

Childhood Trauma, Rehabilitation and Resilience And Survival In Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out Of Carolina*



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ABSTRACT

Trauma fiction is a genre that tends to focus on the different ways in which the novelists of the contemporary literary world, explore the concept of trauma through storytelling. It usually involves the author's memories of any traumatic event in their life. This paper will examine the impact of trauma on one's psyche and the struggles to overcome the negativity to survive and thrive. This paper will examine the concept of trauma in the life of the protagonist of the novel chosen for study, *Bastard out of Carolina*. The protagonist is Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright, a little girl born to a fifteen-year-old unmarried mother, Anney. The hospital staff discover that the baby girl is illegitimate and declare that she is a "bastard", as she is born out of wedlock. The struggles and sufferings of both mother and child are portrayed vividly, as well as the resilience of the human spirit.

Keywords: trauma, pain, sufferings, struggle, victim, patriarchy, survival, abuse

Introduction:

Concepts, themes and theories are various and abundant in literature since the early days. Contemporary literature, especially seems to lean towards a few extremes of graphic description and detail with regard to death, abuse – both physical and mental – and suffering. Contemporary literary theories are many too. Trauma theory is one such theory that shall be discussed in this paper. Trauma theory deals with traumatic experiences of authors that have affected their literary works. It is also concerned with the way the traumatic experiences are represented. Freud himself, after his research wrote that childhood trauma was the source of most neuroses and psychoses.

'trauma' means a deeply distressing or disturbing experience. It also means 'severe emotional shock and pain caused by an extremely upsetting experience', 'a disordered psychic or behavioural state, resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury'. There is physical trauma and psychological trauma. In the field of medicine it means 'physical injury'. Psychological or mental trauma is a result of distressing or disturbing event. It could be the result of a single distressing experience or recurring events over many weeks or years or decades leading to long-term negative consequences. ¹⁻³There are some cases where some individuals may cope better than others.

Trauma Studies:

The role of memory in shaping individual as well as cultural identities, and the representation of

psychological trauma in language are the main elements that define the field of trauma studies. Postcultural, sociocultural and postcolonial theories alongwith psychoanalytic theory are the basis of criticism which interprets representations of an extremely disturbing experience and its impact upon identity and memory. Trauma is widely understood to be a severe, disruptive experience which has a profound effect on one's emotional organization and perception of the external world. Trauma studies is a field that studies the impact of trauma in literature and society by analyzing its psychological, rhetorical, and cultural significance.

Trauma studies developed first in the 1990s. It mainly relied on Freudian theory to develop a model of trauma. This model of trauma depicts that suffering is not representable. Further pluralistic model of trauma suggests that the "assumed unspeakability of trauma is one among many responses to an extreme event rather than its defining feature" (Mambrol 2018). The main focus is how identity, the unconscious, and memory are impacted and influenced by extreme traumatic events. Many other researchers in the study of shock and hysteria that impact one's psychology are Joseph Breuer, Pierre Janet, Jean-Martin Charcot, Hermann Oppenheim, Abram Kardiner, and Morton Prince.

The early theories of Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* (1895) written alongwith Joseph Breuer, and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings* (1920), in which he has enlarged upon his later adapted theories, dominate trauma's conceptual employment by contemporary literary trauma critics. Freud and

Breuer insist that it is the memory of rather than the original event, which causes great harm as it is a constant reminder of the source of pain and hurt. It requires therefore, the “talking cure or abreaction” to understand the effects of the past and gain freedom from the “symptom-causing grasp”. Thus, the traumatic event is said to be understood only after a latency period of deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) that delays the effects and meaning of the past (Breuer & Freud 192). The process and impact are explained by Freud and Breuer, thus:

We may reverse the dictum “cessante causa cessat effectus” (when the cause ceases the effect ceases) and conclude from these observations that the determining process (that is, the recollection of it) continues to operate for years – not indirectly, through a chain of intermediate causal links, but as a directly releasing cause – just as psychical pain that is remembered in waking consciousness still provokes a lachrymal secretion long after the event. Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences. The memory of extreme events inflicts psychological pain, and also considers the previous repressed experience in the unconscious. The term ascribed to this traumatic remembering is “pathogenic remembrances” for the pathologic symptoms the memory causes (Breuer & Freud 40). Trauma, can thus be defined in relation to the process of remembering and as an event that is sheltered within the unconscious causing a splitting of the ego or dissociation.

