

## Addressing the Question of Emotional Neglect in Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born*

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**ABSTRACT:** *This paper explicates a contemporary voice of African-American literature projected towards raising awareness about violence at homes through *Fifth Born*, a novel carrying painful narratives of three generations who are victims of battery and emotional neglect. The novel has sites of unspeakable violence and treachery. This article focuses on the youngest victim who experiences an insidious sense of sadness not only because of the violence of father but also because of the emotional neglect of her mother. She feels frustrated by the exceptional circumstances in which she is trapped into. Grappling with the emotional neglect and struggling not to subdue to oppression turns her irritated. However, the soothing memories of grandmother go parallel with the harrowing present which helps the protagonist to survive amid painful absence of love which is continuously felt. The literary text can be viewed as therapeutic engagement because when such problems are externalized, they promote reflection on detrimental effects of not only violence but emotional neglect also which is equally injurious for an individual.*

**Keywords:** father; grandmother; love; pain.

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## Introduction

Emotional neglect especially in childhood casts a lasting impact on the psyche of an individual. Awards or mistreatment are visible, on the other hand emotional neglect though invisible but unforgettable. Emotional neglect differs from mistreatment and abuse. Abuse or mistreating a child are *actions* on the part of a parent while emotional neglect is a parent's *failure to act* appropriately or respond aptly to a child's emotional needs which might have equal or sometimes greater impact on the psyche of a child. Neglect has been defined by the World Health Organization in 1999 as

[T]he failure to provide for the development of the child in all spheres: health, education, emotional development, nutrition, shelter, and safe living conditions, in the context of resources reasonably available to the family or caretakers and causes or has a high probability of causing harm to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development. This includes the failure to properly supervise and protect children from harm as much as is feasible. (15)

Emotional neglect is a major risk factor for psychopathology, including internalising problems such as depression and anxiety (Colvert et al., 552) and externalising problems including violence (Chapple, Tyler, & Bersani, 39). Being invisible in nature, emotional neglect has been greatly overshadowed by more substantial types of mistreatment. It is insidious and goes unnoticed; it does silent damage to people's lives that usually end up in blaming themselves. Kampen and Henken (in press) think,

Neglect can go undetected for a long time, even by people who are very closely involved with the family where it occurs. Even physical abuse is often hidden and doctors could only see internal injuries caused by child abuse after X-ray technology became available. Diagnosing emotional neglect is even more complicated. Neglect is generally experienced over time, with harm developing insidiously, and often without obvious and immediate impact. This is one of the reasons why the damage of emotional neglect has long been downplayed and ignored, a phenomenon that is called „the neglect of neglect“.

## Methodology

The work of black-woman writers has been explored from the perspective of hate crimes against blacks. My research is carried out to focus on

emotional neglect being faced by the protagonist. This leaves a lasting impact on the mind of a child because the experience is not only unusual but continual also. The selected novel not only reveals pain narrative of the protagonist who experiences emotional neglect but it also examines how the individual learns to cope with this unusual phenomenon and struggles to overcome emotional challenges.

### **Textual Analysis**

The emotional loss which Odessa experiences for the first time during her life is at the loss of her grandmother at the age of three. She thinks that grandmother is the only person on whom she can emotionally rely. At such a young age, she does not know the meaning of death yet she cries but later on she realizes what death means. It is difficult to comprehend for a child of three that how a person on earth suddenly becomes a no-being and after the burial no one can see or meet that person forever. In the whole family she is "the littlest Blackburn" (Lockhart 3) in the funeral but her loss is the greatest because in her childhood she has never received love from anyone else the way in which she has received from her grandmother. When told by her brother, Lamont, that grandmother is dead, Odessa suffers anxiety as she imagines her "gray face and yellow dress" (Lockhart 4). She cries against her brother's chest but no one realizes her pain because she is labeled by the rest of the family as *cry baby-baby* (Lockhart 5) for she is most of the time clinging to her mother wanting to be loved. Unfortunately, Bernice does not understand her feelings which she has for grandmother and thinks that she is habitually crying, ignoring the pain which the child is undergoing.

