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## **Behavioral Consequences of Gender Violence in Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born***

### **Abstract**

*Violence on children is a serious social issue with limited knowledge that explains the behavioral consequences of violence in childhood. The present study documents causation of aggressive parenting and insecure attachment attitude. African-American writers have reframed trauma studies from African perspective in the context of collective experience of slavery and private experiences of domestic abuse as experienced by black woman at home. The objective of this work is to portray the pain of mental wounds which are intangible and insubstantial. The recognition, acknowledgement, and finally encouragement by a supportive individual may facilitate the victim to participate in formal activities of life.*

**Keywords:** Father; Love; Pain; Trauma;

### **Introduction**

Violence against children is a vital societal issue with serious negative consequences like antisocial behavior, aggression, self-destruction, educational underachievement finally leading to anxiety and depression. The present study documents consequences of aggressive parenting and insecure attachment attitude through a selected trauma fiction—*Fifth Born*.

The debut novel *Fifth Born* (2002) of the contemporary African-American writer Zelda Lockhart won various National awards. Talking about the novel, in an interview to McKoy, the writer acknowledges that *Fifth Born* carries autobiographical notes. She says “It’s part of our family legacy. For whatever reason, I was born the child in my family that everybody just wanted to be quiet; don’t ask any questions. So, I was very quiet growing up but I paid attention to everything, a lot like Odessa. A lot of her history is a mix of my story, other people’s stories, and just things that I’ve heard from other people’s pasts about how the secrets in the family really made it complicated as adults to be able to move on with certain issues in their lives or be able to go back and figure out some things that have gone on so they can move forward”. (2007)

### **Research Questions**

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The research questions formulated to investigate consequences of behavioral violence in the novel are as follows:

- How aggressive behavior of father traumatizes childhood of the daughter?
- How unnatural behavior of father results in confusion and finally frustrated conduct of the protagonist?
- How indifferent attitude of Odessa's parents compels her to spend most of the time with her doll, Nakie?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Early as well as contemporary psychologists have defined the *unknowable* and *unspeakable* by the analysis and discussion of the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by the characters of the literary texts.

The founding figures who have made important contribution to literary criticism in relation to trauma studies strongly advocate the importance and complementary relationship between the two. Cathy Caruth links the two disciplines for she believes that this “new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering” (1996) will elucidate the unarticulated expressions of traumatic experiences. Anne Whitehead argues that there is a “resonance between theory and literature in which each speaks to and addresses the other... signalling to the reader the complex and supplementary relation between the two discourses” (2004). Geoffrey Hartman says that trauma theory turns the study of literature toward “more *listening*, more *hearing* of words within words, and a greater openness to testimony” (1995). Felman and Laub consider “literature and art as a precocious means of witnessing—of accessing reality—when all other modes of knowledge are precluded” (1992). They further highlight the importance of art and literature as they say, “art alone can live up to the task of contemporary thinking and of meeting the incredible demands of suffering, of politics and of contemporary consciousness . . .” (1992).

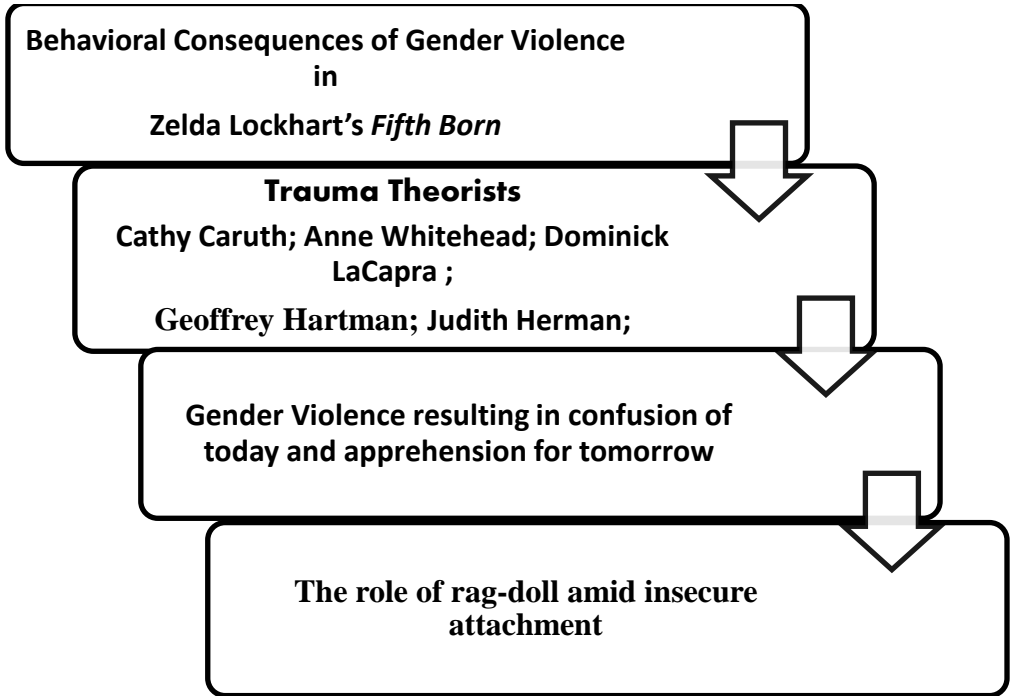
Narrating stories to the succeeding generations allow them to respond and resist the loss of meaning caused by trauma. They help the listener to analyze and gain an understanding of life with all its complexities. Literary writings, with the use of symbolical expressions and metaphorical language portray the mental wounds which are intangible and unsubstantial, thus liberate the author to explore the ramifications of trauma beyond the realm of factual details.

