

OUSTED FROM THE BLISS OF CHILDHOOD HAVEN: A STUDY ON VIRGINIA WOOLF AS A VICTIM OF CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE

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ABSTRACT

Considered the harbinger of modernism in English literary horizon and central figure in the Bloomsbury group of intellectuals, Virginia Woolf adorns a special place in the English literary canon. Though counted as the one of the most celebrated and successful writers, she is said to have suffered from bipolar disorder and depression. Recent studies show that family history and traumatic events are factors related to bipolar disorder. Virginia Woolf was sexually molested by her half siblings for nine years. Her bipolar disorder signs presented a destructive path, associated with hospitalizations, suicidal behavioral and functional impairment.

KEYWORDS: Childhood Abuse, Depression, Lesbian Orientation, Sexual Frigidity

INTRODUCTION

The childhood shows the man

As morning shows the day

- John Milton, **Paradise Regained**

Childhood is the formative period of an individual's life. Childhood is a set of attitudes, behaviors and experiences which lays the foundation for a dynamic and vigorous adult life. It is hyped as the most idyllic phase of one's life when one can be ignorant of life's bleak side. The romantic halo over the childhood got shattered by the advent of industrialism and the resultant social disparities and the exploitation of poor labour classes. Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, *Little Nell* and other child characters articulated the deplorable conditions of the nineteenth century England. Thackeray and Bronte sisters wrote about the ill-treatment, seclusion and segregation of children in the antagonistic atmosphere at boarding schools. With the advent of confessional literature, attention was drawn to scenes depicting domestic violence and sexual assault on children. Freud's psychoanalytic theories of child sexual abuse became much influential in the studies on childhood trauma. The theories of Freud have led critics to treat literary works from the vantage point of psycho-biography, inquiring about personality traits or traumas that shed light upon an author's work. By the closing decades of the twentieth century, sexual as well as psychological abuses of children became a familiar issue, especially in postcolonial literary works. While some works focused on the changing aspects of childhood in different ages in which they were written, a number of oeuvres, coming under the genre of *bildungsroman* novels tracked the psychological or emotional disturbances that children with dreary background carried into their adult lives. Psychological investigations have proven that depressing incident of a childhood leave negative outcome on an adult's life. It is not necessary that all abused and neglected children will experience long term consequences. There will be variations in the outcome depending on the child's age, the type of abuse and the severity of abuse. Some children carry the bitter memories of abuse and neglect till the end of their lives while others emerge relatively unscathed. The ability to survive the distressing experience depends on the individual

characteristics, positive influences like teachers or relatives and social milieu. The immediate emotional effects of abuse and neglect are isolation, fear and an inability to trust which can work out into lifelong consequences including low self esteem, melancholies and relationship difficulties. Dejection and withdrawal symptoms are common among children who experienced emotional, physical or environmental neglect. Sufferings of children and its end results do not confine to their family circle. Sometimes mistreatments in childhood days get sociological implications. Children with the grimy background are likely to develop antisocial traits as they grow up. Adults suffering from social phobia or adults with the anti social mind-set tend to have a history of harrowing childhood. Dorothy O. Lewis in her book *Guilty by Reason of Insanity: A Psychiatrist Explores the Minds of Killers* makes the shocking discovery that most of the murderers had endured perverted physical and sexual violence and abuses in their childhood. Abusive parents often have experienced abuse during their own childhoods. Psychological researches have proved that approximately one third of abused and neglected children will eventually victimize their own children. The present study intends to have the responsiveness of her childhood experiences on Virginia Woolf. .

The principles of psychoanalysis will shed light on the mental as well as physical distresses associated with child abuse. Effects of child sexual abuse include guilt, self blame, nightmares, insomnia, sexual dysfunction, chronic pain, anxiety etc. The deciphering of adverse effects of sexual abuse can be realized from the James Garbarino's statement in an article "Psychological maltreatment is Not an Ancillary Issue". It states that children can rarely absorb and overcome the experience of physical assault and sexual misuse; if they are psychologically mistreated. Emotional abuses also have wider penalty. Emotional abuse includes excessive criticism, degradation, humiliation, ridicule etc. Deblinger, Steer and Lipman comment in an article "Maternal Factors Associated with Sexually Abused Children's Psychological Adjustment" that sexually abused children who receive emotional support are less symptomatic than children who do not. Negative maternal reactions create more severe problems in sexually abused children.