For Glaser emotional neglect is characterized by the acts ignoring the child's basic emotional needs, such as insufficient or no emotional interaction between parents and the child. Odessa experiences emotional neglect when she finds that her father has never loved or cared for her. On the other hand, when their relative Gretal comes to their place, he carries her in his arms and she is kissed by her aunts too. It is at this point, Odessa misses her grandmother who kisses her and always gives a feel of true love to her. She is still too young to sleep in baby-bed, when father in his anger breaks it and Odessa with her quilt doll crashes on the floor. It is at that time she receives an injury from the hands of her father which makes her left eye bleed. It is not only painful to fall but embarrassing too in front of brothers and sisters who are silently watching the scene of her fall. The next day uncle Chet comes; he sympathizes with the injured child and suggests Bernice to take her to the doctor. She respects uncle Chet's

opinion but taking Odessa to a doctor seems a big hassle to her. She feels highly irritated because no close tie exists between the mother and the daughter. They are “like separate fortresses of skin and bone” (Lockhart 30). In *Maternal Care and Mental Health* John Bowlby insisted, “essential for mental health is that the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate, and continuous relationship with his mother (or mother-substitute), in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment” (67). When Odessa feels vacuity, she in her imagination, goes back to grandmother’s yard where she used to receive support from her grandmother. Even while playing with children, the grandmother used to lift her up to make her position equivalent to other playmates. She cannot forget her saying „[t]his is my baby” (Lockhart 30), which makes her feel happy and elated despite indifference of Bernice and harsh attitude of deddy. Whenever she is unable to understand the behavior of the so-called *mama* and *deddy*, she recalls the love of her grandmother which does not let her feel lonely.

It is not that Odessa is only degraded by her parents but she is also neglected and humiliated by her relatives too. Aunt Fanny also rebukes her by calling her “Four Eyes” (Lockhart 62) instead of Odessa. She touches her weakness that she is wearing glasses for her weak eye-sight. She severely scolds her and treats her like “a dirty rag” (Lockhart 62) and “flung” her to a bench. She does not let her play and forces her to sit on the bench all day long. Odessa does not have the courage to look at the glaring looks of her aunt and passes her time by looking at trees and sky. She holds her tears and does not let them fall. This is not all but on reaching home she criticizes her hair, her clothing and says that she is ashamed of taking Odessa with herself. She orders her to get inside the house and slams the door of the car. Once inside the house, Odessa finds herself better than before, but when she locks herself behind the bathroom she lets “loose a quiet convulsion of sadness” (Lockhart 63). This behavior of Aunt Fanny reveals that everyone else in the family knows that she is the child of Ella-Mae, the one with dubious identity born of a father who is both the father and the grandfather of the granddaughter. The obvious discriminatory treatment signals to Odessa that there is some special fact associated to her life of which she is unaware of. On finding Odessa disturbed, the elder sister Towanda tells her that it is Odessa herself who is responsible for the odd behavior of Aunt Fanny, because on finding Odessa always looking for attention the aunt pounces on her like a cat. She should be strong enough and should not let anyone find her weaknesses. Towanda’s discussion makes her so anxious that she feels as

if she has “no control over the things”. (Lockhart 64)

The stress of emotional neglect has so increased on her that she goes to attend Sunday service in Church to wash-off the sins of her father by standing “waist deep in the freezing water in a white robe” (Lockhart 124). On reaching home, her siblings laugh at her, not knowing what trauma she has been undergoing. The anger of mother increases in intensity for she thinks that this action of Odessa has embarrassed her in the community. She hardly receives any consolation from her mother. As a result, she goes down to the basement, the only place of solitude for her, which gets darker with the passage of time. She feels nauseating and the sickness of the body makes her restless. She tries to calm herself down by thinking about good things and tries to go to sleep. The father has given her so much pain that the daughter is harboring thoughts of her father's death. This is one of the extreme cases of hatred in which a child thinks of the death of a parent.

In the morning, with her face swollen all-over, they move towards Mississippi to their grandfather's house. She feels terribly lonely amid seven brothers and sisters so looks out of window to avoid talking to anyone. The parents have always treated her separately and differently. She cannot really talk with any of her sisters because they are born with a different fate; all she can talk is with Gretal who is born in more or less similar circumstances as she was born. One evening, when Gretal calls the ghost of her real mother, Odessa feels no fear at all. Instead, on seeing her, she feels warmth of love though she cannot make out why this is happening to her. Surprisingly, she finds her face soft and familiar, and feels as if the ghost has untied “cluster of knots” (Lockhart 83) within her. She can easily relate the ghost to grandmother, though she does not know the reality that the ghost is the real daughter of grandmother and Odessa's real mother. She does not know what is happening to her but unlike other children she feels the presence of the ghost very comforting.