In *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman states that “[r]emembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of the social order and for the healing of individual victims” (1992). Though many trauma victims want to deny the traumatic event, one must identify it and discuss it. According to Herman, reconstruction of the traumatic experience in a narrative

transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the victim's life story (1992). She also stresses, "[a]voiding the traumatic memories leads to stagnation in the recovery process, while approaching them too precipitately leads to a fruitless and damaging reliving of the trauma" (1992). The patient should be encouraged to talk about her relationships which will provide her a context within which the particular meaning of the trauma can be understood (1992).

Dominick LaCapra explicates the concepts of *acting-out* and *working-through* with reference to psychological trauma. Working-through often necessarily contain remnants of acting-out; both are forms of repetition, the former deliberate on the present and future, the latter remains fixated on the past. LaCapra focuses on socio-political and ethical concerns such as justice, vengeance, and the possibility of perpetrators' trauma. He hopes that his work will enable "the elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices" (*Writing* 2014). He de-emphasizes memory instead emphasizes ethically-focused action. LaCapra's work implicitly rejects conflict between memory and history; instead he asserts that the work of historians, and others who write about the past, must always include facets of memory. It is a transitive concept, and a major component of working-through. He acknowledges that literature too may contain these elements of empathic self-reflexivity and thereby contribute to understanding of the past.

I think that reading trauma narratives in light of trauma theory is a satisfying activity because creating works of literature are actions taken on the part of intellectuals by raising voice against violence and suggesting solutions to the problems. I strongly believe that both Trauma fiction and Trauma studies deal with repressed, silenced and forgotten narratives of the oppressed gender of the society whose silent cry of pain have always been ignored and hidden under the grand narratives of patriarchal culture, hence when read together they supplement each other.



### **Methodology**

The research is based on trauma studies and literary criticism which are strongly related as one complements the other. A number of articles aided in understanding the selected theory and the selected text. To compile the data for theoretical framework, a number of scholarly books and articles—printed and electronic are integrated to the discussion. By engaging close-reading of the text, consequences of behavioral gender violence are investigated through qualitative approach.

### **Discussion**

Odessa harbors a strong wish to get love and attention of her father. She feels “jealous” (Lockhart, 2002) when she sees that a relative’s daughter of her age is being picked up by him in his arms. She feels that the girl is awake but still the father is carrying her up the stairs. Another thing which Odessa finds associated to her father which describes the personality of Loni is a big sleep-inducing sofa. This sofa describes that he is basically an easy-going man, unlike his brother, Leland. He likes to spend most of his time and money on beer, as it is “beer-stained and slit in one spot” (Lockhart, 2002). The word slit is also a *cutting* image which tells the reader about father’s actions which are related to ripping apart of people leaving painful marks on their psyche. When their relatives come to their house, she feels extremely jealous when the father laps Gretal. When Gretal is loved and kissed by her elders, “a chill ran through [her]” (Lockhart, 2002). She

immediately thinks of her mother and wants to go to her before Gretal reaches her mother too. The jealousy is actually a sign of extreme craving for father's love which she has never received. But on finding that the mother is venting out her anger on elder siblings, she runs away, knowing that she will not receive any expression of love from her too. Eventually she thinks of the only person who has always consoled her, the grandmother that used to blow her cheek and kiss it. This indifferent attitude of her parents which later on lead to violence compel Odessa to spend most of the time with her doll, Nakie, because she misses the love of close relations, which she compensates by loving her doll and playing with it.

