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An Explorative Study of Violence with Special Reference to Afro-American Literature

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Abstract:

This paper delves into the multi-faceted violence by exploring its various kinds like domestic violence, racial violence, child sexual abuse etc. and tries to map the history and nature of violence and the relevant sociological, physiological, neurobiological explanations. Why and how violence has become rampant today is touched upon. The multi-dimensional aspects of violence in the specific African- American context are explored in detail.

Keywords: *Violence, child abuse, incest, domestic violence, racial discrimination, Freud, Fanon, power relations etc*

*“Forgive the man his violence
For violence has a human face...”*

J. Bronowski

Violence is defined as behavior that is intended to hurt or kill somebody. It is the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or cause damage to person or property. Child abuse, child sexual abuse, assault, sexual assault, battery, domestic violence, rape, war, terrorism are some of the general forms of violence. Many kinds of violence are taking place around the world on an hourly basis. Violence can be basically divided into three categories. (i) Violence among nations (ie. War terrorism), (ii) Violence among groups within nations (racial or religious etc.) and (iii) Violence among individuals (murder, assault, rape, battery, molestation etc.) Domestic violence is the most prevalent form of violence and is suffered mostly by women across the world. It is the summary of physically, sexually and psychologically abusive behaviour directed by one partner against another, regardless of their marital status or gender. Abusers use physical and sexual violence, threats, money, emotional and psychological abuse to control their partners and get their way. Emotional or psychological abuse is more subtle. Quite often it goes unseen or even the victim does not recognize that she is being abused. It seriously damages the self-esteem and scars the soul. It also has various categories like isolation, verbal abuse, financial abuse etc. Sudha Arora, Counsellor based in Mumbai, calls such kind of mental harassment as “ Silent Violence” and she further says that it is a complex painful, unrecognized form of abuse that has no visible solution. It had been deeply ingrained in a woman that she must learn to compromise. When the woman gets used to the shouting and beating, she does not see it as a torture. Over time, she begins to believe herself lacking and unworthy. And as there is no physical violence, everyone fails to recognize the damage caused by silent negligence or verbal abuse. This kind of unidentified stress gives rise to a number of physical ailments like asthma, indigestion, acidity, leading to unexplained loss of appetite and weakness, migraine etc. Many feminist studies by now have made it clear that even outside home, structures and processes such as citizenship, nationality, democracy or the state are not gender-neutral, and that violence against women is the primary reason for their exploitation. Upper castes and middle class women feel sheltered from external violence but are by no means free from domestic violence. It is in these families that cases of dowry deaths and female feticide are most often reported. On the other hand, lower caste/class women may have the independence which their upper caste counterparts lack but they are more vulnerable to social violence because they are taken to be sexually available and ‘bad’ as against the ‘good’ caste women. Another serious issue is that of child sexual abuse due to which the girl’s very gender becomes a liability to herself as a human being. Internationally renowned authors and celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and Maya Angelou have been sexually abused in their childhood. Angelou, who was sexually abused by her mother’s partner, in *I know Why The Caged Bird Sings*, writes that she first felt something was ‘too soft to be a hand’ and was raped by a ‘mush – hard thing.’ Michael Jackson and film-maker Woody Allen are notoriously famous for being child sexual abusers. The children of single mothers are under the constant threat of sexual assaulters. Most of these perpetrators are the single mother’s manfriends or subsequent husbands. Pinki Virani, author of *Bitter Chocolate – Child Sexual Abuse in India* (2000) who was recently awarded the Government of India’s Shree Shakti Puraskar, honoring her role in woman’s empowerment and the book’s contribution to raising awareness about child sexual abuse, aptly questions “*so much power abused, so much trust betrayed where the parents of these children are?*” (XV). An interesting aspect of violence is that behavior viewed as violent in one society may not be so viewed in another. This happens because what is unacceptable in one society may be acceptable in another. For example, the female circumcision routinely practiced in some parts of Africa may be viewed as violence by those who don’t belong to the African culture. Also the practices that are not perceived as violent at one