The dreams of Odessa are turning into nightmares. At such a young age, she sees the sky turning into unfamiliar shades of orange and purple. In the field of sunflowers there is “a freshly dug grave” (Lockhart 121). It is so fresh that she can smell the dampness of the soil. She is extremely horrified after seeing Leland's murder in front of her eyes and after being raped twice by her own father who is supposed to take care of her; now she feels that the grave-digger has dug this grave for her. She starts running but could not find a way among sunflowers. On seeing this, she finds herself “drenched in sweat and tears” (Lockhart 121). Like a trauma survivor, time seems to break down for Odessa. Time and circumstances

have put “barbed wire” (Lockhart 150) between Odessa and Blackburns. She does not feel stronger any more. She is the only one in the whole family who feels pain of loneliness and tries to listen to “silence behind the invisible walls of [grandmother’s] home” (Lockhart 151).

On reaching Mississippi, she still finds herself restless so she diverts her attention and concentration by randomly counting the things, “[w]hen care-givers are emotionally absent, inconsistent, frustrating, violent, intrusive, or neglectful, children are likely to become intolerably distressed and unlikely to develop a sense that the external environment is able to provide relief” (Benamer 49). Though she has not talked to any experienced person who can guide her, but it is Nature who is guiding her how to survive and sustain amid harsh realities of life. She is counting her teeth with her tongue, the trees with her eyes. Herman explains,

The child trapped in an abusive environment is faced with formidable tasks of adaptation. She must find a way to preserve a sense of 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. (96)

She is feeling melancholic because father’s aggression is multiplied by Bernice’s hits. She strongly wishes that her mother may call her and look at her swollen face. The mother may feel sorry for hitting her so hard.

In reaction to it, Odessa has become stubborn and irritating to her mother. She goes to the extent of stealing a few things from a shop. Her broken state of mind is noticeable in her bearing and gait, so one day in the school, she is guided by one of the teachers to walk with full confidence and pride in herself. Turan et al. think:

The dominant, cold, avoidant, and lonely interpersonal style, therefore, may not only adversely affect the interpersonal relationships of individuals with high testosterone; it may also be a risk factor for emotional and physical health problems. If these problems are detected early, strategies could be employed to ameliorate their negative consequences. (88)

She is unable to understand the meaning of what the teacher has said but she has started following his advice. In the afternoon, when her father comes to take a nap, she makes sure to carry her younger brother inside her coat and walk “far and long enough to miss Deddy” (Lockhart 108). She has started avoiding her father in every possible way. She tricks to

remain silent most of the time and poses obedience to avoid his anger or any type of physical assault on her. She is often reminded of the “giant hands” (Lockhart 109) of her father which destroyed her bed throwing her and Nakie right on the debris of the broken bed. As the father comes home with the smell of whiskey, her *negative emotionality*<sup>1</sup> increases, and her heart starts beating at a faster rate which she tries to hold amid her knees.

It is the memory of her loving grandmother which helps her in coping and confronting many problems which she is facing in her childhood. She is unable to reason out why she feels herself so close to her grandmother rather than her mother, Bernice. Whenever she finds herself caught up in a problem, she imaginatively goes to her grandmother to find solace there. Unlike other children, who hardly remember the dead grandmother's shade of skin and hair color; Odessa very vividly remembers all these minute details related to the grandmother and her house because she thinks that she has always been a special grandchild to her. She has always received distinct attention from her. She has been especially instructed by her real mother to “never forget her face” (Lockhart 3) though at that time both the mother and the daughter do not know about each other's relation. Though she was just a three year old child, still she can make sense of warmth of love of grandmother which is very comforting. She has always imagined her grandmother rocking her and caring for her. In her imagination, she views grandmother lifting her up when seeing the family off for Saint Louis. It is at this moment Bernice calls her, so she leaves grandmother moving forward “trying not to jostle the pain behind [her] eyes” (Lockhart 31). Odessa does not want anyone to come to know about the pain which she experiences upon leaving her grandmother. She keeps it secret even from Bernice, who has become her mother. When their station-wagon leaves their porch, Odessa remembers the grandmother waving them good-bye. The memory of grandmother is so vivid that she even remembers the smell of her cotton dress. These flashbacks refresh her life as she has experienced so many traumas at such an early age.

She “ached deep inside for something clean and whole, Granmama's touch” (Lockhart 69). One of the causes of such a craving for grandmother's touch is because Bernice has never caressed the child the way in which mothers/caretakers do. On reaching grandmother's house, she silently comes into her bedroom to sit quietly where she feels “safe”

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<sup>1</sup> Negative emotionality: A spectrum of emotion ranging from calm contentment at the low end to fear and panic at the high end (Allen 261).

