73). In relevance to parents' betrayal of their duties towards the abused child, Herman adds that parents sometimes project their own issues on their own children and that what she called "parental scapegoating" (75), where a parent displaces his/her fury on a child as a scapegoat for the other parent's mistakes. "Scapegoating" is a kind of emotional manipulation of the abused child who will pay for mistakes he/she never commits.

Third, Herman stresses how childhood trauma will have long-term effects on the adulthood stage. When a child is exposed to series of abuse, he/she will struggle in adulthood with "normal sleep, eating... and abnormal pain perception" (Herman 134). The impact of child repeated abuse extends from physical symptoms to psychological manifestations. In addition, the abused child normally lacks emotional stability, swinging "between isolation and anxious clinging to others" (40), acting in an unpredictable, extremist fashion (from solitude to emotional dependency). So, children's abuse leads them, according to Herman, to "lose their trust in themselves, in other people, and in God. Their self-esteem is assaulted by experiences of humiliation, guilt, and helplessness" (40-41). The victim of childhood abuse loses personal value and

immerses himself/herself in vicious cycles of self-degradation and self-flagellation.

Fourth, trauma recovery takes a significant part in Herman's discussion. It goes through various stages as, establishing safe environment, reconstructing the trauma story, and reconnecting with others. Based on the numerous cases of abuse in her book, she highlights the power of community circles (health professionals, therapists, researchers, and caregivers) to support or hinder trauma victims' recovery, where the victim, "seeks assistance...from the wider community"(51). Moreover, the recovery speed depends on the community reception of traumatized individual, the recognition of trauma ,and acting accordingly. Herman advocates for the rights of trauma victims and recommends a culture that empowers and supports. She encourages individuals, communities, institutes, and decision makers to develop a more comprehensive and informed response to trauma, especially childhood trauma.

After the previous brief discussion of some significant points handled in Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery*, it is important to identify the salient concepts that will be employed in the paper. Herman's concepts of "parental scapegoating" (75) and the defense mechanisms of "automatic obedience" (72), "dissociative disorder symptom" (172), and avoidance will be applied in the discussion. In addition, insomnia and intimacy issues as trauma symptoms will also be utilized.

Emily's Abuse and the Price She Paid in Light of Herman's Perspective:

"I stand Here Ironing" is a short story that is written by Tillie Olsen in 1961. It is narrated by the mother who, while ironing, recounts her tumultuous relation with her daughter Emily and the limitless childhood challenges Emily faces. The analysis of the tale will mainly focus on how the complex abusive family dynamics and the tough societal circumstances and norms contribute to Emily's trauma. There is no doubt that Emily's abuse happens but the argument seeks to investigate factors that caused her abuse and the price she paid (represented in her trauma symptoms as insomnia and speech disorder), and how far is the mother conscientious of her abuse? In other words, is the mother aware of the dreadful impact on Emily when inflicting abuse? Moreover, what are the factors that may create an abuser? The discussion will rely on Herman's perspective in *Trauma and Recovery*.

The mother in the tale is the main abuser of Emily. As the mother opens the gates of the "storehouse of painful experiences," (Tyson 15) she releases her anger due to her husband's abandonment. Also, her sorrows at being obliged to repetitively leave Emily in many different places, without adequate motherly experience, to suffice food and shelter. The little Emily is frequently deserted with "clogged weeping that could not be comforted," weeping that the mother "can hear yet" (Olsen 77). The previous metaphor "clogged weeping" stresses

Emily's emotional trauma where her tears are obstructed because of emotional deprivation. The mother usually turns her back to the little Emily, leaving her to suffer alone. The consistent hearing of Emily's weeping reflects the mother's guilty conscience. So, the mother has a main hand in Emily's trauma. Further argument will prove if the mother deliberately abuses Emily or not.

The mother's abuse of Emily appears in the psychological distance she felt toward Emily who, after catching "chicken pox", has become an image of her father, "walking quick and nervous" like him (77). Emily, as such, turns out to be a constant reminder of the man who, unable to stand poverty, left the mother and the daughter alone during the tough time of America's Great Depression. Emily here stands for what Judith Herman calls "parental scapegoating" (75). She implicitly receives her mother's unconscious, displaced, abusive anger as a scapegoat of her father. As Kumari believes that parents will turn into abusers when, "facing relationship difficulties" (597). So, Emily's mom, unintentionally, abuses and releases her anger on her daughter, just because of Emily's resemblance to the absent father.