It is observed that the narrator, Odessa, is most of the time observing her father from close quarters. She observes that he likes fishing, other than drinking, which has become a part of his routine. He fishes all day because it diverts his attention from "whatever made him so agitated" (Lockhart, 2002). Whenever he compares himself to his brother, he feels very low. His brother has got a status in the society which he has made by sheer hard work but Loni has failed to attain it by his reckless behavior. Moreover, he has destroyed lives of many people among whom Ella Mae is one; to whom he has never asked sorry for. Though he has never done anything to compensate his evil actions, yet at certain points of his life he wants to stay alone which tells that how he has made some people's life troublesome. Most of the time he comes back home, he is drunk and the presence of little Odessa "made him angry" (Lockhart, 2002). Odessa could not reason out the cause; she thinks that because she is most of the time crying and clinging to her caretaker—Bernice or she is the "fifth born, another girl—something agitated him at his very core" (Lockhart, 2002). She knows that her father dislikes her but to reach the real cause behind his irritability is beyond her imagination.

One night, in anger and fury, he violently breaks the baby bed of Odessa and she along with her doll comes down like lifeless "petals tossed on Granmama's grave" (Lockhart, 2002). The petals which become a part of a wedding ceremony or a celebration stand in stark contrast to the petals which become a part of the graveyard. She considers herself unfortunate as she has never received love, care and attention of her parents and is as worthless as petals which are rolled over somebody's grave. This made her left eye bleed. The wife screams at her husband and jumps forward to pick Odessa up from the debris. The child feels as if "[she] was dead" (Lockhart, 2002).

The father has left no chance to kill her by throwing her off the cot but unfortunately she survives to face further traumas which she later on receives from him. He physically injures her as in the morning Bernice cleans the blood all over her face which has dried up during the night. Her touch and words, which are the words of the caretaker, helped her in soothing the pain. Being a daughter, she does not want to associate any bad feelings with father, so though she remembers the image of climbing herself out of the broken bed but she has intentionally erased the image of the father bringing this destruction to her. In the morning the father insults her by comparing her to Gretal and by bumping his legs to her. Though the narrator is too young but can sense from the behavior of her father that he must have forgotten how he has broken the cot last night because she is conscious of the fact that she exists on periphery for him. She cannot break this peripheral position

to come in the center as father is having a headache and considers Odessa to be responsible for that. Odessa cannot make out the reason for she has not done anything except falling helplessly on the floor and getting bruises on her left eye. She is holding her quilted doll tightly which her grandmother has given her. The moment the father leaves the place, she also “unclench[es]” (Lockhart, 2002) her doll which has once been a source of security for her.

On one unfortunate night, the father aggressively comes to Odessa’s bedroom and physically assaults her. The aggressive attitude of the father is not letting her sleep peacefully. Discussing the traumatic moment, Herman observes, “It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. The traumatic moment becomes encoded in an abnormal form of memory, which breaks spontaneously into consciousness, both as flashbacks during waking states and as traumatic nightmares during sleep” (1992). For Odessa, the memories of the night are gloomy and harrowing. In her thoughts she feels as if she is running through songs and images of the gone days with no substantial strength, with shadows which she can vaguely see but hear with somewhat clarity. She finds herself floating among the objects which are *biting* and *pinching* her. This nightmarish, semi-conscious state of mind reminds her of her favorite quilted doll which her grandmother has given to her. That doll is turned soiled with blood stains when her father molested her. She, in her anger, threw it away which Gretal immediately picked up and took it to her collection of toys. The semi-conscious vague images remind her of her dear doll, a memoir of grandmother. Previously it has always been a source of strength to her because it reminded her of grandmother’s love and care but now the same object has become the reminder of the most painful incident of her life with which she associates “shame and fear” (Lockhart, 2002).

