
Entangled Affections and Inherited Silence: A Trauma Bonding Analysis of Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born*

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ABSTRACT

Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born* (2002) dwells on complex issues of familial nature created by abuse, intergenerational trauma and silence within an African American family in St. Louis. It makes a blend of forgotten secrets, generational patterns, violence, financial issues, social pressure and desire for normalcy that is inaccessible unless imagined. Amidst such a poisonous atmosphere abuse lurks in every corner of the novel. This paper applies trauma bonding theory to analyze how cycles of abuse, denial, and secrecy entrap victims in paradoxical attachments to perpetrators. Focusing on the protagonist Odessa, her family members and relatives, the study identifies the core elements of trauma bonding that binds the story together. The analysis reveals how Lockhart critiques not only individual issues of the psyche but also the cultural mechanisms that perpetuate and facilitates silence, violence and abuse, showing that recovery requires both testimony and narrative reclamation. This analysis of *Fifth Born* being situated in trauma literature, highlights its contribution to understanding the relational, cultural, and generational dimensions of abuse.

Introduction



Trauma narratives in African American women's literature often engage with an entanglement of love, violence and attachments, where family, community, and history remain a complex yet dominant manipulative factor. A mixture of psycho-social concerns predetermines and governs the lives of the characters who remains a puppet maneuvered by destiny and preset generational patterns. These patterns often traumatic emerge from a jumble of pain, silence, violence and subjugation. Zelda Lockhart's *Fifth Born* (2002) portrays the childhood of Odessa Lumas, the child protagonist who grows up in an unwanted environment where her father sexually and physically abuses her, while her mother adopts silence and self-imposed forgetfulness to maintain a semblance of normalcy amidst chaos. Unlike narratives of abuse that focus primarily on the abuser's cruelty, Lockhart illuminates the emotional bonds that tether victims to perpetrators despite ongoing harm. Such emotional bonds created as a result of trauma are trauma bonds. According to Dutton and Painter trauma bonds are created when a relationship is governed by "power imbalances and intermittent good-bad treatment" (Dutton & Painter, 1993, 105) which strengthens attachments. These abusive relationships start with an episode of abuse that initially appear as an anomaly which is followed by episodes of concern or positive regard from the perpetrator keeping the emotional attachment intact and enhanced. With time abuse becomes the new reality but the attachment remains making the victim believe that the "abuse will be repetitive and inescapable" and the only option is to prevent it through personal effort. (Dutton & Painter, 1993, 106) Trauma bonds are accompanied by abuse cycles, "misplaced loyalties", where victims "will not leave no matter what their" perpetrators do. (Carnes, 1997, Trauma Bonds and their Allies section) People trapped in trauma bonds "stay involved or wish to stay involved with people who betray them. Emotional pain, severe consequences and even the prospect of death do not stop their caring or commitment." (Carnes, 1997, Trauma Bonds and their Allies section) Trauma bonding theory, introduced by Patrick Carnes (1997) in *The Betrayal Bond*, describes the psychological attachment formed between victim and abuser through cycles of fear, intermittent kindness, dependency, and secrecy. In "The Betrayal Bond" Patrick J. Carnes considers trauma bonds as addictive bonds in pathological relationships, that suffered a "fundamental betrayal" and with time becomes such an obsession that the victim stops prioritizing themselves, even their lives. By betrayal Carnes means

A breach of trust. Fear. What you thought was true—counted on to be true—was not. It was just smoke and mirrors, outright deceit and lies. Sometimes it was hard to tell because there was just enough truth to make everything seem right.

The victims enter a pattern owing to their addiction to the trauma and the trauma bond making them vulnerable to further similar traumatic episodes of violence. According to Carnes "trauma bonds can be



very durable bonds” that in spite of abuse victims remain loyal for years. (Carnes, 1997, Trauma Bonds as Addictive section) These bonds created out of trauma can be positive without the “betrayal component” and act as a survival bond. The power of trauma bonds is enhanced by its allies. “Reactivity, arousal, blocking, splitting, abstinence, shame and repetition compulsion can all be in the service of traumatic bonding.” (Carnes, 1997, Trauma Bonds as Addictive section) Although employed by the victims as solutions for trauma, they become more harmful. Trauma Bonds “can be formed almost instantaneously, but they can last forever.” (Carnes, 1997, Trauma Bonds as Addictive section)

Objectives of the Study

This paper explores *Fifth Born* through trauma bonding, asking:

1. **To analyze the ways in which Lockhart’s narrative illustrates the psychological mechanisms of trauma bonding.**
2. **To explore how the novel represents silence and secrecy as binding forces within in traumatic relationships.**
3. **To examine how intergenerational trauma perpetuates cycles of abuse in *Fifth Born*.**

Methodology

This paper combines trauma bonding theory with close textual analysis. Zelda Lockhart’s *Fifth Born*, a prominent novel within African American women’s literary tradition, will be studied using Patrick Carnes’ views on trauma bonding. The intricate weave of the elements on trauma bonding like intermittent reinforcement, power imbalance, denial, shame, internalization of the abuser’s views by the victim, and intergenerational trauma will be mapped through the experiences of the characters, especially Odessa, the child protagonist of the novel. The themes of abuse, silence, and attachment will entwine and intersect with the elements of trauma bonding to present the combined harrowing impact these had on Odessa’s psyche.

Discussion

Lockhart’s novel *Fifth Born* is replete with instances of violence and abuse, and the resultant trauma is explicitly evident in the characters. In such a situation trauma bonding is imminent and well expected. Indeed, the socio-cultural elements, expectations and lack of means makes escape from such bond almost impossible, trapping them deeper and deeper into the trap. Coexistence and codependency with the



abuser become the only reality, compelling the abused to minimize the abuse through self-induced or forced forgetfulness.

In the center of Trauma Bonding functions wildly the dynamics of power imbalance and intermittent reinforcement. Intermittent good and bad treatment solidifies the trauma bond. Moreover, the dependence the weak has on the powerful for gaining a minimal surge of power or acceptance strengthens the trauma bond. The primary abuser in the stories of the abused characters is Loni, father of Odessa. He traumatized multiple characters and even killed his own elder brother Leland, the only possible exit from abuse for Odessa and her mother. He relishes the power and control he has on the characters he has abused. Loni wields absolute power within the household, enforcing all the members into dependency, hence none ever tried to undermine his authority. The only ones who gave a fight against him were the elder children and Odessa. They received beatings when they disobey, subsequently as they grew up, they started to avoid the household as much as they could. However, Odessa suffered his violence to the extreme, her resistance was replied with rape and permanent wounds to the body and mind. Loni managed a permanent power imbalance state with people he could control and relished his power, exemplified by his laughter at the sense of fear and inferiority he can bring about into his victims. After violating Odessa, he laughs and made all the other kids to laugh with him, reasserting his might and dominance in the family by saying ““I recollect you better either learn to keep your eyes on your feet, or you better not be thinking you so different...You more dented up than a run-over polecat.” (Lockhart, 2002,117) Abuse was his only way to assert power. He also raped his niece Devon’s daughter Gretel. The victim accepted around him abuse was imminent so they focused on prevention as the only thing they can control to maintain any semblance of control in their life, which is in reality non-existent. On suspecting Odessa being raped, Gretel remarks- “Girl, haven’t you figured out how to stay out of your old man’s way yet?” (Lockhart, 2002, 113) She and her mother both were victims and to maintain any sense of normalcy they took to the belief that “men can’t help it, especially if they stay drunk all the time. They forget who they wife” and sexually assaults anybody, and decides “we just got to stay out that nigga’s way” (Lockhart, 2002, 115) revealing their secret of being raped by Loni. They make themselves believe that they have some control over future episodes of abuse if they prevent it. This the fake sense of control that traps victims with the abuser in spite of repeated abuse, strengthening the trauma bond with time. The common factor among all these victims is that they were under his protection, except Ella Mae. Such imbalance of power makes the victimization repetitive and the bond unbreakable, because the abuser constantly preserves his sense of power by repeating the violations and the victims never leave as they believe and realize they need the



abuser to survive, empowering the dependency. Dependency deepens attachment, and leaving or resisting threatens both safety and belonging. Odessa was dependent on her father for material stability and emotional legitimacy. He controls the household physically and symbolically, dictating rules about movement, and speech. Odessa and her siblings became experts at behaving according to his moods, a ritualized survival tactic. Gretel and her teenage mother Devon, were also dependent on him for protection and financial support. Odessa's adoptive mother Bernice, is also entrapped in a trauma bond and often appears traumatized and beaten. There are instance she uses her pregnancy to prevent beatings.