Additionally, the mother's "fierce rigidity" (76) and the constant failure to smile at Emily are signs of emotional abuse. When asked by her neighbor to "smile at Emily more when you look at her" the mother replies, "what was on my face when I looked at her?" (78). The mother's reply significantly proves her unawareness of the "stranger within" that "coexists" with what is familiar inside her, and compulsively dictates certain non-smiling gestures which "might be quite distressing but also compellingly unavoidable" (Rivkin 119). Her inability to show emotions simply reflects the absence of genuine motherly love towards Emily.

The abandonment of the biological father and the negligence of the inexperienced mother caused Emily's severe traumatic symptoms (the cost she paid). Jane Anderson states that, "children living with their married, biological parents consistently have better physical, emotional, and academic well-being" (378). Emily was not such a lucky child, she doesn't have a stable family life with her biological parents, that is why she becomes a victim of emotional abuse. Such emotional abuse is reflected in physical symptoms, as Tower Crosson adds, that "Physical symptoms include (a) speech disorders; (b) delayed physical or emotional development; and (c) ulcers, asthma, or severe allergies" (18). Physically, Emily struggles with weight loss and she is always vulnerable to diseases as "fever" and "measles" and "asthma" (79). Emily's face, "is closed and somber" (Olsen 78-79), with no ability to smile, as if she has inherited her mother's coldness, and detachment. The hyperbole in "closed and somber" carries a symbolic reference to Emily's unreadiness to communicate with the outside world. Emotionally, Emily has "nightmares", insomnia, and bad "dreams"(80). Herman believes that those who suffer from "childhood abuse display significantly more insomnia" (88), Emily used to spend sleepless nights,

waiting and seeking her mother's closeness. Academically, Emily is a slow learner with low academic performance. She has what Crosson describes as "speech disorder" as "stammering and unsure" (86). These traumatic symptoms echo Emily's severe emotional abuse within her family.

Family, in Lois Tyson's words, is the determiner of the individual's conduct, because "we are each a product of the role we are given in the family-complex" (16). Then, what was the role given to Emily in her family? Because of the mom's obligation to work, Emily has always lived like an outcast or an object, moving helplessly between the houses of neighbors and those of relatives, between the nurseries and the convalescent home in a futile quest for comfort. She was always begging her mother to stay with her, "don't go Mommy" (78). Emily has been under acute emotional abuse, as deprived of fatherly love and care; she didn't even receive equal motherly care like her other siblings. Her mother nursed her according to the "book" and the "clock" (76). The intimate moment of nursing turned out to be a rigid situation, where the mother acts like a robot, fulfilling a task. Both "book...clock" are symbols of the mother's coldness and rigidity. Abusing her childhood, Emily is burdened with adults' duties in shopping and housekeeping. Frequently absent from school with her "homework not done," (86). According to the American School Counselor Association's Position Statement: "lacking adequate supervision... irregular/illegal absences from school" are considered signs of neglect from parents' side"(1). Emily did not receive from her mother the same guidance, care, and strictness that her other siblings (from another man) would receive if they did the same.

Emily, though emotionally abused, learns to perform what Herman describes as "automatic obedience" (72), which is an unconscious defense mechanism to reduce anxiety. Unlike her siblings, who had their "demands" (78), Emily experienced her emotional deprivations without "a direct protest" (78). She always obeys her mom's orders, repressing her anger much to the astonishment of her mother who asks, "what was the cost, the cost to her [Emily] of such goodness?" (78). Emily, in fact, paid a very high price. As Julia Rivkin and Michael Ryan explain the "relation between the child and its objects especially the mother, during the pre-Oedipal period" failed to shape Emily's "personality" or her "self-identity." Because the relation was "distant, cold, and frustrating", it consequently resulted in Emily's later failure to be separated from her mother. But how could Emily achieve the required separation if the "unity" itself has been "cold", "distant," and "frustrating"-virtually, nonexistent? (121) Having failed to achieve the proper identification with, then the separation from the mother, Emily remains fluctuating between two extremes, "isolation" or "anxious clinging to others" (Herman 40). It is an either or situation where to be either isolated from the outside world or to be emotionally dependent on others.

