

From Domestic Abuse to Attachment Relations:
Importance of Safe Haven in Zelda Lockhart's

Fifth Born

Dr. Shamaila Dodhy^{*}

ABSTRACT: *Coercive and assaultive conduct behind closed doors with physical, sexual and psychological attacks is a global phenomenon not associated to geography, religion or social status. Presenting a review of trauma in domestic sphere which usually remains concealed from the society, I discuss how traumatized people endure their injuries with the help of attachment relations. The protagonist of the selected text cultivates a social support for herself which is rather challenging but acts as a buffer against negative outcomes. This paper aims to draw on Bowlby's idea of attachment and the work of a contemporary psychologist Jon G. Allen to assess the situation of Odessa. While discussing the exterior landscape, I have used concepts of safe haven and attachment, thus drawing conclusions about the novelist's treatment of the subject of hushed violence. The present study endeavors to elucidate how non-visual contact with an attachment figure can give a sense of security to the suffering child.*

Keywords: attachment, father, grandmother, love, pain.

^{*} Email: shamailadodhy@yahoo.com

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to analyze the significance of safe haven in life of the protagonist who is both physically and sexually abused by her parents. Children who grow-up with domestic violence suffer from strain and fear. These children perceive life to be threatening and demanding. Odessa, who is a victim of psychological and emotional abuse, needs someone to console her. When she finds that no one truly loves and cares for her, she takes refuge in the memories of her dead grandmother who becomes her safe haven. It is essential to study the background of trauma in domestic sphere which is not very rare but a concealed reality of life.

Scholarly Opinions on Domestic Abuse

Trauma in domestic sphere is present in varied forms from prehistoric times to present. It is present in diverse forms like battery, acquaintance rape and keeping women in a state of intense fear. Men have always received protection from the society in general while women are warned to remain silent.

Cultural pressure to protect fathers, maneuvers to maintain incest, as the most voiceless crime “incest cannot be properly understood outside an analysis of the gender and power inequities that structure the social context in which it occurs” (Kowaleski-Wallace 299). Sigmund Freud observes that all his women patients had reported seduction from their fathers to whom he did not believe thinking that their hysterical symptoms are mere phantasies and are not real. They are the results of their own erotic fantasies (*New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-analysis* 129). Later he realized that the reports of women-patients are based on truth. Judith L. Herman’s *Father-Daughter Incest* is a socio-psychological study about the complex and painful phenomenon in which the writer focuses on sexual exploitation by fathers. She analyzes forty victims and develops a composite picture by bringing in professionals from mental health, child protection, and law enforcement agencies. She argues that incest is the extension of male domination in a patriarchal society and “[d]enial has always been the incestuous father’s first line of defense” (22). Unlike Herman, Diana E.H. Russell believes that instead of speaking up against male domination “therapists pathologized and *depoliticized* incest, diverting survivors away from a political activist approach to incestuous abuse” (xxviii). Russell challenges many widely held beliefs by examining incestuous abuse from every angle and varied aspects. Based on the

findings about San Francisco, she carefully explores the complex variables of incestuous abuse: the victim's age, the dynamics of class, the brutality of the abuse, the subtleties of race and ethnicity, and the severe consequences of the incident on emotional lives of victims.

Vartan P. Messier and Nandita Batra consider that incest which used to be a taboo, has become a transgression so "the word 'bestiality' be replaced by the already existent term 'zoosexuality' or coined even more neutrally as 'inter-speciel sexuality'" (vi). Anna Meigs and Kathleen Barlow think that the topic of incest has diverse definitions having varied cultural constructions. It is complexly related to power-structures. It is rich in "representation in myth, symbol, and story; and in the depth of its psychological impact on enculturated individuals" (46). Jennifer Freyd focuses on intentional forgetfulness on the part of a child when betrayed by a parent or a caretaker. In order to survive, one does not want to recall those painful experiences. Children consciously block the information otherwise the harrowing experience does not let them function normally and continue their relationship on whom they have always trusted. The writer introduces this concept and terms it as "knowledge isolation" (26). She stresses on the shortcomings of "false memory" movement (22) which supported the perpetrators. The individual is betrayed not only by the attacker but by the society also that always disbelieved in children thus strengthening their feeling of helplessness. She proves her argument that there is logic in forgetting thus bringing in sanity and intelligibility to child sexual abuse theory.