(Lockhart 70). Bowlby also says that a child feels safe from environment when he goes to the lap of the mother. Here also, it is seen that in grandmother's room she is feeling safe from the world outside. She is experiencing peace of mind and wants to enjoy solitude here. The grandmother's bedroom has become like a lap of a mother to her. Reading and re-reading the passage encircled by the grandmother in the Bible gives her feeling as if the grandmother has "lost" (Lockhart 70) something/someone long ago which is unforgettable. She cannot resolve this confusion of mind. This hazy confusion is there in her mind which is not letting her enjoy childhood as other children do. This confusion is accompanied by "anger" and "sadness", both of which are boiling "like a heavy storm" (Lockhart 70). She is angry for the circumstances in which she is living and sad for a sense of loss which is there in her subconscious. Both these feelings are not inactive but they are burning feelings multiplying her stress pileup; not letting her rest.

She is already experiencing intense anxiety but unfortunately, one afternoon, the father comes home. Bernice is away in the hospital, so Odessa's father uses his belt which makes her fall down on the floor. She is reminded of how she has been ripped apart when she was just five. At that time, he was deeply drunk and came home with a lost state of mind but now he is fully aware of what he is doing. He uses violence and force, the fear of leather belt makes her fall unconscious. He physically abuses her which leaves her more terrified than before. Her anxious state of mind reminds her again of the trauma which she has experienced at the age of five, she is also reminded of the horrifying episode of how her father soaked his hand in the blood of his real brother and now she has to reconcile with this fresh pain in her head, cuts on her cheeks and bruises on her thighs. The anxiety of Odessa is somewhat reduced when Greta comes to visit and finds her both mentally and physically broken down. She consoles her by saying that she has also been going through same type of experiences. Odessa tells her cousin that she has no courage to tell it to her father that she has seen him killing his brother and to disclose the secret of father to anyone that he has been abusing her. Both girls have been abused by the same person; both of them have not received support and protection from their mothers, so both of them can understand each other's distress. Both cry over their emotional neglect by their caretakers.

Next day her anxiety further increases as her father makes fun of her bruises and ridicules her by making false announcements that she has again fallen from basement steps. The cruel father does not look at her but "cut[s] his eyes over at [her]" (Lockhart 107). He further degrades her by



saying that she should keep her eyes on her feet, and should accept this fact that she cannot walk normally like others. On passing these insulting remarks, he laughs and lets her siblings also laugh at her. Odessa avoids letting him look in her eyes because she does not want him to know her broken state of mind. The episode of recent assault has “stripped away any hope that things would be different for [her]” (Lockhart 118). Before the second episode of father’s assault on her, she used to nurture this hope “that with money Deddy would no longer be drunk and nasty” (Lockhart 118), but all her hopes are dashed to ground when he consciously traumatized his own vulnerable daughter. It is asserted (Norman et al.) that the consequences of emotional neglect should not be overlooked as experiences of emotional neglect are strongly linked with symptoms of anxiety, depression and suicidal attempt in recent meta-analysis.

### **Conclusion**

While amid Blackburns, Odessa is so ignored and treated with indifference that she feels herself to be an “untouchable” (Lockhart 90) amid the rest of family. In such a broken state of mind, she often falls on her pillow where she finds grandmother’s voice “with urgency into the darkness of [her] mind” (Lockhart 136) to keep silent. She suggests her that there is no need to communicate with those who do not understand her. She feels that grandmother has been the only person with whom she can share the confusion of her mind. At such a young age, she draws “some comfort” (Lockhart 90) in consoling herself that when she will die she will tell “Granmama about the things that welled up [in her] head like pus in the wound” (Lockhart 90). She is now old enough to think that grandmother cannot come back so she keeps Nakie, a memoir of grandmother, “hidden in the back pocket of [her] jeans” (Lockhart 92). One night she wakes up after seeing a nightmare, she immediately searches for her doll, Nakie. On finding her, she instantly hides it under the mattress. She often changes the place of her quilted doll which tells about the insecurity lurking in her mind. Al-Thani and Semmar think that sometimes objects function as the building block for more advanced transactions in the child's environment. They continue, “[t]he external world, according to the object-relations tradition, plays an essential role in the formation of children's object relationships and their internal objects; the internal world servers as a reflection of parents and other primary caregivers” (77).

The painful narrative of Odessa highlights the fact that emotional neglect of parents can be very distressing for children. She notices small actions and responses of her parents. Her world revolves around parents’ love and

care. She wants to draw their maximum attention, which usually she fails to do; turning her sad and sorrowful. Nevertheless, the comforting memories of grandmother help her to survive.

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