To protect her traumatized identity, Emily resorts to more defense mechanisms. Avoidance and fear of intimacy as, "psychological defenses" are

employed by Emily, "to compensate for the failures of adult care and protection" (Herman 70). Avoidance means to, "stay away from people or situations that are liable to make [her] anxious by stirring up some unconscious...repressed experience or emotion" (Tyson 18). Emily used to invent excuses to avoid going to school as, "Momma, you look sick. Momma, I feel sick. Momma, the teachers aren't there today, they're sick..., there was a fire there last night...it's a holiday today, no school" (78). Exposure to the outside world accelerates Emily's anxiety, fear, and helplessness. That is why she would prefer to be imprisoned in her cocoon of loneliness. Herman refers to "problems in intimacy"(91) as major symptoms that childhood trauma manifests. Emily's dire need for intimacy and attachment has mournfully taken another form, that is, fear of intimacy. Fear of intimacy, as a defense mechanism, is the "feeling that emotional closeness will seriously hurt or destroy us" (Tyson 16), and it is safer to stay emotionally detached from those who hurt us before. This is shown when the mother says, "I used to try to hold and love her...but her body would stay stiff, and after a while she'd push away" (82). The stiffness and the detachment of Emily's body are symptoms of her trauma. Due to her intense fear of getting involved in a relation that might end promptly, and due to her unstable sense of self, Emily develops defense mechanisms to protect her fragile self. with who hurt her before.

Another factor of Emily's emotional abuse is the unfair comparison between her and her half-sister Susan. While Susan is "golden and curly-haired and chubby, quick and articulate and assured," (84), Emily is "thin and dark and foreign-looking,... silent," (84), "stammering and unsure" (86). The appalling comparison between the two sisters is not only held by the family members, but by the whole society. What strengthens Emily's inferiority trauma is that she does not fit the society's white standard of beauty, where little girls must look like the white idol of beauty, Shirley Temple. Emily struggles to fit, and to be socially accepted, but the competition is ferocious because she will never fit the fashionable standard look. This comparison makes Emily feel like an outcast in her family and in her society with inferiority, anxiety and jealousy issues. Even when Emily distinguishes herself with her "rare gift for comedy," (79) this distinction, sorrowfully, became a short-lived one, as her gift is, "edged inside, clogged and clotted" (87). Due to Emily's psychological trauma, her comedy gift is obstructed and remains frozen like blood clots. But where does comedy come from? Jacqueline Garrick states that "traumatic survivors used humor to ease the traumatic events...to minimize stressful events"(Abstract 1). So, Emily's humor gift is a defensive attempt to cope with her trauma and reduce anxiety. But unfortunately, it did not save Emily because her trauma is far complicated. Also the objects Emily collects identify her emotional trauma and her attempts to give her life meaning as, "single earrings", symbolizing her loneliness, "bottle tops", identify her uselessness and low self-esteem, "dried flowers" (83), symbolize her inner dryness, and "shells" express her intense traumatic inner hollowness. All

items serve as Emily's substitutions for her loss of care, intimacy and an expression of inner emotional trauma.

The society's material conditions play a major role in the creation of Emily's trauma. The mother excuses her failure to comply with her tasks by stating that society is also responsible for her daughter's trauma. She asserts that she does not have the "key" to solve Emily's issues because they were mainly caused by the society's economic circumstances, by the forces, as the mother says, that are "outside of me, beyond me" (76). Emily, according to her mother, "is a child of her age, of depression, of war, of fear" (88). This is indicative of how the harsh economic circumstances during the American Great Depression (1929-1938) trigger fear and disappointment and Emily is one of its victims. Joseph Doyle stresses that, "Economic insecurity has been linked to poor coping strategies, including substance abuse" (87). For Doyle, economic tightness induces abuse, and this is exactly what happened in Emily's case. Poverty is the real reason behind their torment and behind Emily's trauma; her biological father abandons them because he cannot, as the mother says, "endure sharing want with us," (76). Then, she adds, "we were poor and could not afford for her the soil of easy growth" (88). Such repeated references to poverty explain the circumstances of the poor mother who is concerned only with her family survival. To emphasize that, Christina Paxson believes that "child maltreatment—including neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and other forms of maltreatment—is affected by parental economic circumstances" (abstract). So, a great part of Emily's trauma is a result of the economic situations, which are beyond the mother's control.

The society's failure to save Emily and her mother intensifies the trauma. The mother is overburdened by poverty, continuous quest for a job, and job exhaustion. Ironically enough is that society (with all its institutes), largely fails to make up for this: none of all the hands, that Emily was delivered to, was able to comfort her pains. The "nurseries...are only parking places for children," (77) the "convalescent home", where she is expected to get food and care "was a big failure, a place where "nothing ever tasted good" (82). Even the school was a failure: it is full of "overworked and exasperated teachers" (83). Emily's early neglect will for sure lead to her future expected failure as Elisa Romano clarifies that "Children who have experienced primarily neglect seem to have greater impairments in academic achievement" (420). If the mother's abuse happens without an intention, the society's abuse is deliberate and planned. As Olsen puts it, the society's "seeing eyes were few or nonexistent" (76). This refers to the sensitivity of the abuse issue and the deliberate conspiracy of many social institutes to hide abusive practices and to silence the abused. All the supposed to be caring institutions were, like the mother, suffering "the fatigue of the long day" (77). So, Emily is a victim of all these dysfunctional institutes.