All of Woolf's major works sketch some aspect of infancy, childhood, or adolescence to show how the formative life of an individual gives rise to the multiple identities of the adult. Not only is consciousness in her art determined by the impressionability of early life, but the central drama of her fiction is the relation which a character forms with the past. *A Sketch of the Past*, in which she disclosed some of her earnest, most cherished truths, included the sexual abuse she experienced as a young girl at the hands of her half-brother Gerald Duckworth. Her autobiographer and nephew Bell attributes her sexual frigidity and her aversion to sex in her marital life to her childhood sexual traumas. The psychological effects of her step brother's sexual advances to her is evidenced in *A Sketch of the Past*, a section of her autobiography *Moments of Being*, where she recounts two memories, separate yet connected.

There was a small looking glass in the hall at Talland House. It had, I remember, a ledge with a brush on it. By standing on tiptoe I could see my face in the glass. When I was six or seven perhaps, I got into the habit of looking at my face in the glass. But I only did this if I was sure that I was alone. I was ashamed of it. A strong feeling of guilt seemed naturally attached to it. But why was this so? (68)

Once when I was very small Gerald Duckworth lifted me onto [a ledge], and as I sat there he began to explore my body. I can remember the feel of his hand going under my clothes; going firmly and steadily lower and lower. I remember how I hoped that he would stop; how stiffened and wriggled as his hand approached my private parts. But it did not stop. His hand explored my private parts too. I remember resenting, disliking it – what is the word for so dumb and mixed feeling? (69)

The episodes with George and Gerald, nonetheless, were only one part of the turbulent mood in which Woolf lived as a child. In a study on Woolf's childhood, Louise DeSalvo has made the case for the existence of what she calls a pattern of "incest, sexual violence, and abusive behavior" in the Stephen family. Being a victim of incest herself, Woolf had to go through the additional trauma of witnessing the other young female members of her household being either sexually or emotionally abused. Woolf had to witness the cruelty with which her parents dealt with her mentally challenged half-sister Laura; then it was her other half-sister Stella's turn to suffer the "violent pursuit" of her cousin J.K. Stephen, a situation which must have been tremendously shocking for Woolf because despite their knowledge of J. K.'s insane and violent character, her parents would still allow him unlimited access to Stella. Next in the list of victimized girls were Woolf's elder sister Vanessa and the closest of all her siblings. As shown in Woolf's memoir, Vanessa was the object of George's Duckworth's sadistic gusts of passion and incestuous assaults from 1897 until 1904.

Virginia often had bouts of depression and mental breakdown. She often expressed eating disorders too. All these psychological problems would seem to point out that Woolf's adult issues had their initiation during her upbringing, a point that is principally underlined by Louise DeSalvo, who attributes Woolf's bouts of illness, her problems with food and her complex attitude to her body to childhood traumas. Drawing on Woolf's memoir, *Moments of Being*, DeSalvo argues that the young Virginia was over and over again molested by her half-brothers with harrowing consequences, and that her 'breakdowns' "might have been a desperate [if uncontrollable] attempt to stop the abuse, for [they] brought doctors into the household" (109).

The French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot had provided great impetus for the study of the relation between trauma and hysterics, and his findings caught the attention of physicians worldwide. Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, made studies to find the causes of hysteria, and by the mid-1890s, they had both come to the conclusion that hysteria was a condition caused by psychological trauma. They had also developed a new technique to deal with hysterical symptoms, which involved helping patients to recover traumatic memories and then recounting these memories. In 1896, Freud published *The Aetiology of Hysteria*, where he suggested that hysteric women suffered mainly from traumas of childhood sexual abuse.

In a narrative analysis of Virginia Woolf's 22 *Hyde Park Gate* autobiographical speech, she reveals her childhood sexual trauma. As it is given in Beginning of 4th story ("Outings with Virginia")

"[...] and then [George] burst into a statement which was at once dark and extremely lurid. [...] but if his sisters – if Vanessa refused to go out with him – if he could not bring his friends to the house – in short, it was clear that the chaste, immaculate George Duckworth would be forced into the arms of whores. Needless to say he did not put it like that; and I could only conjure up in my virgin consciousness, dimly irradiated by having read the "Symposium" with Miss Case, horrible visions of the vices to which young men were driven whose sisters did not make them happy at home" (p. 38).[blame]

And again, last phrase of 5th story ("Revelation").