The Role of Attachment Relations in Recovery

Discussing the causes of depression, Jon G. Allen says that it is observed that disruption in attachment relations is a common cause of stress. Just as attachment relationships help to provide security and safety to the young one, they play a positive role in the development of the child till the time he reaches adulthood. Similarly, attachment trauma is a common stressor which can trigger depression. Bowlby's research proved that a child when separated from mother/caregiver, he protests which is followed by despair, "separation-related despair is the prototype for depression in response to loss" ("Coping with the Catch-22s" 119). So secure-attachment safeguards people from stress. These attachment figures function in relieving the stressed-out person. On the other hand, people having insecure attachment pass a stressful life. They suffer from strong emotional need of someone to talk with on whom they can rely and get comfort after being hurt by someone. They feel frustrated and isolated on not finding someone which can lead to

negative emotional state. It is seen that the more people live in close proximity with their attachment figures, the sooner they come out of depression. Allen says,

“There are many sorts of trauma, ranging from tornadoes to assaults, and trauma can involve either a single event or repeated events. Trauma can befall a person in childhood or adulthood or both. In my view, trauma in attachment relationships (e.g., abuse and neglect by caregivers or romantic partners) is especially likely to have severe consequences, depression among them” (“Coping with the Catch-22s” 120).

Among trauma in attachment relationships sexual, physical and emotional abuse are more worrisome as they have severe consequences.

In *Maternal Care and Mental Health*, Bowlby deals with the effects of maternal separation and deprivation in homeless children of postwar Europe. Bowlby believes that children’s separations from their mothers deprive them from experiencing healthy development and brings about significant and serious mental disorders. These children, with troubled childhood get no affection so are unable to establish a bond with others, usually become delinquents. He explains a variety of factors and life-events which contribute in making these children delinquents. These factors could include adoptive children being placed with different families multiple times, traumatic or strenuous environments, and the absence of a parent in early childhood. Such disturbances in the child’s secure attachment with his or her primary caregiver can lead to negative psychological impairments in addition to variety of problems later in life. Talking about the importance of primary care-giver which is usually a mother in relation to child, he says, “She orients him in space and time, provides his environment, permits the satisfaction of some impulses, restricts others. She is his ego and superego. Gradually he learns these arts himself (Bowlby, *Maternal Care and Mental Health* 53). Chris Fraley in “Attachment Stability From Infancy to Adulthood: Meta-Analysis and Dynamic Modeling of Developmental Mechanisms” concludes that attachment security is moderately stable across the first nineteen years of life, with results being more consistent with the *prototype perspective*, i.e., representations of early experiences are retained over time, continue to play an influential role in attachment behavior, rather than the *revisionist perspective*, i.e., early attachment representations are modified with new experiences (123-151). So there appears to be stability in attachment bond from infancy to adolescence and adulthood, with remarkable exception like nerve-racking life experiences or chaotic

family environments. In such cases “working models are updated and modified in a way that reflects the quality of experience with significant others” (Fraley 127).

Literature Review on Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born*

Zelda Lockhart is a contemporary African-American writer, the author of *Fifth Born* which won a finalist award from the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Legacy Foundation. Lockhart held the honor of the 2010 Piedmont Laureate for Literature in her region of North Carolina. In her letter of support for Lockhart's laureate application, a well-known writer Dorothy Allison wrote: “Zelda has a strong commitment to beautiful and unique language. She gives us an unflinching view of the human spirit . . . Her people read to me as real—fully rendered and difficult as any I have made myself. She is also an inspired and inspiring speaker, and I know she would serve eloquently as a laureate.”

