

A Critical Study of Women's Oppression in Sapphire's *Push*

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Abstract

Oppression against women prevails in different forms such as abuse, violence, and exploitation denying them from their rights. Women face oppression in every walk of life. Family is a safest place for a woman to live in but at times family become a secret platform for the abusers to exploit the women of the house. Women because of their lower status are ostracised and discriminated in the society. The paper through the novel *Push* (1996) by Sapphire critically examines the plethora of violence suffered by the protagonist with multifaceted oppression. Moreover, paper explores the universal oppression of women and its impact on their individuality.

Keywords: Women, Oppression, Abuse, Family.

Abuse is traumatic experience for every individual. Abuse is defined as an improper use of actions by one person to intentionally harm the other. Most of the times this behaviour is adopted by the men in a powerful position to control and dominate the women in powerless position, as Maynard and Hanmer in *Women, Violence and Social Control* (1987) remarks, "... women are kept subordinate through these various strategies, which are not simply the prerogative of particular men, but rather institutionalised through the male dominant hierarchy"

(5) . Men, the prime perpetrators of the abuse want women to be in a submissive spot for which they use different forms of abuse, “the male is seen as subject and agent, the female as object or other” (Maynard and Hanmar 16).

Abuse as a global issue has reached across cultural, social, economic boundaries, “Globally, nationally and locally violence against women is an endemic social problem and one that is increasingly being recognised as human rights issue” (Lombard and McMillan 9). Incidences of abuse being so extensive and wide-spread has dispersed all over world where humans reside making it socially accepted behaviour practised by the stronger over the weaker. It is not the issue of lower or middle class rather it prevails among high class societies as well Abuse commenced on the women is the major issue that has serious impacts on the women and is deeply ingrained within many societies which consider such inevitable problem as a trivial matter. Subjection of women to abuse has its continuous existence due to pretention of women as weaker sex. Image of women as feeble, docile, delicate, and gentle has further led to their discrimination in the society. As their insignificant image has always been associated with their being weak and frail compared to men. Signs of abuse are not always prevalent and a majority of women never voice their stories about abuse.

Moreover, a stigma gets entangled in the psyche of the women as she is seen with doubtful eyes. She is blamed for the abuse committed on her. She is never supported by the family members. Her accusations are a direct attack on family’s pride and honour. Disclosing the abuse leads to embarrassment for her. For the family, it is women who is at fault who ruins family’s harmony. It is humiliating for the women to face the world with disgrace and dishonour. It is the women, who carries the burden of the crime committed on her by her own dear ones. It gets even tougher for the women to prove her own family member guilty of the crime. Her status is lowered before her as well as society shifting her to the margins of the

society. Women who suffers abuse is further deprived of her privileges as she is seen as the offender.

Women victims of abuse sometimes avoid to share their helpless situation as, "... women's experience of violence is rarely submitted to scrutiny or analysis..." (Maynard and Hanmer1). They are victims of different forms of abuse: domestic abuse, sexual abuse, physical as well as verbal abuse within the household that cycles around them, "Violence against women is a salient and pervasive issue; it can affect women at any stage of their lives and takes many forms including physical, psychological, sexual/ or economic abuse"(Lombard and McMillan 9). They get entangled inside the cycle regardless of their self-esteem. Perpetuator binds the women within the abusive relationship without letting her to admit the abuse.

The novel *Push* (1996) is written by an eminent American author Sapphire. She was born to an army couple as Ramona Lofton on August 4, 1950 in Fort Ord, California. Later she adopted her pen name 'Sapphire'. Her parent's separation affected Sapphire's high school studies. She left her high school, attained GED degree from San Francisco. She attended New York City College and from Brooklyn College she obtained MFA degree. Before starting her career in writing she tried hands in various jobs. She published her first book of poetry titled *Meditations on the Rainbow* in 1987. Her collection of poetry includes *American Dreams* (1994), *Black Wings & Blind Angels: Poems* (1999). The novel *Push* was published in 1996, and later a film was premiered on the same on January 2009 at the Sundance Film Festival. Her novel *The Kid* which she published in 2011 is semi-sequel to *Push*.