The physical assault of father has partially gone at the back of her mind but after the ruthless murder of father’s brother at the hands of her father, the forgotten incidents of her private pain have again come to the forefront. Even eating mulberries reminds her of how Bernice perfectly cleaned the blood-stained wooden floor of the hallway. Though apparently Odessa is enjoying mulberries and walking leisurely over the spots but each time she steps on the mulberry stain, she hears “Leland’s head hit and crack on the hard floor” (Lockhart, 2002). The traumatic event is re-experienced “through intrusive and distressing memories, nightmares, and flashbacks and by strong emotional and physiological reactions triggered by trauma-related reminders” (Stein, 2009). The traumatic memory is going parallel in her mind with the narrative memory which pushes her to share her experiences with someone. She wants to talk but cannot find anyone around her.

The scene of Uncle Leland’s murder repeatedly comes vividly to her mind. Her father kills his brother as if he used to kill a rabbit while hunting with his friends. Just as he used to rip apart the skin from the bone and flesh of the animal, similarly he induced the blade of his knife under his brother’s chin which makes him fall back hard on the table. Though he kills his brother but Odessa is reminded of Bernice who used to crack nuts on the eve of Christmas, telling that uncle’s life is as insignificant to husband and wife as abundant nuts cracked and consumed on the Christmas Eve. It is hard for her to erase the image of her

father's knife which "spun in the pool of blood" (Lockhart, 2002). The "[t]raumatic memory is registered outside normal memory and is thus lost to conscious recall. Its presence is marked by unfathomable flashes of disturbing images or compulsive repetitions" (Luckhurst, 2008). While walking on the road, she hides her face in shivering hands and cries bitterly on feeling ashamed on how she has lost Uncle Leland out of sheer reckless attitude of her parents. But her parents are least sorrowful, on taking one human life. Instead they are happy that they have become rich on receiving the money, business and property of the dead man. She is reminded of how Bernice has cleverly cleaned the blood stains and covered the remaining marks of blood with new carpet; ironically letting every one step on the memory of the dead man.

The reaction of Bernice is quite practical but the reaction of Odessa is quite natural for she has seen a murder and blood at a very young age. Both father and Bernice have "numbed" (Lockhart, 2002) themselves, but Odessa finds herself haunted by "sirens screeched all day, all night, to kill the demons in [their] house" (Lockhart, 2002). The daughter observes Bernice very closely and finds "no sign of the passion" (Lockhart, 2002) during his burial and funeral. Now she is completely a different person showing no sorrow, no feeling for the dead man. Bernice has comforted herself by numbing and pretending as if one of the many relatives has left the world. The priest, on finding that no person is crying on the death of the dead person has to search special passages from the Bible to make people shed tears. Leland's death has left such a lasting impact on her mind that she sees human limbs among the pieces of dirt in her nightmares. After a long time, she is reminded of her Nakie doll which she has thrown away in anger. This anxiety has brought forward all pain which was lying submerged in her subconscious. In reaction to it, she becomes stubborn and irritating to her mother. She goes to the extent of stealing a few things from a shop. The murder of Uncle Leland is getting on her nerves so she wants to tell it to any person whom she finds sympathetic towards her. One day she goes to school, where her teacher speaks nicely to her, she wants to tell him "my father had murdered his own brother" (Lockhart, 2002), but she stops herself from telling it.

The violent behaviour of the father is becoming a constant source of stress to Odessa. When her mother, who is actually her aunt/caretaker is not around, the father constantly observes her. He passes remarks on her body making her flinch by raising his big hands on her. The way in which he behaves is quite unlike the usual father. She is living amid "abusive family environment, the exercise of parental power is arbitrary, capricious, and absolute. Rules are erratic, inconsistent, or patently unfair" (Herman, 1992). While the mother is away in the hospital to have her gallstone operation, it is Odessa who is supposed to take care of everyone at the house. Other elder brothers and sisters are enjoying their lives with freedom, but though she is the fifth born yet she has "to make breakfast for everybody" (Lockhart, 2002). To harass the child, the father asks meaningless questions to her. This infuriates her but she very intelligently handles the situation by showing humble submission to him. To avoid him, she does not want to give long answers to him. Talking about patriarchal hold in black community Sedehi says, "[l]anguage is in the hands of men and they dominate women with it; men

decide what, to whom and where women can express themselves,” (2014). Odessa wants to stay in the company of her father for a minimum period of time. Psychotherapist Bessel van der Kolk says about children,