Prominent Authors of Trauma Fiction:

There are many writers whose personal trauma is reflected in their works and the author, Dorothy Allison, chosen for study is one such writer. Other writers who fall in the same category are Virginia Woolfe, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Lidia Yuknavitch, Roxane Gay, Nate Powell, Scott Heim, Caryl Phillips, Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Martha Gelhorn, George Eliot, Maya Angelou, Richard Wright, Dorothy Parker, Sherwood Anderson, Ambrose Bierce, Jonathan Swift, Kurt Vonnegat and Mark Twain. Themes of violence, suffering, pain and loss are expressed through the greatest works of literature. Most of admired writers of American and British literature were also journalists and for many of them, the experience of physical and emotional trauma in their work and personal lives shaped their most memorable works. Literary trauma theory is applied to identify “trauma texts”. Its main focus is to study texts that use intertextuality, repetition, fragmentation, repetition, and language manipulation to create meaning due to extreme traumatic stress. The works of William H. Gass are widely acknowledged as prime examples of postmodern trauma texts.

Dorothy Allison:

Dorothy Earlene Allison, born on 11th April, 1949, is an American writer from South Carolina. She passed away on 6 November, 2024. Her mother, Ruth Gibson Alison, was fifteen years old when she gave birth to her and her father died when she was a baby. Her mother raised her as a single parent relying on her jobs as a waitress and cook. She married eventually and this led to the sexual abuse of Dorothy by her step-father when she was five years old, a torment that she suffered for seven years. Her mother, hearing about the abuse from a relative to whom Dorothy had confided, stepped in to put an end to the abuse, which enabled the family to stay together. However, the abuse resumed and went on five more years. The abuse affected her both physically and mentally, and she also contracted gonorrhea. This disease was diagnosed only in her 20s when she was treated for it. This left her unable to bear children. She, along with her family moved to central Florida when she was 11. Her time in school offered her some respite from the oppression at home. She has mentioned her awareness of her own lesbian sexuality during her adolescence.

Dorothy’s writings mainly focus on class struggle, sexual abuse, child abuse, feminism and lesbianism. She has given credit to “militant feminists” for her decision to write. She is the recipient of many awards for her writing including many Lambda Literary Awards. *Bastard out of Carolina*, *Two or Three Kings I know for Sure*, *Cavedweller* and *Truth: Short Stories* are some of her significant works. Her books mainly include or reflect her life experiences, including the abuse she faced at the hands of her stepfather, dealing with poverty and her unconventional attraction for women. She is proud of her roots and always identifies with working class and working poor communities. She seeks to broaden the representations of poor and impoverished women in her books.

Autobiographical Element:

Dorothy Allison’s debut novel was *Bastard out of Carolina*. The novel was greatly acclaimed by critics and was a finalist for the National Book Award. It generated much controversy for portraying sexual abuse, and has many times appeared on lists of books that have been banned. The book is a semi-autobiographical trauma narrative, and set in Allison’s hometown, Greenville in South Carolina. Greenville County, South Carolina, is a wild, lush place that houses the Boatwright family, that the novel deals with, which is a tight-knit clan. The clan is made of rough-hewn and hard-drinking men who do not hesitate to shoot each other’s trucks, and willful women who marry early and age too quickly. Her family, as she described them, fit the stereotypes of ‘white trash’ (Guinn 23). Bone is acutely aware of her

family's position in the social hierarchy. She says, 'We knew what the neighbors called us . . . We knew who we were' (Allison 82). It is the 1950s. The narrator and protagonist of this novel is Ruth Anne 'Bone' Boatwright. The main conflict of the story is between Bone and her mother's husband, Glen Waddell. Glen Wadell, the stepfather is described as "cold as death, mean as a snake".

Birth of the Protagonist:

Like many postmodern novels, *Bastard out of Carolina's* focus is on traumatic childhood experiences in the familial context. The novel's narrator is Ruth Anne 'Bone' Boatwright who recounts events, which are not possible for her to remember. Her mother Anney became pregnant with her at the age of fifteen and delivered her at sixteen. Bone was born of labour induced early by a car accident her mother Anney, was caught in. In her comatose state, she says to the nurses and doctors that Bone's father is unknown, and so they issue Bone's birth certificate with the word 'Illegitimate' stamped across it in big red letters. This certificate is the cause of many insults and humiliating confrontation for both Bone as well as Anney. Thus, trauma begins early for little Bone, and follows one after the other.

