
The Trauma of Familial Rape: A Study of Morrison, Walker, and Angelou

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Abstract

Childhood sexual abuse is said to be far more common than is suggested by the cases that are reported in the media or brought to trial. The victim may be silenced in the name of preserving family honor, or she may remain silent in the face of the power that she perceives in her abuser. While patriarchal discourse seeks to deny this crime, black feminists have spoken out powerfully against the gendered violence that is often to be found within the confines of the family. This paper looks at three such texts – Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, and Maya Angelou's *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* – to see the specific context in which the abuse occurs, the response or reaction of family members, including the injunction to silence or, contrarily, to voice, and how healing does or does not occur. Recovery from the trauma of rape is promoted by the support of a sisterhood, the development of a critical perspective, and the ability to tell one's own story.

Keywords: Childhood Sexual Abuse, Trauma, Silencing, Black Feminists, Rape.

"One does not have to be a combat soldier or visit a refugee camp in Syria or the Congo to encounter trauma. Trauma happens to us, our friends, our families, and our neighbors. Research by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has shown that one in five Americans was sexually molested as a child;"

(Opening lines of Prologue to *The Body Keeps the Score*)

Black Feminism, which emerged as a medley of powerful voices in the wake of the Civil Rights and Black nationalist movements, has never been shy of speaking truth to power. Great writers have written movingly about the trauma of rape, what underlay specific situations, and what was the aftermath. Three such writers are Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*, Alice Walker in *The Color Purple*, and Maya Angelou in the first of her seven autobiographical volumes – *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

The ubiquity of childhood sexual abuse was mentioned by no less a person than the father of psychoanalysis – Sigmund Freud. Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery* about how, in 1896, Freud presented 18 case studies under the title of *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, where he put forward his "thesis that at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood..." (13). Within a year, "troubled by the radical social implications of his hypothesis," Freud repudiated his own theory (14). Since hysteria was so widespread among women, his theory would have pointed to the endemic nature of what he called "perverted acts against children" (quoted in *Trauma and Recovery* 14). Hence, he turned to an alternate account of female hysteria, attributing it to childhood fantasies and desires. While this is an example of patriarchal control of scientific research, it also points to how sexual abuse within the family has been largely denied in public discourse.

The imperative of silence and the tendency to blame the victim in a patriarchal society has meant that the telling of rape is not easy. When it comes to speaking of familial rape, black women writers face another backlash from their community. Walker, for example, was excoriated for portraying black rapists in *The Color Purple*, as it was felt by the black community that she was thereby encouraging the racist stereotype of the black male as a sexual predator. Kimberle Crenshaw writes that the intra-community debate was about "the political costs of exposing gender violence within the black community" (1256), as there is also a larger debate about blacks being pathologically violent.

In *Aint I a Woman*, bell hooks writes that during the Jim Crow years, post the Reconstruction, white supremacists raised the bogey of the black male rapist to ensure that white women would keep their distance from black men (61). Racist white society feared interracial marriages, and this was their way of preventing them. "By brainwashing white women to see black men as savage beasts, white supremacists were able to implant enough fear in the white female's psyche so that she would avoid any contact with black men (*Aint* 61). At the same time, they continued the myth of the loose black woman, which had been used during slavery to justify the sexual exploitation of black women slaves. They, therefore, allowed "inter-racial sex" between black women and white men as long as it did not lead to marriage (*Aint* 61).

As black women writers, Morrison, Walker, and Angelou avoid stereotyping and sensitively present the raw trauma of the rape that is manifested in the psyche of the child. They show the vulnerability of the child victim and what encourages or mitigates their survival with integrity.

Pecola in Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*

Written in 1970, this is Morrison's story of an eleven-year-old girl, Pecola, who grows up feeling unwanted and unloved. Morrison explains that "the novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her" (*Bluest* xi). It starts with her mother, Pauline,

who has internalized white ideals of feminine beauty as embodied in the screen presence of Jean Harlow. When she sees how black newborn Pecola is, she damns her as ugly.