Sapphire in her novel explores the issues of exploitation, violence and abuse leading to the oppression of women. The novel unfolds the journey of oppression of a sixteen-year-old girl, the protagonist of the novel, Claireece Precious Jones an illiterate and obese female. Sapphire through the victimization of Precious, reveals the cruelties of violence in the form of

sexual, physical and verbal abuse propagated on the women. The novel vividly depicts sufferings of a daughter and her suppression under patriarchy.

Fathers are in authority in a patriarchal society and many a times family provides a secret platform to them for exploiting their daughters as Herman remarks, “As long as fathers dominate their families, they will have the power to make sexual use of their children” (202). Father’s control over the family resources approves his right over the daughter. Daughters in a powerless condition give up before the fathers, “Men are more likely to consider their daughters or stepdaughters as their sexual property” (Beverly 5). Daughters never feel safe in such family systems where various forms of abuse perpetuates. Families where fathers target their daughters for their sexual needs possess weak internal structures. Precious’s sexual relationship with her father is one of the characteristics of women’s oppression in the patriarchal society. According to Brownmiller, “If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape” (18), Precious has been raped and assaulted by her father since childhood. Carl Kenwood Jones, her father forces himself on his daughter without caring for the pain she endures, “My father don’t see me really. If he did he would know I was like a white girl, a *real* person, inside. He would not climb on me from forever and stick his dick in me ‘n gets me inside on fire, bleed, I bleed then he slaps me” (Push 32). Her father never treated Precious as his daughter. He always perceived her as his property whom he could exploit whenever he liked, “I see me, first grade, pink dress dirty sperm stuffs on it. No one combs my hair. Second grade, third grade, fourth grade seem like one dark night. Carl is the night and I disappear in it. And the daytimes don’t make sense” (18). Being a child, Precious is an easy prey for her father, Carl Kenwood Jones, as there is difference of power between her and her father. Her father enjoys his commanding position in the family by victimizing his daughter.

Precious witness brutality in the form of sexual abuse from her father and her suffering is doubled when she learns about her pregnancy. She is expelled from her school for being pregnant as her teacher says, "I'm afraid I'm going to have to suspend you-" (Push 8). Her classmates make fun of Precious for being obese, "But I'm big five feet nine-ten, I weigh over two hundred pounds" (Push 6) she feels ashamed for her body size, "...they laugh like trying to pull me..." (Push 6). She is seen as the culprit for the abuse she has gone through. She has to face oppression at every moment of her life by the people around her. She feels embarrassed when the nurse in the hospital enquires:

"Father, "she say. "What's your daddy's name?"

"Carl Kenwood Jones, born in the Bronx."

She say, "What's the baby's father's name?"

I say, "Carl Kenwood Jones, born in the same Bronx."

She quiet quiet, Say, "Shame, thas a Shame. Twelve years old, twelve years old," she say over'n over like she crazy (or in some shock or something).

Her self-esteem is shattered, when it is revealed that she is pregnant by her father. Her father who exploits her sexually escapes the disgrace Precious goes through. Because of her father's abusive behaviour towards his daughter, ruins her life as Lynn Sacco in her book *Unspeakable: Father-Daughter Incest in American History* (2009) remarks, "Most children who are sexually abused are girls who were assaulted by their father or other male head of household" (16) it is the daughter every time who carries the burden of humiliation and dishonour with her.