At the age of seventeen, Anney marries Lyle Parsons. She is very happy with him. She has her second daughter, Reese with him. He promises to adopt Bone, but tragically dies in a car accident. Anney is left alone with her two little daughters, Bone and Reese. Anney then starts going out with Glen Waddell, the youngest in his family. He is quite the black sheep. He is personally interested in her two little daughters, but openly devoted to Anney. She conceives due to this relationship and then marries Glen. In the meanwhile, when the courthouse catches fire, Anney uses this opportunity and burns Bone's birth certificate in this fire. This marriage between Glen Waddell and Anney marks a huge turning point for the worse in Bone's life.

The night Anney is admitted in the hospital to deliver her third baby, Glen Wadell molests little Bone in the car. With this starts the sexual and physical abuse which will go on for more than ten years. Both kinds of abuse cause endless trauma in Bone's life. The death of Anney's third child, a still born, causes something to snap in Glen Wadell. He starts taking out his anger on Bone. It causes in him low self-esteem. Anney seems quite blind to his faults and his ill-treatment of Bone even when Reese implies that she too, is being molested by Glen Wadell. This abuse is horrific as Bone all this time calls him Daddy Glen. He abuses him for seven years which causes unspeakable misery in her life. Such painful occurrences are known as Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). Such childhood experiences can

have a negative effect on an individual's well-being that is said to often last into adulthood. The situation is worsened when Anney is able to convince herself and justify the faults of Glen: "It must have been like what he felt when he stood around his daddy's house, his head hanging down" (Allison 14-21). Bone is mentored into considering her position clearly as "this body, like my aunts' bodies, was born to be worked to death, used up and thrown away . . . born to shame and death" (Allison 206).

Maternal Ambivalence:

Bone has a complex relationship with her. Bone is deeply loyal to her mother and loves her intently-a love that is strained as she grows older and witnesses the mother's relationships with abusive men that causes Bone's own lifelong trauma. Maternal ambivalence is an important concept of the theory of trauma. Bone's mother is a perfect example of this poignant concept. She not only comes through as Bone's fierce protector, but also as the ultimate traitor. On one occasion, Glen beats Bone so badly that she ends up in a hospital. Anney then sends Bone away to live with her aunts for some time till she is healed. It is quite shocking that she is able to forgive Glen. She later makes the decision to take Bone back with her, which enables the continuity of Bone's abuse at the hand of Glen again.

The abuse goes on till the funeral of Aunt Ruth, when Aunt Raylene sees the bruises and blood on Bone's back and informs the uncles about it. The uncles immediately get together and beat up Glen when they find out that he had done this to Bone. Anney then leaves Glen, takes the girls and moves into an apartment. However, she looks so miserable that Bone tells her to go back to Glen, but refuses to go back with her. Torn between her love for Bone and her dependency on Glen, Anney exemplifies the moral and emotional compromises often forced by systemic poverty. This dynamic illustrates the concept of generational trauma, wherein unresolved pain and dysfunction are transmitted across generations.

"Mama stared at me like I was someone else, someone she didn't know. She whispered, 'You lie,' and turned her face away." (Allison 292)

Bone's pain is tangible, when she realizes that her mother prefers to go back to a man who has mercilessly abused her daughter almost her whole life. Towards the end of the novel, Bone seems to come to terms with her mother's struggle with her love for her children and love for the man in her life. Anney seems to live in denial of Bone's abuse at the hands of Wadell. The destructive power of trauma is evident in its ability to sever the strongest bond between mother and child. She seems inclined to refuse to believe in Bone which reflects a broader societal tendency to disbelieve or minimize

survivors' accounts, ³⁻⁵compounding their sense of isolation, despair, and the sense of hopelessness.