This mirroring continues throughout Pecola's young life. She is rejected by her classmates for her absolute blackness. One of them, a mulatto, named Maureen Peal, pretends to be friendly only to taunt her at a more personal level. Another calls her to his home, throws his mother's cat, and blames it on her. His mother ejects her as "a nasty little black bitch" (*Bluest* 92). Inside a shop, she finds that the white shopkeeper cannot see her as her color removes her from his line of visibility. When she is badly scalded in her mother's workplace, it is the white employer's child whom Pauline comforts as she slaps Pecola aside. During fights between her parents, she prays to disappear and imagines her body parts vanishing till only the eyes remain. So, she identifies her eyes as the problem and prays for blue eyes as a way out of her misery.

Like her mother, Pecola has internalized the white cultural ideal of femininity represented by images in popular culture – such as that of Shirley Temple on a cup and Mary Jane on a sweet wrapper. Her aspirational ideal, presented through a primer, is a happy white family where the children play together with a cat and a dog. Unfortunately, her experiential truth is the misery and unhappiness of her family.

As in her other novels, Morrison offers a black sisterhood as a life-enabling source. Pecola finds affection in three whores who live above her storefront home and in the McTeer women – her classmates, Claudia and Frieda, and their mother. However, because of her "racial self-loathing" (*Bluest* xi), she is unable to accept the key to survival that they represent.

As events in her life move inexorably to the climax, she is raped by her drunken father, who then decamps, leaving her pregnant, facing the fury of her mother. She petitions the neighborhood seer, Sapehead, for blue eyes. Understanding that she is "an ugly little girl asking for beauty" (*Bluest* 174), he plays God and pretends to grant her her prayer, using her to kill his neighbor's hated dog.

Her story ends in madness – living with her mother outside the town, psychotic and double-voiced as she imagines a friend to validate her blue eyes. As she is a "narrative void," it is her friend Claudia who tells her story (*Bluest* x).

Celie in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*

In Alice Walker's Pulitzer-prize-winning novel, the protagonist, Celie, is fourteen when the story begins with her horrifying narration of rape by the man she has been taught to believe is her father. He attempts to silence her: "You better not tell nobody but God. It'd kill your Mammy" (*Color* 3). Therefore, she begins writing to

God, and he continues to abuse her, impregnating her twice and disposing of the babies after they are born. When her mother dies, and he gets a new wife, on one occasion, when the latter is sick, Celie invites his attention to herself in order to protect her sister, Nettie, from his roving eye.

Unlike *The Bluest Eye*, where we see Pecola in a state of stasis at the end, Walker shows us the different life stages that Celie goes through to emerge as a successful businesswoman, reunited with her family and enjoying the full support of a sisterhood of black women. From a woman who supports the status quo as mandated by God: "Bible says, honor father and mother no matter what" and who puts up with the ill-treatment by her husband Mr: "... he my husband...This life soon be over...heaven last all ways" (*Color* 40), we see her evolving into a woman who tells God "You must be sleep"(ibid 160). Thereafter, she begins to address her letters to her sister Nettie.

Shug Avery, a blues singer, and her husband's mistress; Sofia – Mr's daughter-in-law; and Kate – Mr's sister, are the women who help Celie to know her self-worth. Celie blossoms under Shug's mentorship and retells the story of her first childhood rape, expressing all her feelings about it. Both Judith Herman and Bessel van der Kolk talk about how important it is for trauma survivors to narrate their own stories and thereby process them thoroughly. This is how reparative healing occurs.