"Yes the old ladies of Kensington and Belgravia never knew that George Duckworth was not the only father and mother, brother and sister to those poor Stephen girls; he was their lover also" (p. 42).

In *Moment of Being*, Woolf over and over again stirs up the incidents of sexual abuse; she suffered at the hands of her half brothers, which is said to have haunted her till her suicide.

Her helplessness is perceptible from the words describing her experience at the age of sex.

I remember resenting, disliking it-what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling? (p.69)

Her critics had often tried to portray her as an over sensitive and novice, who cannot face the world of realities and projected her as an ivory class atheist. They often nicknamed her as 'the invalid lady of Bloomsbury.' In the earlier writings on her, especially in a time when child sexual abuse was not a public matter for discussion, the critics attributed her depressive nature of her father's hypersensitive nervous system and predisposition to madness. But her autobiographical writings and letters and diaries later revealed the role played by abusive instances in her life in leading her to a life of depression. Research analysis of the consequences of incest and childhood sexual abuse shows that when the perpetrator is the father or father figure, on whom the victim had a great trust, the damage is inestimable. Both of her step brothers were much older and more or like a father to her, especially after the death of her mother. D. Gelinas in his work, *The Persisting Negative Effect of Incest* points out that the reaction of children to their abuser's advances are varied depending on the situation and her relation with the abuser.

Depending on the situation, a child reacts variously to the abuser's advances; rarely does she respond with anger. If the abuser is loved and (hitherto) trusted, and especially if he stands in a position of authority over the child, as father, uncle, elder brother, or trusted family friend, the child will be divided in her feelings between loyalty to self and loyalty to the offender (p. 328).

Louise DeSalvo has even suggested that '[h]er lifelong response to her prolonged abuse was a dislike, perhaps even a terror, of heterosexual sexuality... she chose lesbian love... as a positive, adaptive response to her abuse'. Long-standing female partners in Woolf's life had included her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen, her sister Vanessa Bell and her friends Violet Dickinson, Margaret Llewelyn-Davies and Vita Sackville- West. Psychological studies prove that child victims of sexual abuse carry the pain of the incest into their adulthood to such an extent that they become sexually frigid, partly because sex becomes disgusting to them or partly because of their belief that this numbness may shield them further attacks on them. On the contrary, there are possibilities of the victim becoming sexually promiscuous, seeking pleasure in sexual adventures. Diana Russel in her work, "The Incidence and Prevalence of Intra familial and Extra familial Sexual Abuse of Female Children" makes the observation that 'sometimes a woman associates all men with the incest, finds them repulsive, and seeks a sexual partner in another woman.

CONCLUSIONS

The relevance of the issue of tormented childhood is discernible from the current prevalence attached with the word 'child abuse'. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child defines child abuse as all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse.' This definition categorizes all forms of child abuses as a crime. Nowadays, many surveys come out revealing the frightening increase in the number of children, either male or female, who undergo sexual exploitation either in family or in society. The distress resulting from the sexual torment enhance when the children lack emotional support from their own family. In the nuclear family system children find no one who might assure them that they are not the sinners, but they are just the victims of someone else's sin. Children miss a considerate being in antagonistic parents within the home or the divorced parents living separately. Children are particularly susceptible to social forces. Children who are exposed to an environment which is encouraging and supportive are more likely to develop an optimistic and confident outlook towards

themselves and the society than are children placed in an atmosphere in which reverse is the case. Malignant influence yields irreparable effect on them and causes behavioral problems.

When the family fails in providing appropriate and consistent socialization experiences, the child seems to be particularly vulnerable to the development of conduct and delinquent disorders. Typically the children with persistent disorders come from families where there is discord and quarrelling, where affection is lacking, where discipline is inconsistent, ineffective and either extremely severe or lax. (Gale and Chapman 1984: 40)

George Eliot wrote in *The Mill on the Floss* "We could never have loved the earth so well if we had had no childhood in it". And it is this joy of childhood that the children are denied by adults or by society.

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