Child sexual abuse in African American society: A study of Maya Angelou’s lived trauma

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Abstract---The study is an exploration of the discourse about Child Sexual Abuse in African American society which is a moral, political and social concern that demands an appropriate solution against adult abuse of power. Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) has been part of history since long time but is often neglected as a subject of public discourse and conversation in U.S. hegemonic society. Earlier research focused on the mental health consequences of CSA but not on the prevalence or reasons for its occurrence in African American community in U.S. The study analyses the case of Maya Angelou who was raped at the age of eight by her mother’s live-in boyfriend in her very home, by using her documented experiences from autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings. The study also examines pertinent questions regarding Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) - the causes, symptoms and effects.

Keywords---child sexual abuse, African American, power, trauma, victim.

Introduction

What is Child Sexual Abuse?

Child Sexual Abuse is the forceful use of children for the sexual gratification by adults. The abuser is mostly a known male figure: a relative (father, uncle, brother, grandfather); member of the household (stepfather or Mother’s cohabitant) or a carer (servant, driver, babysitters etc). CSA can occur in any strata of society- rich or poor. Children of all ages ranging from 0-18 years and either sex may be sexual victims.
What happens and how often does sexual abuse occur?

Sexual abuse consists of all types of sexual activities starting with intrusiveness. Children are exposed to pornographic content on phones, movies, books; genital contact in the form of fondling, masturbation, and intercourse. Penetration can be oral, vaginal, or anal. It can occur as many times. The abuser is many a times regular violator. Sometimes a child (the abused) can mistake it as some form of game that everyone plays or as an act of love.

Risk factors prompt to Child Sexual Abuse

- A Paedophilic sexual orientation
- Loss of control under the influence of alcohol or drugs
- Incest history and sexual deviance in the family
- New member in household having previous records of sexual offences
- History of neglect and parental rejection in childhood

The different types of symptoms

- Physical symptoms: bleeding, soreness, vaginal discharge, anal cuts
- Emotional symptoms: loss of concentration, suicidal tendencies, no verbal interaction with people, eating disorder, Post Traumatic Stress disorder.
- Inappropriate sexual knowledge: The information derived from watching pornographic content, or observing others

Recognizing Child Sexual Abuse

The publication of several books like *Conspiracy of silence: The trauma of incest* (1978), *Sexual assault of children and adolescents* (1978), *Sexually victimized children* (1979), *The best kept secret: Sexual abuse of children* (1980), *Sexual exploitation: Rape, Child sexual abuse and workplace harassment* (1984) resulted in the recognition of CSA in print and electronic media. Prior to this, the victim were suppressed from talking about the matter openly or rather was considered a taboo. Many researchers like Olafson, Corwin and Summit documented some incidents wherein the “accounts of sexual abuse were suppressed and the victims, or those who wrote or spoke on their behalf, were ostracized and subjected to suspicion and criticism” (Conte: 226). Often, psychological, cultural and political practices are involved in acknowledging CSA. Gordon defines “family violence, including child sexual abuse as a political issue, writing that the “very meanings of family violence” are politically determined” (Conte: 227). Conceding the fact that a child has been sexually abused is often miserable for many adults either because of the concern or their personal history as victim/victimizer and also “because abuse involves emotionally-laden issues of relationships, sexuality, coercion and other difficult intra-and interpersonal processes” (Conte: 227). Therefore, because child sexual abuse invokes polarized reactions, denial is central to the societal response to child sexual abuse. Also, often times the victims were branded as sex delinquents or participating victims; and sexual abuse was described as a concern of victims’ perception and not actual physical or emotional trauma. Often times the mainstream discourse failed to understand
the very concept and causes of child sexual abuse—“it is difficult to understand why a child, except for its cultural conditioning, should be disturbed at having its genitalia touched” (Kinsey, 1953).

However, by the turn of the century, the result was an incongruous world in which best-selling books proclaiming fabrications in memory coexisted with those encouraging survivors to trust their memories, in which a highly educated Left largely discredited retrieved memories and decried excessive state arbitration into child welfare, seeing them as examples of victimology. It was a world in which the state defined child sexual abuse primarily as a criminal issue, and simultaneously used the discourse of trauma and recovery in many arenas, from foreign policy to domestic welfare reform. It was a world where sex offenders were depicted in the media as evil and untreatable and still given a chance to improve themselves and seek treatment in rehabilitation centers. Also, the cases were framed in a manner that was in sync with dominant discourses about pedophilia or a medical and sexual problem, and not as a matter of violence or power. However with the publication of memoirs, autobiographies and testimonies, child sexual abuse received much required public attention in the recent past and many facets of this epidemic were finally discussed and explored.