Emily has never had an equal chance, either inside or outside the home. The severity of Emily's trauma symptoms echoes the intensity of her abuse. Home



complexities and the society's dictations (both are reflections of each other) have entombed her identity and jointly had her "loveliness gone" (77) and her "rare gift for comedy" (79) "edded inside, clogged and clotted" (87). She, therefore, recoils into sleep: "don't get me up with the rest in the morning." Emily's escapism is another symptom of her trauma, she gives up on life, with no passion to survive. Noelle Smith mentions, "helplessness" as one of trauma's symptoms (43). Emily feels helpless in the face of all the abusive factors that traumatized her as she says to her mom, "in a couple of years when we'll all be atom-dead" (87-88). The mother does not seem aware of the dreadful impact of her neglect on Emily, her abuse of Emily happens out of the mom's ignorance, lack of experience, and harsh economic conditions. The mother herself is a victim of abuse (from both husband and society). Emily surrenders forever to the inner and outer forces. That is why the mother, in the last line of the tale, asks the school counselor (as a representative of the society's institutions) to apply changes in the society's policies and to "help her [Emily] to believe" in her potentials, and to recognize that "she is more than this dress on the ironing board" (89). But it is too late for Emily with her complex trauma, resulting from the absence of a father figure, the emotional negligence of the mother, the discrimination among siblings and the harsh socioeconomic circumstances. All abusive factors collaborate to create a traumatized individual.

Pecola's Trauma through Herman's Lenses in Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*:

The Bluest Eye is a very reputed novel, written by the well-known African American author Toni Morrison in 1970. Researchers approached it as a novel in which the racist White American Society is mainly responsible for the misery of the blacks, as represented by the Breed loves: Cholly, Pauline, and their daughter Pecola. But, this paper stresses the heavy responsibility that should be laid on the blacks themselves and which turned the Breedloves into Breed Hatred family to traumatize and abuse the little Pecola till she loses her sanity. The events take place in Lorain, Ohio during the 1940s. The narrative centers on the life trauma of the 11-year-old Pecola Breedlove, a young African American girl who is made to feel ugly and to find beauty only in things that are perceived as white. She believes that people will accept her if she has blue eyes, and that becomes her ultimate dream to feel accepted. Pecola lives a lifelong trauma till she loses her mind because of her abusive family's defeatism, her racist society, and her own weakness and vulnerability. The argument seeks to investigate the factors that cause Pecola's abuse and her intense trauma symptoms. Also how far are the parents conscientious of their abuse? In other words, are they aware of the dreadful impact on Pecola when inflicting abuse? Moreover, what are the factors that may turn a parent into an abuser? The discussion will be through the lenses of Herman's ideas in *Trauma and Recovery*

The Bluest Eye highlights the latent defeatism of the weak blacks (the Breedloves) who subject themselves to white criteria (like in Pauline's case) or block themselves psychologically behind an oppressive act and let this act fully govern their lives (like in Cholly's case). In both cases Pecola's parents abusively reflect their problems on their daughter. Pecola lives with abusive parents who themselves are, at the same time, abused and traumatized. They daily live defeatism in a racist, and abusive community. That is why there is no wonder that Pecola's trauma is aggressive and beyond healing. The people who are supposed to give hand in her crisis represent a reason of her trauma and they are also sick beyond any hope of redemption.

Cholly, Pecola's father, is her first abuser and one of the main factors behind her aggressive trauma symptoms. But who made Cholly as an abuser? Cholly's problem emanates originally, not from being coerced by two white men to keep making love to Darlene in front of them, but mainly from being deprived of family love and care since birth. He has a bitter heritage that he hands down to Pecola. At birth, Cholly was found in a Junkyard, so he feels rejected and worthless. Cholly, willingly imprisons himself within the psychological block caused by the two white men and, instead of taking revenge at those who humiliated him, he strangely turns on Darlene as an easy and handy locus for his displaced anger, to take revenge on his own people for something they did not do is a sort of deviation for which he is personally responsible. This deviation proves Cholly's malaise: a man with a divided self, so divided that he blames Darlene who witnessed his degradation, not the people who degraded him.