Precious's oppression by her father begins when he loses sexual interest in her mother, Mary Johnston, and substitutes Precious for her mother's place. He starts assaulting Precious when she is an infant as is revealed by her mother, "Then he get off me, take off her Pampers and try to stick his thing in Precious" (Push 135), consequently raping her at a young age. Precious is too small to protest her father. She not even remembers the first time she was

abused. Precious's, from an early age, is exposed to violence, abuse, and oppression first by her father and later by her mother. Precious finds herself being the most suppressed in the family. She loses her "self" and 'individuality' as her identity gets associated with the abuse she endured as Beverly A. Ogilvie in his book *Mother-daughter Incest: A Guide for Helping Professionals* notices, "The daughter is expected to join the parents in promising the rules that maintain family unit" (5). Precious never knew how to express her opinion or stand against her abuser. She loses her self-respect when she is incestuously raped by her own father. Precious out of fear submits to her father every time he assaults her. She is left choiceless to raise voice against her abuser.

A daughter depends on her mother in her difficult times. Mothers are seen as an epitome of love and motherhood. They are ensured with the responsibility of rearing and nurturing. A mother saves her daughter from every danger the daughter witnesses. A daughter develops her first bond with her mother. A daughter learns from her mother and tries to imitate her: "She is expected to identify with her mother..." (Beverly 5). Many a times a mother abuses her daughter for sleeping with her husband. She sees her daughter as a competitor and blames her for the consequences. According to the mother it is her daughter who is the culprit and who is to be punished. Precious's mother Mary Johnston never loves her daughter. She is annoyed with her daughter and abuses her for being pregnant:

Mama slap me. HARD. Then she pick up cast-iron skillet, thank god it was no hot grease in it, and she hit me so hard on back I fall on floor. Then she kick me in ribs. Then she say, "Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut!" ... "Fat cunt bucket slut! Nigger pig bitch! He done quit me! He done left me' cause of you". (19)

Her mother never stopped her father from abusing their daughter. She rather than supporting her daughter hated her. She wanted her husband at any cost, "She bring him to me.

I ain' crazy, that stinky hoe give me to him. Probably thas' what he require to fuck her, some of me" (24). Mary Johnston willingly fragments her daughter's dignity to get her husband back. She never cares for her daughter's future. Though she is the mutual culprit of ending their daughter's childhood but she accuses Precious for all the circumstances. Precious is not only the victim of her father's sexual abuse but she is shattered with her mother's hatred and accusations. Moreover, her submission to her mother's abuse clearly proves her helplessness before her powerful parents.

The oppression which Precious endures in her life never stops. Her struggle never ends with the abuse. She is denied of all the funds she gets for her baby. Her mother receives all the funds of Precious's baby from the welfare and never give it to Precious, "I ain' got notebook, no money" (40). She struggles every moment to survive in the world. Precious is informed by Mary Johnston that her father is HIV positive and Precious must also get herself tested. Precious is shaken to know that she is also infected by her father, "... I am ... am *positive* (110). She is worried that her daughter and son might be HIV positive as well and gets the daughter tested along with her, "'Cause if Lil Mongo don't got it maybe he didn't have it in 1983 when she born" (110). She gets her son tested as well, "Abdul get tested. He is not HIV positive" (138). Precious mourns over her helplessness, her father has ruined by raping his daughter. He not only ruined her past but abandoned her from living a healthy and normal life.

Precious meets women like her, who are victims of patriarchal abuse. In reality, Precious never had a family in true sense. She found her family in these women. She was assaulted and treated as a servant who was to serve her mother. All these women have suffered a lot in their lives like Precious. They are abused by their father, stepfather, boyfriend and mother. These women share their horrifying stories of rape in different meetings. Precious learns that she is not only a single girl who is victimized but there are women like her, who are the victims of silent abuse that takes place inside four walls of the house.

Precious as her name suggests is not so 'Precious' for anyone in her family. She is more like a body than a person to her parents. Precious is doubly oppressed, firstly by her parents' abuse and later by the behaviour of the people who consider her culprit. She never receives any care or affection from her parents. She is not even provided with proper resources in her family. She lives a life of humiliation and subordination with her parents. There are women around the world like Precious who face oppression that is buried in the habits considered inevitable for good womanhood. The culturally sanctioned degradation of women begins in private life within families, with women being abused by the members of the family. Women who suffer abuse are alienated from their own society.

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