Child Sexual Abuse in African American society: the case study of Maya Angelou

Child Sexual Abuse (CSA) in African American society was first widely discussed in 1970s when the feminists working within the anti-rape movement “saw sexual violence against children as a product of patriarchy” (Whittier, 2009, p. 7) and “elaborated a model of “internalized oppression”, arguing that societal inequalities echoed within individuals’ psyches” (Whittier, 2009, p. 8). African American male leaders, have historically, not only neglected the voice and rights of Black women but also “abandoned Black women as collective rape victims…Part of their self-censorship certainly had to do with reluctance to “air dirty laundry” in a White society that viewed Black men as sexual predators” (Collins p.226, 2004).) However, Maya Angelou changes this notion by documenting her sexual abuse as a child, directed towards African American male. Angelou’s autobiography serves as a powerful narration of the complex dynamics of African American family structure vis-à-vis child sexual abuse. She stresses upon the intricate realities of the marginalized groups in the description of her rape that depicts the raw grief of many African American women who suffer at the whims and fancies of their own men. Child sexual abuse is a widespread issue that is found in every racial and ethnic group but in the African American community, the prevalence of children being sexually abused is somewhat of a dilemma, as they have attributes of a collectivist culture and are known for protecting their own community members amidst the hegemonic society of U.S. The depiction of the act of rape between an ignorant child and a grown up man reveals explicitly the reality of weak African American family structure and sexual violence against African American children in U.S.

Maya Angelou is first of few African American women writers to document (even prior to the publication of critical literature about CSA) her childhood sexual abuse in the year 1969 in her autobiographical narrative I Know Why the Caged
**Bird Sings.** African American women in U.S. are triply oppressed, by White males and females; and also by African American male hegemony. Maya’s revelation of rape reveals the behind-the-doors reality of African American society when she succumbs to the illicit lust of her predator that stays in her very house and is her mother’s live-in partner. The African American children more often fall prey to their own fathers, stepfathers and close relatives. This leads to serious discussion on why a group who always works in accordance to the best interests of their members is responsible for the abuse of their own children. Is child sexual abuse a case of power exploitation by frustrated African American males who suffer at the hands of whites and in return manifest their aggression on the less powerful and vulnerable (i.e., children) members of their own community or it is a case of parental neglect and unstable family environment. Rush argues “The sexual abuse of children is an early manifestation of male power and oppression of the female,” and “The sexual abuse of children, who are overwhelmingly female, by sexual offenders who are overwhelmingly male adults, is part and parcel of the male dominated society which overtly and covertly subjugates women” (Whittier, 2009).

Angelou, though never had any formal higher education but living in a hegemonic society of Civil Rights era presents a perspective of her exploitation at the hands of an African American male where “Black girls are especially vulnerable to childhood sexual assault. Within their families and communities, fathers, stepfathers, uncles, brother, and other male relatives are part of a general climate of violence that makes young Black girls appropriate sexual targets for predatory older men”(Collins:.226, 2004). Angelou’s blasting of the silence and secrecy around CSA through the narration of her sexual abuse in 1969 corresponds with the explosion of anti-rape movement in United States where critics often argued about the nature and motives of child sexual abuse. Florence Rush argues CSA to be a product of patriarchal domination rather than male perversion. She asserts: “sexual objectification and victimization of female children by men was widespread and promoted by the patriarchal society” which Angelou seems to confirm in her personal tale where Mr. Freeman, her rapist, is a man who rather seeks control and power over an innocent child by threatening her after the sexual assault.

Many often the reason for rape of children is considered simply to be the pervert male psyche. But this can be contested in case of Maya Angelou where Mr. Freeman comes across as a man who rather seeks control and power over an innocent child by threatening her after the sexual assault. This proves how a powerful man envisions a naive child as a powerless object for his sexual gratification. Coming from a broken home and absence of parents most of the times during her childhood years, Angelou is deluded into the illusionary world of false love and security when she fantasizes to be at home with her ‘real’ father, Mr. Freeman (who is her mother’s live-in boyfriend). The strong desire developing from the childhood complex to have a normal family and loving parents leads her to seek Mr. Freeman as someone who can provide her the care and love that she never got from her own father. She thought of her father as a stranger and could not connect with his unfamiliar ways whereas she feels sorry for Mr. Freeman and finds him as someone with whom she can connect. She describes her first intimate encounter with Mr. Freeman as: “I wasn’t afraid, a little apprehensive,
maybe, but not afraid...He held me so softly that I wished he wouldn't ever let me go. I felt at home...This was probably my real father and we had found each other at last" (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: 79).