Thereafter, there is a public showdown with Mr where Celie announces that she will leave him. He retaliates, saying: "Look at you. You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam ... you nothing at all" (*Color* 187). Having outgrown her old fearfulness, she answers: "I'm pore, I'm black, I may be ugly and can't cook ... but I'm here" (*Color* 187). This is Celie's movement from voicelessness to voice. It underscores her ability to tell her own story and impels her growth,

Maya Angelou in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

This book, published in 1969, is the first of Angelou's riveting autobiographical series. As a young girl of eight, she was raped by her mother's boyfriend, Mr Freeman. With her trademark honesty and refusal to hide behind justificatory explanations, Angelou describes how it began as a kind of molestation that puzzled her but which she also mistook as a form of loving. To enforce silence, he threatened that he would kill her beloved brother, Bailey if she spoke about the experience. Later there was an actual rape, and she talks about how she could not tell her mother about the terrible physical pain even though Mr Freeman had moved out of their home following a quarrel: "Could I tell her now? The terrible pain assured me that I couldn't. What he did to me, and what I allowed, must have been very bad if God had already let me hurt so much. If Mr Freeman was gone, did that mean that Bailey was out of danger? And if so, if I told him, would he still love me?" (*I Know* 81).

When the facts became known, Angelou's mother's family got Freeman arrested and brought to court, where the young girl had to appear as a witness. The lawyer cast doubt on her as a witness to her own rape: "Do you know if you were raped?" (*I Know* 84). Angelou explains, very movingly and persuasively, why she lied in court to save her rapist: "The lie lumped in my throat, and I couldn't get air. How I despised the man for making me lie" (*I Know* 85). When Freeman's lawyer got him released in a day, the mother's family had him killed. Traumatized by the whole experience, blaming herself for the rape and the murder – "a man was dead because I lied" (*I Know* 86), Angelou stopped talking completely: "I had sold my soul to the Devil, and there could be no escape. The only thing I could do was to stop talking to people other than Bailey" (*I Know* 87). She and Bailey were then sent back to live with their paternal grandmother, Momma, in Stamps, Arkansas, where she gradually became comfortable again to speak. The text itself is the biggest proof of the recovery of her voice.

Conclusion

Patriarchal discourse denies rape. The silencing is enforced by power relations within the family and also by the victim's own feelings of guilt and complicity, which would be encouraged by the abuser.

Recovery from the trauma of rape is enabled by a community which offers empathy and support. Like her parents, who were estranged from their community, Pecola is cut off from the restorative healing bonds offered by the whores and the McTeer women. Celie, on the other hand, has Nettie and a whole sisterhood of supportive women who help her to grow. Angelou, too, heals while living with her grandmother, of whom she says, "a deep brooding love hung over everything she touched" (*I Know* 57).

In the face of silencing, the trauma survivor must find the courage to reject the dominant narrative. This is facilitated by the development of a critical thinking ability. For poor black women in a racist and sexist society, the building of a critical perspective often starts with a deconstruction of whiteness. Bell Hooks, in *Teaching to Transgress*, writes how, before integration, when she attended a blacks-only school, her black teachers tried to transform the students in the interest of uplifting the entire race. "We learned early that our devotion to learning ... was a counter-hegemonic act ..." (2). Hence, when schools were desegregated, and she had to join a white school, she found, to her dismay, that "Knowledge was suddenly about information only. It had no relation to how one lived, behaved" (*Teaching* 3).

This deconstructivism paradigm is evident when Celie and Nettie, as very young girls, reject the totalizing image of Columbus as the discoverer of America and talk about how he repaid the hospitality of the native Indians by enslaving some of them. Similarly, Angelou writes, "I remember never believing that whites were really real"

(*I Know* 25) and mentions her “fear-admiration-contempt” for the “white ‘things’”(*I Know* 49). This healthy skepticism enables the growth of critical thinking and a liberatory perspective. Pecola, on the other hand, accepts the primacy of patriarchal, white supremacist thought. Her obsession with the eyes links her with masculinist epistemology, which privileges seeing against black feminist ways of being and emphasises the importance of the voice.

Healing can occur when the victim can find her voice and tell her own story. While both Celie and Angelou use the pronoun “I” to tell their stories, Pecola is one of those “who collapse, silently, anonymously, with no voice to express or acknowledge it” (*Bluest x*).

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