Amidst the interplay of power imbalance and dependency intermittent reinforcement of positive and negative treatment plays a dominant role in enhancing the emotional attachment. Odessa craves her father's approval although she suffers his violence. Loni plays the game of harm followed by fleeting reward well, entrapping all his victims. He beats Bernice, but later acts as if nothing happened and acts as the good husband who provides and takes the family for outings. He abuses Gretel and her mother, but also provides them with enough money to spent in new clothes and luxuries inaccessible to Odessa and her siblings. Odessa's mother says "That don't make sense. When that girl get tired of wearing something, she just throw it in a corner and get a new one." (Lockhart, 2002, 113) For Odessa, the ostracized one in the family small acts of inclusion like asking her to help in cleaning the hunted rabbits was enough to keep her attached. Loni flung away Odessa and her crib when she was a baby damaging her eye permanently. Yet the next day he showed irritation that Bernice let the baby play on the floor. Following this incident, we see Bernice taking care of her wound and cajoled her into forgetting the incident "See? Boo-boo's all gone. Let mama kiss it up to God." (Lockhart, 2002, 26) She also defends her against Loni's complaints- "Loni, leave her alone, she ain't feelin good this mornin." (Lockhart, 2002,26) Upon discovering about Odessa's rape Bernice beats her till she went unconscious. Later she cleans her up, puts ointment on her wounds and help her recover with daily doses of rum and lemon cough syrup. She even defends her against Loni's accusation regarding skipping school saying— "Let the chile get better. She ain't feelin good." (Lockhart, 2002,42) In all the trauma bonding relationships- Loni and Bernice, Loni and Odessa, Loni and Devon-Gretel, we see the existence of intermittent reward and punishment.

The attachment grew with each episode of abuse. Bernice despite of claiming "I ought to leave that nigga", she never does. She often appears with swellings and bruises. She knew Loni raped Odessa and that he killed Leland, yet she could never detach. Indeed, she feels grateful "Loni is providing food, and clothes, and a car nicer than most people ever had". (Lockhart, 2002,135) Gretel and Devon too sought importance and belongingness in the family. Through Odessa's view we learn "I was so tired of how



Gretel acted like she was closer to everybody in my family than I was.” (Lockhart, 2002,82) In the same interaction we also see Gretel with cracked tongue frantically brushing her tongue whenever she has her hands on a tooth brush saying “Uncle Loni told me that brushing my tongue is the only way to get all the germs out. ‘Anybody can brush they teeth, but don’t mean they mouth clean.’” suggesting ongoing sexual assault. There was simultaneous existence of suffering and the desire to belong in Gretel. Against Bernice’s betrayal after the first episode of violence we see Odessa craving for more attention from her. Odessa narrates “She carried me on her hip into the kitchen, and I let my leg curve around to touch her pregnant belly...I squeezed to let the baby know that I was still the baby.” (Lockhart, 2002, 26) Odessa’s trauma bonded with her mother let her feel a close affinity to her safter repeated betrayals and abuse. In *Fifth Born* Trauma bonding functions not only at individual level but as a systemic family dynamic. Each adapt differently to the abusive yet inescapable environment, forming a family system of survival that centers the abuser’s moods. Towanda and Lamont avoid home, Roscoe appeases the father by spilling secrets, LaVern thinks she belong with Chet and aunt Fanny, Gretel, Devon and Odessa avoid being in the presence of Loni, Benice weaves lies to replace reality. Each trauma bonded victim fails to consider the dangerous situation they exist in and the continuous exposure to life threatening situations. They prefer contact and affinity with the abuser rather than escape. Trauma bonds have such capacity to make victims insensitive to the prospect of danger and remain attached to the abuser at the cost of their safety.

Denial and minimization of abuse is evident in the character that perpetuated victimization. On learning Loni sexually assaulted five-year-old Odessa, Bernice’s response was hitting Odessa till she passed out. She minimized Loni’s inhumanity and shifted the blame to Odessa. Her hostility also reeks of internalization of abuser’s logic, where a trauma bonded person echoes the abuser’s mentality and justifies the abuse by pointing out the victim’s fault. Loni and Odessa forget too. Bernice failed as a mother when she refused to see Odessa as the victim and shifted Loni’s blame onto her. His victimizing tendency is minimized by his family blaming his drinking habit. Odessa recalls “Towanda said Deddy was an alcoholic, and that’s what caused him to be looking for somebody to fight one minute, and then forget the whole thing by the next day and be laughing and trying to get Mama to pack us all to go fishing.” (Lockhart, 2002, 52)