These lines explicitly reveal the psychology of an eight year old who till now has always found herself grappling in different worlds without the security and love of her biological parents and forever craving the attention and affection of her parents so much that she misunderstands the act of sexual coercion by a man who lives in the same house as love. Maya, for that certain moment goes into the world of false trust and security wherein she fantasizes being at home with her father. Mr. Freeman’s pervert actions coupled with child’s desire for security and attention paves way for a ghastly act of rape on a child. When Mr. Freeman acts cold with Maya after the act, she feels guilty as if she has disappointed him and longs to be in his arms again. She emphasizes “I began to feel lonely for Mr. Freeman and the encasement of his big arms...I began to wait for Mr. Freeman to come in from the yards, but when he did. He never noticed me, although I put a lot of feeling into “Good evening, Mr. Freeman” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: 81). On later account she even refuses to go close to Mr. Freeman in order to avoid getting hurt by his cold behavior towards her. She says “No, sir, Mr. Freeman”. I started to back away. I didn’t want to touch that mushy-hard thing again, and I didn’t need him to hold me anymore” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: 83). Her reluctance to go near him when he fails to provide her the intimacy is not because she was scared to get hurt physically by him but rather not to get hurt emotionally. Her misunderstood and confused emotions are an outcome of the neglect and absence of parental love and it reveals the disposition of a child who mistakes the act of sexual coercion as an act of love and security.

But Mr. Freeman deceives Maya at the pretext of loving her or rather playing games with her and finally rapes her: “He released me enough to snatch down my bloomers, and then he dragged me closer to him...If you scream, I’m gonna kill you...Then there was the pain. A breaking and entering when even the senses are torn apart. The act of rape on an eight year old body is a matter of the needle giving because the camel can’t. The child gives, because the body can, and the mind of the violator cannot” (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings: 84). Angelou manifests her feeling of being raped through long silence of five years coupled with the feelings of shame and guilt for giving a testimony against her abuser in court when she gets to know about his death. Angelou for the longer time held herself responsible for her rapist’s death at the hands of her uncle because sexual abuse “is an unspoken but prominent factor in socializing and preparing the female to accept a subordinate role; to feel guilty, ashamed, and to tolerate, through fear, the power exercised over her by men.” (Whittier, 2009. Pg: 24) At the young age of eight, Angelou is confused, vulnerable and unclear. She is not able to make sense of the crime that happened to her. As a lonely child, coming from disturbed house she mistakes the sexual act as love and held herself responsible for the death of her abuser. This brings a very pertinent observation to forefront. Many a times a child is simply lured in such acts by the abuser. The abuser uses emotional tactics and weakness of the child to get what he wants. Also, instead of feeling ashamed himself, the abuser rather makes the abused feel guilty.
**Why the accounts of sexually abused survivors are important?**

The documentation of emotions and personal trauma pertaining to her sexual abuse by Angelou at the age of 41 when U.S society was not ready to publicly acknowledge the graveness of the CSA provides a new dimension to the way how child victims of sexual abuse were perceived. Earlier, people looked at CSA as something to be concealed away from public eye and children were asked not to share the obscure details of the incident. However, Angelou by openly describing the intricate details and personal feelings pertaining to her abuse offers an emotional perspective to the manner in which child sexual abuse is initially perceived and also addresses various misconceptions around CSA. Angelou in an interview reveals the harrowing effect on the mind of a child who goes from being unaware about what has happened to her to the unsettling realization of the seriousness of the crime committed against her. She asserts: “When I was seven and a half. I was raped. I won’t say severely raped, all rape is severe. The rapist was a person very well known to my family. I was hospitalized...When I decided to speak I had a lot to say and many ways in which to say what I had to say. So out of this evil which was a dire kind of evil because rape on the body of a young person more often than not introduces cynic and there is nothing quite tragic as a young cynic. Because it means the person has gone from knowing nothing to believing nothing. And I was able to draw from human thought, human disappointments and triumphs enough to triumph myself” (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stAOpg71vK4). Psychologists and human right activists often discussed the many consequences of such crime on innocent minds but real lived record of a CSA survivor imparts the touch of empathy and reality to the intricate details of such sensitive issue. With the publication of real lived incidents, the survivor wants to prevent it from happening to others by addressing this to everyone in her society so that those in similar situations can understand and not hold themselves responsible.

**References**