Mental and Physical Abuse:

One day, Glen visits them in their apartment to try and convince Bone to come back to him. Bone is caught alone at home and refuses to go back with him. He is enraged by her refusal and uses this opportunity to brutally beat and rape her. Anney returns at this moment, and drags Bone away from him and takes her to the car. Glen crawls behind them and begs Anney to kill him. It is disgusting to note that Bone passes out, but Anney throws her arms around the man whom she saw raping her daughter, and forgives him for his unforgivable crime against her daughter. She offers forgiveness to a man who has been abusing her innocent daughter causing her severe trauma for twelve long years. The horrifying trauma of Bone has caused a lasting impact on her:

At the hospital when they had left me alone in the bathroom for a minute, I Had looked at myself in the mirror and known I was a different person. Older, meaner, rawboned, crazy, and hateful. I was full of hate. I had spit on the glass, spit on my life, not caring any more who I was or what I would be.

(Allison 22)

The mental and physical abuses by Bone's stepfather destroy her self-esteem making her feel worthless, at fault, and to put it simply, "bad". The very nickname of the protagonist, "Bone", is not only a representation of her physique which is "thin and fragile", but also a symbol of her emotional resilience. Her name is symbolic of her vulnerability as well as her strength, as she battles to survive in a world where she seems to be an outcaste because of her status as a "bastard". The novel's use of first-person narration gives the readers an opportunity to view the situation from Bone's perspective, fostering empathy while also highlighting the limitations of her understanding. Bone's narration is not reliable. It is marked by moments of confusion and self-blame and reveals the internalized shame that is seen to often accompany abuse. For instance, Bone reflects:

"I thought it was my fault... that somehow I had made him angry, made him want to hurt me." (Allison 134) As noted by Bessel van der Kolk in *The Body Keeps the Score*, this internalization of blame is a common response among trauma survivors: "Survivors often believe they are to blame for their victimization, a belief reinforced by societal attitudes."

After her very first abuse at the hands of Glen Wadell, Bone had heard his lies to her mother, who asked Bone later what she had done to deserve this beating. This attitude has strengthened the feeling of worthlessness in Bone who realizes like Wadell himself, that Anney is incapable of facing the fact that Wadell is a pathological liar and compulsory pedophile when it comes to bone herself. This

occurrence is representative of Allison's own abuse at the hands of her stepfather who sexually abused her at the tender age of five and continued the same for six years. Her mother, whom she loved deeply, was either incapable or unwilling to deal with the issue, which hurt her deeply. By the time Bone reaches the age of thirteen, she has accumulated a lifetime supply of disappointment, bitterness, self-hatred and resentment for her mother.⁵

Traditional Setting:

The setting of the narration in the Southern Gothic tradition contributes towards the trauma aesthetics of the novel. Southern Gothic tradition is a genre that is characterized by decay, grotesquerie, and a preoccupation with social outcasts. The Gothic elements in *Bastard out of Carolina* appears to amplify the novel's exploration of trauma by situating it in a world that sees an abundance of moral and physical decay. The dilapidated homes, oppressive heat, and pervasive poverty of the Boatwrights' South create an environment that is steeped in suffering and despair.

"The house smelled of mold and old dreams, the kind that had dried up and cracked long before I was born." (Allison 56)

The setting itself becomes a metaphor for the cumulative weight of trauma. The Southern Gothic's emphasis on haunting and the uncanny, seems to mirror the psychological disorientation Bone experiences. ⁶As trauma theory emphasizes, survivors often feel "haunted" by their pasts, unable to reconcile their memories with their present realities.

Resilience and Survival:

By presenting trauma as a complex experience that is instigated by the intersections of gender, poverty, and familial ties, *Bastard out of Carolina* sheds light on how trauma both creates resilience, and fractures identity. This analysis uses Southern Gothic tropes and trauma theory to dissect the story's examination of memory, suffering, and survival. The novel, which is narrated by Ruth Anne "Bone" Boatwright, reaches out as a chronicle of the layers of abuse and neglect, which define her upbringing. Trauma fiction as a literary genre seeks to lend a voice to that which is too complex to articulate—the profound psychological and emotional impact of traumatic experiences. Allison's novel exemplifies this genre by presenting Bone's abuse not merely as personal affliction but as a reflection of systemic and generational trauma. Bone's life was already laid out as it was going to be, just as her mother's, her aunts' and her grandma's was. Aunt Ruth explains to Bone: "Nothing else will ever hit you this hard," she promised... 'Now you look like a Boatwright... you got the look. You're as old as you're ever gonna get,

girl. This is the way you'll look till you die" (Allison 8). Bone was conditioned to understand exactly what her aunt was saying, that all their kind of people were good for was only working and then dying—the poverty that she was born into would never go away; it was in her bloodline.