Cholly's aggression is an expression of his frustration and defeatism. He is "frustrated at his own lack of control over his feelings of anxiety...and might lash out in anger at those around him" (Carlson 21). His frustration is a result of his loss of control over his destiny and his powerlessness. He, as Carlson explains, vindicates his fury at the vulnerable targets around him, to make up for his own defeatism. As Joy Osofsky assumes that abusive environments will negatively affect parents' capacity "to parent", parents who live in an aggressive, violent community "are often traumatized along with their children"(40). This is not to excuse Cholly's deeds, but it is an attempt to understand circumstances that may lead a parent to be a predator of his own daughter. Cholly cannot "parent" because he never had parents. He is a traumatized person who needs help. As James Berger puts it "We need to understand the socially traumatizing factors that produce men who abuse children and women" (581). Cholly is a victim of racism, defeatism, and frustration.

Cholly, being traumatized himself, fails to maintain the temporary relief created in his life after marrying Pauline. He contrarily retreats into his earlier crisis and resorts to drink and family abuse. Instead of being a caring figure for his wife and children, he puts his whole family outdoors by burning down the house. His trauma symptoms appear in his sever addiction to alcohol, anger fits,



and abuse. Cholly's defeatism is culminated in raping his own daughter, which guarantees him the title of an abuser. He did not only violate Pecola's body and soul, but also denied her any right to have him as a father, a source of protection and support. Ironically, Cholly, who failed to regain his money back from the delivery man who ruined his sofa, takes his own daughter as a soft arena of domination. Cholly's "despair, dissipation, and violence" were always "directed towards petty things and weak people" (38), and Pecola is the weakest among all.

Cholly is not conscientious of the harm he inflicts on Pecola because he does not understand what happens. Like an animal, Cholly makes love to his own vulnerable daughter: abandoned from any human connection. For Shoshana Felman, this "traumatic event, although real, took place outside the parameters of normal reality" (69). The way Cholly is sexually aroused towards Pecola (Pecola's scratching the back of her leg by the other leg) is not without its dog-like implication, a gesture to which he instinctively responds by, "crawling on all four towards her" (162). Cholly's physical abuse of Pecola is beyond ethics and norms, as Felman says, it violates all codes of humanity. It causes a life-long trauma for Pecola. Cholly passed his trauma to Pecola as Michelle Balaev adds, "individual trauma can be passed to others of the same ethnic, racial, or gender group" (152). Cholly transfers his defeatism, frustration, and vulnerability to Pecola

Like Cholly, Pauline is another abuser of Pecola. How does she become an abuser? Pauline, Pecola's mother, has a strong latent readiness for defeat. She is a self-divided black female who willingly traumatizes herself in quest of a mirage—the never-attainable standards of the mythical white beauty. She believes that acceptance and self-worth are fulfilled only through the whites' criteria of physical beauty. Separating herself from her black community and failing to cope with the white's standards of beauty, Pauline resorts to movies as a relief for failed dreams. But, she "was never able, after her education in the movies, to look at a face and not assign it some category in the scale of absolute beauty; and the scale was one she absorbed in full of the silver screen" (122). As Malin Walther observes, "in trying to conform to the 'look' of a white movie star, Pauline has denied the fundamental physical reality of her body" (778).

Pauline denies her reality as a black mother, she is dispersed between her rejection of her own blackness and her failure to fit into the white standards. Also, the limp in one of her feet adds to her inferiority, where she, "collected self-contempt by the heap" (Morrison 122). Pauline's self-disdain, is "by heap", which is symbolic of the huge traumatic pressure Pauline lives through. Her real problem lies in her inability to love, or to firmly stick to any kind of love, neither as a wife nor as a mother. Pauline got married with the anticipation of having a family with a loving husband, but her dreams vanished under the harsh economic circumstances of the blacks in America during the forties and Cholly's continuous abuse and addiction to alcohol. So, Pauline let go of everything, including her

family and kids. She escapes reality in the silver screen, enjoying the beauty of her abusers. Pauline is made as an abuser because of her own defeatism, insecurity, low self-esteem and surrounding economic conditions.