Denise Simon (2002) appreciates Zelda Lockhart for selecting a cumbersome topic for her novel which explores the dynamics of emotional, physical and sexual abuse through the experiences of Odessa, who struggles to find a safe place within her large and nightmarishly dysfunctional family. Simon criticizes Lockhart for using the voice of a child, though Odessa's innocence amplifies the horror of her situation but still there are moments when she sounds too mature for her age. While Vanessa Bush compares Lockhart's *Fifth Born* to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* for its sensitive portrayal of a young girl trapped in family violence, damaged by brutality, and longing for love. Odessa is sheltered in a house where the father terrorizes the child with his boundless and violent temper. Their mother makes up stories to explain away injuries and mishaps, stories that become a part of family tradition. This affects the sensitive Odessa, who bears the brutality of both the parents; consequently, shrinking inside herself until she slowly learns the long-held family secrets that underlie violence.

Bobbi Booker (2002) appreciates the stylistic features of the artist, the way in which the storyteller has woven beauty into disturbing and complex issues of life in poetic style. Life experiences are seen from Odessa Blackburn's mind that makes the reader see how she struggles to survive against her family's corrupted perception of reality. Odessa's own reality is distorted by her emotionally distant aunt/mother and father's aggression. She is further disturbed by seeing her mother's affair, which ultimately leads to the death of a favorite uncle at the

hands of her father. Her parents luxuriated by inheriting the murdered relative's tavern and store. Odessa bears silent witness to the myriad of family secrets but is forced to maintain her silence through intimidation and harassment. When Odessa bravely voices her anxieties to Bernice, she is brutally beaten by her. She feels devastated by her mother's unflinching deceitfulness and treachery with her close relations. Her chance meeting with Ella Mae leads her to discover the cause behind her troubled relations with her family. Ella Mae, on the other hand, has a tale of woe that equally rivals Odessa. Finally both discover complex truth about the web of lies which dictated their lives.

Thumper focuses on soul-aching pain of Odessa who needs loving attention of her parents who always ignore and degrade her. Odessa craves for and searches ways to escape painful memories in search of relief from pain. Her world tumbles into a living hell after her grandmother dies. In the following ten years, Odessa is abused by her father, battered by her mother, and treated with scorn and hatred by the rest of the family members. This makes her life miserable. Her world is nothing but pain. Thumper says "I was entranced. Lockhart took me beyond the watching-an-accident-happening-in-slow-motion phase, to the next level, where I felt the full impact of the collision. I was whupped, done in, and out done, because *Fifth Born* is the type of book where it took a while before I could let go of it" (2002, para 3). Giving a metaphorical comparison, Thumper writes, "Lockhart's portrayal of Odessa's mental and emotional wellbeing reminded me of a person suffering frostbite. Slowly, little by little Odessa is dying, going numb as her soul shrinks and becomes hard as granite with cracks running throughout" (2002, para 4). By ignoring the destructive nature of sexual abuse and not letting the justice to prevail, the perpetrator is encouraged to commit this heinous act and continue it over and over again with different members of the family. Resultantly, many people suffer and their lives are badly effected due to him. Finally, he compares Lockhart's work to the work of Alice Walker because she, like her, can uncover the emotional truths and harrowing realities while at the same time has a comforting and lyrical style. Researchers have not examined Lockhart's *Fifth Born* intensively.

Textual Analysis

Odessa comes across exceptional circumstances as the caretaker ignores her emotional needs so she confronts many problems which children do not come across in their childhood, but the memories of

grandmother who is her attachment relation characterize *safe haven* which let her carry on with resilience.

She feels restless for her parents who arrange a party on every Saturday night which fills their house with the musty smell of beer spilled at different places, the music on the hi-fi goes on as no one bothers to turn it off, while the ash trays are full of cigarette butts. Finding herself amid such a chaos and confusion, she listens to the funeral songs of the neighborhood church. This reminds her of her grandmother and her words. She strongly wishes to have more knowledge about her. Similarly, when she looks at the image of Ella-Mae in the mirror, she compares her beauty to her grandmother but is confused to relate what is actually the relationship between the two. For her, the grandmother is the ultimate image of beauty because she is her safe haven. She has all the love for Odessa. Unlike other children, who are frightened of Ella-Mae because they have been fed-up by their elders that it is a ghost of a mad woman; Odessa feels that she has been comforted by the ghost. She feels confused but in spite of this confusion, she is trying to cope up with the situation in which she finds herself somewhat trapped.