The novel represents silence and secrecy as binding forces within traumatic relationships. Here silence and secrecy help maintain normalcy by burying the reality of their chaos filled lives. After Odessa’s rape Bernice covered it up by weaving a false story of Odessa contracting a flu. She told Odessa’s teacher- “She’s gonna have to stay home till I can get this flu to break” (Lockhart, 2002, 41) to give her space to heal from the wounds. She also took preventive measure against possible



rape attempts by making Odessa believe “I was a big girl now and didn’t need naps anymore, so when Daddy came home for lunch, she let me watch TV in the sitting space of the hall” (Lockhart, 2002, 41-42) where she can keep an eye. All the measures were against Odessa not against Loni. This compels us to think, by doing so was she protecting Loni’s image as a good father and husband? Odessa reveals “when it didn’t hurt to walk anymore, I went back to school. I knew that Deddy couldn’t remember what he had done to me, and after a while I couldn’t remember either.” (Lockhart, 2002, 42) Only later after Leland’s funeral her dreams brought back a disfigured memory of the incident “I woke up sweating, and remembered a moment when I was five years old and sick with some kind of flu that made me ache between my legs. I pressed on my temples to stop the blood from surging through that part of my brain, to shut it all down before I vomited.” (Lockhart, 2002, 90-91) This suggests she attempted to reimpose forgetfulness, preventing possible release of the truth silenced deep within her memories. Odessa’s mother embodies the silence that sustains trauma bonds. She uses denial to force Odessa to mistrust her own perception. Secrecy is the scaffolding of trauma bonds in *Fifth Born*. When the family insists that family secrets stay inside, violence was legitimized and the abuser’s exposure was discouraging. Lockhart portrays silence not as passive absence but as an active practice of suppression, shaping nonexistent realities. As evident in trauma bonding, secrecy isolates victims, making disclosure dangerous and keeping them bound to the abusive environment.

Trauma patterns and ways to respond to trauma is intergenerational in *Fifth Born*. Like Odessa her Grandmama was a victim of incest. Silencing and weaving stories to cover up painful incidents was inherited by Bernice from her mother. Mothers sacrificing kids for their own preservation is also common among them. Both Bo, Odessa’s grandfather and Loni were abusers and beat the children for asserting power and keeping order. The generational trauma turns the subsequent generations to consider violence as normal in families, perpetuating trauma across generations. The trauma responses and mitigating tactics were also established as the only way to exist. For them to survive means to be silent as defense would be considered disobedience and will be replied with more severe abuse. The African American history of being abused and silence might be considered the reason for making them believe struggle and chaos is the only way to exist. Financial issues led to drinking and widely prevalent social discrimination might have made them vigilant about any behaviour that might justify the severe views the whites have on them. This is evident in the episode after the kids fought in their station wagon while stopping at a filling-station pump managed by an old white man, on their way back from Mississippi to St. Louis. The imminent beatings from Loni made Odessa remember what “Granmama would say:



“Don’t be actin a fool in front of white folks, they just waitin to justify that we ain’t nothing but a bunch of heathens.” (Lockhart, 2002, 13) *Fifth Born* reveals how trauma bonds replicate across generations.

Conclusion

Zelda Lockhart’s *Fifth Born* exemplifies how trauma bonding operates within families, entangling love and violence in ways that perpetuate silence and generational harm. Lockhart’s narrative demonstrates how trauma bonding is not simply a psychological anomaly but a structural condition of abusive families. The novel also critiques how racialized social scrutiny intensifies the silence, as families conceal abuse to avoid external judgment. The prevailing condition minimized the possibility of rupturing trauma bond because testimony and validation as necessary for recovery, which is impossible when the truth is silenced. The wounds are too deep to be forgotten with distance and disconnection from the abuser. So, the characters who could escape the home would possibly be connected in a negative emotional bond sustaining on obsessive hatred towards the perpetrator or overthinking about the episodes of abuse and resultant anomalies. Only Odessa seems to have a chance of recovery because she could reveal her secret and pain to Gretel and Ella Mae. The acts of narration and truth-telling may loosen the bonds of secrecy and help her reclaim agency. Lockhart thus contributes to a literary tradition, that exposes the intimate mechanics of abuse while illuminating the resilience required to break cycles of silence. This study situates *Fifth Born* as a critical text in trauma literature, offering insights into the impacts of abuse and trauma bonds on individual psyche as well as broader cultural contexts working in facilitating trauma bonding. Lockhart dramatizes how trauma bonding entraps characters in paradoxical attachment to the abuser. The victims crave love and acceptance while enduring violence, doubts their own perception and applies denial to minimize abuse, remains silent out of shame and dependence, and inherits generational trauma leaking through repeated patterns of abuse. By presenting trauma bonding as both individual and systemic, *Fifth Born* situates Odessa’s suffering within broader structures of familial, cultural, and historical silence.

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