Here comes Pauline's abusive influence on Pecola's trauma. Out of her own self-contempt, she also hates her own daughter Pecola: "Lord she was ugly" (126). By seeing her daughter's physical ugliness, Pauline asserts that she does not nor cannot love Pecola, because she is black. Pauline prefers to be an ideal servant for a white family (the Fishers) than being a loving mother for Pecola. As Davis illustrates "Mrs. Breedlove has a nickname, (Polly) that only the whites use; it reduces her dignity and identifies her as 'the ideal servant'" (8). However, such a role of domestic service has "filled practically all her white needs of 'beauty, order, cleanliness, and praise" (127), while Pecola is a reminder of ugliness, disorder, hunger, and poverty (values that she wants to forget). Pauline cares for the little Fisher girl, and fiercely hits and abuses her own daughter. When Pauline communicates with the white Fisher girl, she has "honey in her words", but with Pecola she "spit out words like rotten pieces of apple" (107). The juxtaposition between "honey" and "spit out..rotten pieces" clarifies the emotional abuse of Pecola by her mother who even prevents Pecola from calling her mom.

Pauline is a negligent mother to Pecola. Neglect, according to the American School Counselor Association's Position Statement, is "lacking adequate supervision... lacking essential psychological/ emotional nurturing; abandonment" (1). Pauline never pays Pecola any kind of "supervision", guidance or support. She did not even notice Pecola's body changes because of pregnancy. Recalling Judith Herman's idea of betrayal, Pecola feels betrayed by her own mother because Pauline shows "indifference and at worst as complicit betrayal... if she cared enough, she would have found out... should have intervened; if she cared enough, she would have fought"(73). Pauline never cared, or interfered, or fought to save her own daughter from abuse, she preferred to abandon Pecola, leaving her to be raped by a drunk and monstrous father. In the words of Hayes, Pauline proves herself as "unnatural" woman, a "monster", and a "horrible" mother who "refuses to nurture, love, or fight for her child" (177). Pauline developed a strong sense of self-unworthiness and succeeded only to pass it to her daughter- a heavy burden that Pecola cannot bear.

If Cholly seeks his lost identity in raping his daughter, Pauline seeks hers in abandoning her daughter because she reminds her of everything ugly. So, "it is around and through Pecola, the scorned and rejected girl who longs to be beautiful and to be loved, that most of the main characters plod through a desperate, pitiful search for meaning and personal definition" (Dee 19). Dee illustrates how Pecola's childhood was abused and traumatized by her parents. Each one of them reflects his personal issues of defeatism, frustration, and insecurity on her. Pecola stands for what Judith Herman calls "parental scapegoating" (75), the easy target

for her parents, the silent "scapegoat", the recipient of their personal issues. The trauma of Pecola is a result of her parents' continuous physical and psychological abuse.

Judith Herman declared in *Trauma and Recovery* that one of the main reasons of child abuse is the unsafe relationship between the child and his family. The child who lives in an abusive family will always feel threatened with, "the unpredictable nature of the violence" (71). The child will suffer a psychological trauma because of the anticipation of unknown threats. Pecola's parents are mainly responsible for her traumatic deformity because, as Don Brown states, that children develop their attitudes and character traits from the way their parents treat them, "Parents are the gatekeepers of negative and positive self-talk" (1). The "gatekeepers" of Pecola feed her since birth only negative thoughts about how ugly and useless she is. Supposedly, parents are the most, "protective resource to enable a child to cope with exposure to violence is a strong relationship with a competent, caring, positive adult, most often a parent" (Osofsky 38). But Pecola's parents are neither "competent" nor "caring" nor "positive" to help her cope with the violent, racist society, her parents are the main cause of her trauma. The Sociologist Pete Simi "who has conducted 17 years of fieldwork with far-right extremists, noted that the most common background characteristic is a family disruption, including parental abandonment, divorce, substance abuse, or parental incarceration" (Qtd. in Bast and DeSimone 14). Pecola's extreme trauma is a product of "family disruption...parental abandonment...abuse". But why did the Breedloves stay together as a married couple? Why did not they get a divorce? The answer may lie in the deliberate intention of many social institutes (marriage) to hide abusive practices and to pretend having a normal functioning life.

The next part of the paper discusses Pecola's trauma symptoms. Caruth says that "one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another" (141). Pecola's trauma of self-loathe is "tied up with" her parents' self-contempt and self-hatred. Recognized as "ugly" since her birth, Pecola, as defeated as her parents, develops traumatic symptom of self-loathe. She has what Herman refers to as a "sense of inner badness" which "may be directly confirmed by parental scapegoating" (75). The reason behind Pecola's continuous self-degradation is the traumatic internalization of the white standards of beauty implemented by her parents' insecurity. Pecola wants "to erase her corporeal body to conform to white standards of visual attractiveness" (Walther 778), represented by the white, blond Shirley Temple and Mary Jane as the idols of beauty for girls (during the 1940s in America). But what she really erases is her own self-worth. Dominated by a strong belief in her ugliness because of her black color, Pecola is traumatized, comparing herself to the unattainable white beauty and easily sacrifices herself at the altar of the white goddesses. Pecola never fought nor initiated a quest for finding her identity. As Powell explains, Pecola Breedlove "fails to discover a

true self precisely because she allows her values to be dictated by the white mythology" (752). She leaves herself to be traumatized by her society and her family. She lives isolated and this adds to her vulnerability, she never tried to stand against abuse. As Balaev adds, "traumatic experience shatters identity" (162). Pecola's identity is shattered because of her physical, psychological and social abuse trauma.