She remembers grandmother on every important occasion of her life. When no one in the family is crying on the death of Leland, she remembers how her teacher in the school cried profusely when she lost her son. As she remembers a mother crying bitterly for her son, she also remembers her grandmother kissing her “three-year-old mouth with both of lips”, this image takes her to death scene of the grandmother when her body was lying in the casket. She starts crying apparently on the death of Leland but actually she is crying for “Granmama” (Lockhart 90).

While going through this state of mental turmoil, one day she answers back to Bernice. On this, she is severely beaten by her. She thinks herself to be a hate able figure craving for mother's physical and emotional love. In such a broken state of mind, she falls on her pillow where she finds grandmother's voice “with urgency into the darkness of [her] mind” (Lockhart 136) to keep silent. She is suggesting her that there is no need to communicate with those who do not understand her.

On their visit to Mississippi, Odessa notices that after the death of grandmother, her neat and clean house becomes a picture of mess with old and worn-out things scattered around. The flower-bed of the backyard which used to be full of flowers of varied and bright colours is

now carrying the body of grandfather's broken and rusty truck. The grandmother has decorated even the kitchen of the house with curtains. Now they are taken off, the windows are shut and the "glass [is] smeared with smashed flies and finger prints" (Lockhart 67). She goes to grandmother's bedroom where bright and crisp sheets are replaced by pale green sheets. There is a smell of grandfather's body-oil mixed with whiskey, while grandmother's cedar wardrobe is replaced by grandfather's rifle. She nostalgically opens one drawer and pulls out the Bible which is so old that its yellow papers are held together with the help of a rubber band. She wants to feel the presence of grandmother so she smells the Bible. For a minute she goes back in time when this house used to be neat and clean.

One day, Odessa runs away towards an unknown destination in the deep recesses of a jungle where she meets Ella-Mae, her real mother, who talks in anger about Odessa's grandmother who is her mother. Odessa is so badly hurt that she cannot tolerate it. To hold back her tears becomes difficult. Odessa runs away from her. Ella-Mae, on finding the child disturbed, feels sorry for what she has said. Odessa cannot tolerate someone undoing her good memories of her grandmother, "the one love [she] had understood all of [her] life" (Lockhart 169). It is an unseen but deeply felt safe haven which has provided her strength and stability to survive amid traumatic experiences.

Towards the end of the novel, grandmother's insubstantial safe haven is replaced by Ella-Mae's substantial presence. When Odessa returns home late, the father pounces upon her and jumps forward to severely beat her. Though not knowing that she is the mother of this child, still Ella-Mae takes stand and fights physically with Loni. The father insultingly says that Odessa's mother has left her, at that moment Odessa again remembers her grandmother singing song of love for her while kissing her sweaty cheeks. At this moment, Odessa is embraced by Ella Mae, her tangible and physical safe haven. Now she is in the secure and loving hands forever. So towards the end of the novel, grandmother's insubstantial safe haven is replaced by Ella-Mae's substantial, warm and sweet voice. Odessa feels lucky that Ella-Mae resembles her grandmother. The voice of grandmother has always guided her, but this time on meeting Ella-Mae, she does not hear grandmother's voice telling her to run away. Ella-Mae's hair, expression and voice resemble Odessa's grandmother. Whenever Odessa looks at

her, she is reminded of her original safe haven, which adds to the happiness of Odessa.

Conclusion

Home is a place of comfort and support provided by the parents who protect and love their children; but if it becomes a place of violence then a child fails to grow up into a stable and balanced individual. Odessa lives an extremely uncomfortable life in her home so one day she runs out of her home in search of peace of mind. The memories of grandmother and her voice guide her in every important step of her life. The grandmother is her safe haven, whose unseen presence imbues a sense of security within her, but still Odessa craves for a substantial safe haven, which she fortunately gets by a stroke of good luck.

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