When children are unable to achieve a sense of control and stability, they become helpless. If they are unable to grasp what is going on and unable do anything about it to change it, they go immediately from (fearful) stimulus to (fight/flight/freeze) response without being able to learn from the experience. Subsequently, when exposed to reminders of a trauma (sensations, physiological states, images, sounds, situations) they end to behave as if they were traumatized all over again—as a catastrophe. (2008)

She cannot erase the memory of how the father breaks her baby bed, consequently making her fall on the floor like marbles coming out of the sack. In the presence of the father, she feels so insecure that her heart beats at a faster rate. The forgotten memories come to surface and she is reminded of the old cut on her left eye when she fell on the broken parts of the baby bed. Bernice has always given a cover to her husband by telling to people that it is just a birthmark, nothing else. Ironically it is a birthmark because she was too young when she received this mark on her face from the cruel hands of her father. Felman and Laub think,

[T]rauma victims live not with memories of the past, but with an event that could not and did not proceed through its to completion, has no ending, attained no closure, and therefore, as far as its victims are concerned, continues into the present and is current in every respect. The victim, indeed, is not truly in touch either with the core of his traumatic reality or with the fatedness of its reenactments, and thereby remains entrapped in both. (1992)

The most painful fact of the episode is the cruel attitude of father who cuts jokes on her. He says that she does not keep her eyes on her feet which make her fall frequently from the basement stairs. She is “more dented up than a run-over polecat” (Lockhart, 2002). At such remarks all her siblings laugh out loudly. On passing these remarks, “he cut[s] his eyes over [her]” (Lockhart, 2002). The verb *cut* suggests the cutting expression of the father with which he looks at her daughter whom he does not own. She is his child not born out of love but out of hatred for Ella Mae. He wants to degrade and insult her mother’s strength, which is one of the reasons of not owning the child of whom he is the father.

The trauma of a twelve year old child is obvious as she says that she is scared that “he would look in [her] eyes and know some part of [her] was dead forever” (Lockhart, 2002). She escapes the hard reality of life by running to a book-store in the neighborhood to look at comic books and horoscope. On reading these books, her face relaxes as they take her into the world of innocence but when time of going back to home comes her softness is converted into hardness, which is hidden beneath the open reality of cuts and bruises on her body.

When the mother comes back home, she is surprised to find “the scabs and bruises on [her] face” (Lockhart, 2002). Now Odessa is mature enough to feel



embarrassed. Thinking it a matter of shame that she has again been assaulted by her father she hides it from everyone, even from mother. Again the already sensitive left eye has gone through rough treatment which is not good for the eye. Odessa keeps her eyes on the pattern of the bedcover while Bernice “for the first time in years” (Lockhart, 2002) touches her. With her finger tips she touches the obvious wounds of Odessa as if she is trying to read the story imprinted on her body. She spontaneously remarks that she has “got so big” (Lockhart, 2002) in her absence. Actually she is comparing her with the first time when she was just a child of five. At that time she cried bitterly taking the name of her father while the mother applied ointment, washed all her clothes, made her sleep with rum and cough syrup but this time she managed it all by herself—from cleaning, to calming herself mentally and emotionally.

### **Findings & Conclusion**

This work of literature focuses on disturbed childhood of Odessa who is traumatized by an aggressive father who violently bruises his own daughter. She experiences sinister sense of wretchedness and feels frustrated by extraordinary circumstances and experiences in her life which are beyond her comprehension. This results in psychological and emotional trauma. Though Loni is a biological father yet he behaves rather unnaturally as he repetitively assaults his own daughter. This makes Odessa tired of her life as she finds herself clutched in a tight situation. She goes to the point of stealing little things from the neighborhood store. The indifferent attitude of the caretaker multiplies her sorrow. Nevertheless she consoles her distressed soul by holding Nakie, the doll which she was gifted by her grandmother, in her hand. However, the novel ends on a hopeful note as Odessa finally meets her real mother who rescues her from the life of aggression and torture.

### **Recommendation**

It is essential to address the complex needs of trauma victims otherwise the repressed feelings may resurface affecting the innocence of a child. It requires skills of the therapist, energy and motivation of the patient, and strong therapeutic between the patient and the therapist. My study has been a pioneering effort to analyze current conceptions about chronic childhood abuse. There is still much to investigate and elaborate about this process.

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