Pecola, besides her internalization of white values, is weak by nature. She is a regressive character with no power to defend herself or to confront her abuser. In the face of her classmates' ridicule, she remains silent, chewing her agonies with no reaction. All she can do is either release a sigh or fantasize to have blue eyes, but of course neither her sigh nor her fantasy changes reality. This happens when Maureen (a mulatto rich girl) insists that Pecola saw her own daddy naked, all that Pecola can do is that she, "tucks her head in-a funny, sad, helpless movement. A kind of hunching of the shoulders, pulling in of the neck, as though she wanted to cover her ears," letting Claudia, her close friend, defend her instead (72). This extract manifests an intense traumatic moment for Pecola, where she escapes into her "helpless" passivity and remains silent. Smith believes that "Intense fear, helplessness, or horror" are among trauma symptoms(43), Pecola here stands helplessly, unable to take an action. Morrison is so exasperated with Pecola's weakness that she lets her receive the hit which Claudia intended for Maureen, "I swung at her [Maureen] and missed , hitting Pecola in the face" (73).

When Pecola "seemed to fold into herself, like a pleated wing," in response to Maureen's insults, Claudia "wanted to open her up...ram a stick down that hunched and curved spine, force her to stand erect and spit the misery out on the street. But Pecola held it in when it could lap into her eyes" (73-74). The way Pecola folded her body shows what Smith refers to as, "Intense fear" which is another trauma symptom caused by repeated types of abuse. Pecola never confronts her abuser, she normally "held" her failure in and hid her fear behind silence and withdrawal. She has been through trauma that, " disrupts attachments between self and others" (Balaev149). Therefore, she lives in loneliness and silence because, as Balaev says in "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered" that, " language fails to represent trauma" (7). Pecola's silence is indicative of her failure to express, through words, what she feels. Claudia's desire to "ram a stick down" Pecola's "hunched and curved spine," presents Claudia's furious rejection of Pecola's submissiveness, "ram a stick" is symbolic of Claudia's desire to be violent with Pecola to get her out of her silence and passivity, but Pecola is a hopeless case, traumatized and deformed.

According to Herman, Pecola suffers from a Complex-Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), where " the victim of chronic trauma may feel herself to be changed irrevocably, or she may lose the sense that she has any self at all"(62). This is exactly what happens to Pecola, her inability to resist or to fight are

indicative of having "no self at all". In her dummy silence and withdrawal, she becomes, to borrow Cynthia Davis's words, "just a doll, an image without a self behind it" (12). So, one of Pecola's trauma symptoms is her loss of identity or "a self" as Davis puts it. How can Pecola develop a self within such abusive environment? And what kind of identity will she have if she is told everyday how ugly or useless she is?

Herman speaks about the "dissociative disorder symptom" that a traumatic individual suffers from. It is, "the capacity to disconnect mind from body as a merciful protection...a creative and adaptive psychodefense against overwhelming terror" (172). Pecola develops a "dissociative disorder" where she recoils into unfulfilled fantasies to "disconnect" her mind from her body and to escape terror. She, "let fantasy spin itself out, end on end, in the darkness of the room" (46), fantasy shields her against reality. In her fantasy, "she whispered to the wall, "I will do it I will do it", she would be so pretty. She would be beautiful." (173). She would sit "paralyzed" but "elsewhere, her imagination rocked and whipped about...She was forced to be an observer" (46). She escapes with her mind, while she is imprisoned within her body. Birkeland clarifies that "Youth who reported sexual trauma, severe bullying or threats, domestic violence...had particularly high levels of negative cognition and emotions" (503). Pecola's creation of unfulfilled fantasies is a symptom of "negative cognition and emotions", resulting from her going through several types of abuse; physical, psychological and social. Such "negative cognition and emotions" lead her to lose her mind and to live in false fantasies. Pecola got enough of life; sexually abused by her father, bullied and threatened by her peers, and exposed to domestic violence by her mother.