One observes that the narration is fragmented, indicating the fragmented nature of trauma. The unfolding of the story in episodic vignettes gives the readers an insight into how traumatic memories are often experienced as disjointed and nonlinear. This structure aligns with trauma theorists' observations that traditional narrative forms struggle to accommodate the chaos of trauma. Leigh Gilmore argues in her critique of the novel that Anney's actions reveal the entanglement of motherhood and shame: "Anney's decision to remain with Glen stems not from a lack of love for Bone but from her internalized belief that her worth is tied to her ability to maintain a family, even at great personal cost" (Gilmore 103). This insight highlights the novel's critique of the infiltration of patriarchal structures in the society that marginalize and oppress women like Anney, and leave them trapped in cycles of dependence and despair. The story of resilience adds to a Southern history consistently written mostly by males. This novel is proof that female perspectives can only enrich the Southern experience, instead of being a side-show to a hugely male dominated literary arena, and thus offering a "resistance to the patriarchal narrative provides . . . a strategy for making female experience visible, audible" (Ladd 60).

Bastard out of Carolina is not only a harrowing story, but also a story of resilience and survival. The survival of Bone is an example of the resilience of the human spirit in the midst of intense suffering. The role of storytelling, in Bone's process of healing is amplified by Allison in the novel, as evident in the words of Bone: "I told myself stories at night, stories where I was strong and beautiful and someone loved me." (Allison 212). These moments of imaginative escapades help to highlight the restorative power of narrative, that aligns with the therapeutic potential of storytelling in recovery from trauma.⁷⁻⁸

The novel has an ambiguous ending that leaves the future of Bone uncertain but hopeful simultaneously. She is painfully scarred by her experiences, but she refuses to be silenced which suggests a nascent resilience on her part. As Allison herself has noted in interviews, *Bastard out of Carolina* is ultimately a story about survival: "You write the truth, but you also write the possibility of healing, because that's what we live for" (Allison, qtd. in Juhasz 45).

Conclusion:

Identity and self-worth, family and loyalty, abuse and trauma, search for love and acceptance, poverty and social class, the power of storytelling, resilience and survival are some of the themes that abound in the novel, *Bastard out of Carolina*. The novel is powerful and poignant and emotionally charged. It is a portrayal of Bone's coming of age journey which is both harrowing and redemptive at the same time. The story offers a raw and unflinching insight into the complexities of family, love and self-acceptance. Bone's story provides the readers an idea of how poverty, stigma and trauma tend to intersect, along with how the quest for love and identity can drive an individual to breaking point. The novel comes across as a testament of human resilience through the act of storytelling, which provides the individual a chance to take back control of one's own life, that had been once taken away from them. In "Five Lessons from My Mentor," Boylorn explains that "stories are inherent to experience . . . We tell and listen to stories as a way of 'knowing' and making sense of ourselves in the context of other lives and experiences" (Allison 45).

K. K. Roeder in the April 1991 publication of *San Francisco Review of Books* states that Allison: "relates the difficulty of Bone's struggles with intensity, humor, and hard-wrought rejection of self-pity, rendering *Bastard* a rare achievement among works of fiction dealing with abused children." In the July 5, 1992, edition of *The New York Times Book Review*, George Garrett said the book "in no way seems to be a patchwork of short stories linked together. Everything, each part, belongs only to the novel" and "close to flawless". He compared it to J.D. Salinger's novel *Catcher in the Rye* and Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, writing, "Special qualities of her style include a perfect ear for speech and its natural rhythms; an unassertive, cumulative lyricism; an intensely imagined and presented sensory world, with all five senses working together; and, above all, again and again a language for the direct articulation of deep and complex feelings."

Allison gives the readers an insight into the struggles of an adolescent in the south where patriarchal oppression is the norm, and violence is acceptable and tolerable. As author Dorothy Allison confirms, "[t]he story becomes the thing needed" (Allison *Two* 3). The narration carries more impact because of the firsthand account of her abuse and trauma. Allison says, "Poor people in the South do not make the historical registers unless we knock some rich man off his horse" (Guinn 5), and continues, "Our true stories may be violent, distasteful, painful, stunning, and haunting, I do not doubt, but our stories will be literature. No one will be able to forget them, and though it will not always make us happy to read of the

dark and dangerous . . . our reality is the best we can ask of our literature”

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