Conclusion:

To conclude, re-reading Olsen's "I Stand Here Ironing" and Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in the light of trauma theory and children trauma theory proves that, mainly family and society, led respectively to Emily's and Pecola's traumas. The symptoms of their traumas varied according to the abuse intensity. Pecola's trauma is more intense than that of Emily's because of sexual abuse and physical violence. Emily is abused by her negligent mother and the American depressed society of the thirties. The paper traces Emily trauma symptoms as they appear in forms of fever, measles, nightmares, dreams, asthma, and weight loss. Emily's anxiety, sense of inferiority, low academic performance, silence and speech disorder are more symptoms. Add to this, Emily's coldness, detachment, fear of intimacy, stiffness, and helplessness. As for Pecola, she is sexually abused by her father, bullied by her peers, abandoned by her mother and discriminated against by the society. The symptoms of Pecola's trauma are aggressive as they include: self-loathe, passivity, helplessness, dissociative disorder, withdrawal, loss of identity, silence, and negative emotions. The paper concludes that abuse

may happen in undeliberate way because of the abuser's ignorance, lack of experience, low economic status, or because the abuser himself/herself is being a victim of abuse. The parents in the two literary works are, as Sechrist puts it, "unable to protect their children and keep them safe," because they "themselves may be numbed, frightened, and depressed, unable to deal with their own trauma and/or grief, and emotionally unavailable for their children" (40). The abusers in both works are not conscientious of the dreadful impact of abuse on the victims. Moreover, the paper discusses the salient factors that may turn a parent into an aggressive abuser.

The paper reaches the point that abuse is a sensitive issue where several social institutes hide its practices and silence the abused. If Emily's mom speaks earlier about what happened to Emily since birth, maybe Emily would have been saved. And if Pauline divorced Cholly since she discovered his abusive character, maybe Pecola would have been saved. Sechrist says "If child protective service interventions occur soon after maltreatment begins, two positive results occur: 1) subsequent episodes of abuse can be prevented, and 2) an opportunity exists for services to be delivered to children to minimize the trauma" (242). This paper is an attempt to raise awareness of how abuse may cause traumatic long-term, costly symptoms that endanger lives of abused individuals and consequently the whole society.

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من تسبب في صدمة إميلي وبيكولا؟
إساءة معاملة الطفولة في "أقف هنا لأكوي" لأولسن و "العين الأكثر زرقة" لمورسون

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المخلص:

الهدف الرئيسي من هذا البحث هو إعادة قراءة "أقف هنا لأكوي" لأولسن والعين الأكثر زرقة لموريسون للبحث عن القوى المسيئة التي أدت الي صدمات إميلي وبيكولا على التوالي. الهدف من البحث ليس المقارنة، بل دراسة كل نص على حدة في ضوء نظرية الصدمة ونظرية صدمة الأطفال، وتحديدًا كتاب جوديث هيرمان الصدمة والتعافي. كما يدرس البحث كيف تعكس أعراض الصدمة (مثل اضطراب النوم، واضطراب ما بعد الصدمة، والعجز، والربو، والتجنب...) درجة شدة سوء المعاملة. وتوضح الأعمال التي تم تناولها أن الإساءة قد تحدث بطريقة غير متعمدة بسبب جهل المعتدي أو قلة خبرته أو الظروف الاقتصادية القاسية أو لأن المعتدي نفسه ضحية للإساءة. وسبب اختيار هذين النصين هو أن كلا النصين الأدبيين يتعاملان مع فتاتين باعتبارهما ضحية سوء المعاملة والإهمال بسبب أسرتهم ومجتمعهم. من المهم أن نرى كيف تؤدي الإساءة إلى تحطيم هوياتهم. كما يكشف كلا العملين عن أنواع مختلفة من الإساءة (الجسدية والاجتماعية والنفسية). علاوة على ذلك، يتم تحديد شدة أعراض الصدمة لكل من إميلي وبيكولا وفقاً لشدة إساءة معاملتهما. ويكشف البحث حساسية موضوع الإساءة والنية المتعمدة لدى العديد من المؤسسات الاجتماعية (كالمدرسة والزواج) لإخفاء الممارسات المسيئة وإسكات المعتدي عليهم، كما تقول زينب منير: "إن الروايات المؤلمة غالباً ما يتم إسكاتها وقمعها من قبل الأعراف الاجتماعية التي تقاوم أي نزعة لتشويه سمعة المجتمع" (729)

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية الصدمة- نظرية صدمة الاطفال-الأساءة.