point of time may be considered so in the same society as the values of that society change. For example, practices such as child marriage or the denial of the right of remarriage to widows, Sati etc which were acceptable within our society, around four generations ago are now considered to be violent by all of us. In the same way, practices and behavior that may not be considered to be violent by a person at one point of time may be considered so by the same person as his or her values or awareness change. This can also lead to deep personal conflicts and even complete breakdown if the person experiencing the change is unable to contain or manage it efficiently. For instance, the transformation in the awareness of Black Americans regarding racism after the Second World War. Discrimination on the basis of colour has always been resented by the black population of US. But it had been broadly accepted until the Second World War. On their return from the war these soldiers resented the racial discrimination they had earlier tolerated. They saw it as a serious violation of the equality promised by the Constitution of their country. This awareness led to deep resentment and personal conflicts when they faced racial discrimination and this led to strong anti-racial movements against it in the last few decades. In a similar way, women all over the world have started to resent the discrimination they suffer in different spheres of life. The problem of violence is an immensely old and complicated one. According to the Genesis man is essentially violent and was so from the beginning. The first active sin committed after Man's Fall was the murder of Abel by Cain. There has been a long held debate regarding whether violence is inherent in human or the result of his circumstances. The archaeological evidence among prehistoric human shows both violence and peacefulness as his characteristics. There are certain communities in the world who represent the essential violence of mankind. For example, for the Yanomanno Indians of South America, warfare is ever present in their lives. Many of their children are slain at birth and a third of their adults perish violently in battle. And in the Hawaii Islands, the punishment for any small or big crime is death. But in contrast to them there are certain passive unwarlike tribes which are a proof that man is not inevitably destructive. For eg, the Auroguacos of Columbia, the Semai of Malai, the Eskimos of Arctic, Lapchas of Sikkim etc. The next major question is why violence takes place? The explanation given by sociologists is that, being born into a family and a society at large man encounters a contradiction between himself and other members of the group. He wants to belong, be loved and recognized by others as it reassures his identity, but not on terms which restrict his autonomy. He wants this on his own terms and those who fail to do it must be made to suffer too to make them see his feelings. Hence violence is not just the physical language or tool of aggression, but it is *also* "the unloving application of force" (25), as Gerald Priestland puts it. The physiological explanation given by neurobiologists is that the stimuli of violence transfigures the perpetrator and takes total control of him. Violence is commonly instigated by anger, fear and frustration which seems to increase the pressure and pulse of the blood, raises the glucose content, speeds up breathing and shuts down the digestion. The nerves become partially anaestheticised in some way, so that there is courage and tolerance of pain which in normal times man is not capable of. Most of these phenomena are controlled from an area at the base of the brain which recognizes a challenge to the individual and responds by signaling for the release of non adrenalin and other hormones from the adrenal glands. The effect of these is like an injection of drugs – once in the bloodstream they are hard to resist and cannot be neutralized at will. A man who has been aggressive is not his normal self and will not return to that state until the hormones wear off. So the explanation of violence can be summed up in one word as "frustration" which as Freud puts it "results from the restrictions imposed by society on the free workings of its instincts" (<http://fire.rettorato.unito.it/blog/?id=26162>). Sigmund Freud, in his famous work Civilization and its Discontents (1930) elaborates his views on violence and states that : Violence is an unborn instinct controlled by society but always ready to erupt. The enactment of it as the spectacle of destructiveness provides the ego with the satisfaction of its vital needs and with the sense of control over nature. (<http://fire.rettorato.unito.it/blog/?id=26162>) He opines that aggressiveness, destructiveness, cruelty are inborn human inclinations. Destructive forces are present in all individuals and thus man is by nature an anti-cultural being. Besides the instinct to preserve life (eros), there's also the instinct to destroy it (thanatos). In this modern world, man has transformed himself and his society to such an extent that he has become a misfit in his own society. And 'self defence' and 'necessity' have become characteristic words to justify violence. No part of the world seems safe from the horrors of the savage destruction, the threats of mass terrorism or nuclear annihilation. The horrific terrorist elimination of the Twin towers and thousands of people inside them, in the traumatic event now referred to as 9/11, has shocked the North Americans into realizing that they too are vulnerable to violence. Violence is the issue of our times and at national level it mainly results from the lust for power and domination. As we can see all politics is a struggle for power. This reminds us of the position of thinkers like Foucault and Sartre – "A man feels himself more of a man when he is imposing himself and making others the instruments of his will which gives him incomparable pleasure" (<http://books.google.co.in/books?hl=en&lr>). In a broad sense, it can be said that violence occurs in situations of injustice. It is caused not only by physical threats but by threats to human dignity. J. Krishnamurthy in his book Beyond Violence opines that the source of the violence is the "me", the ego, the self which expresses itself in many ways. ...in trying to become or be somebody it divides itself as the "me" and the "not me", as the unconscious and the conscious, the "me" that identifies with the family or not with the family, with the community or not with the community and so on. It is like a stone dropped in a lake: the waves spread and spread and at the centre is the 'me'. As long as the 'me' survives in any form, very subtly or grossly there must be violence. (74) The renowned British dramatist of the twentieth century Edward Bond in his note "On Violence" argues that capitalism is the culprit which propagated the system of violence, in spite of all the physical advantages and economic affluence. According to him violence is a sign of the presence of some major social injustice and "it will only stop when we live in a just society in which all people are equal in all significant respect" (9). He aptly says that violence is not a function of human nature but of human societies. In the scenario of the fast paced scientific explorations and advancements of the contemporary society, people have more reasons to panic as anyone can avail themselves of guns and weapons which are very efficient and are mass produced. Instances of mass killing and bombing have almost become daily affairs and we see it live on T.V. and other mass media. In many cases it is seen that violence and brutality is a characteristic of the inarticulate the ignored and the socially backward. It is in this context that Frantz Fanon, a black French psychiatrist from Martinique, whose philosophy of contemporary violence receives attention. It was his experience as a

psychiatrist in an Algerian hospital which made him realize what torture could do to its victims. He was convinced that torture was used by French to satisfy their sadistic racism and that the opportunity to commit atrocities against black people was one of the motives behind colonialism. He came to the conclusion that such a violent system could only be removed by using violence. And freedom had to be seized rather than be waited for to be granted. In the very first chapter 'Concerning Violence' in his *The Wretched of the Earth* which is hailed as '*The Handbook for Black Revolution*', Fanon makes it clear that the struggle for power in colonized states will be resolved only through violent struggle. As the colonized states were created and maintained by the use of violence or the threat of violence it is a necessity that it will take violence to reverse the power relationships. The multi dimensional aspect of violence in the specific African- American context needs to be discussed in detail. America has been a unique country demographically, as its majority of the population is imported from widely varied sources and cultures within a short span of time. To a large extent, American violence is the result of this immigration, with all of them fighting for places in a society which will make them feel wanted and significant. America's most pertinent problem had been how to allow the Negro people to join a white society, who had been imported as slaves over a period three hundred years as part of colonization and deliberately deprived of their own social and political pride. When the question of women in Afro-America arises, they have been and are still suffering even when political freedom has been attained "*due to the imposition of colonial ideology and Victorian attitudes*" (Sircar 18). Imprisoned within their homes, where notions of marriage and motherhood are used to control and devalue them, these women have to fight against a patriarchal and racial society on a daily basis. To add to their woes they are deprived of a support system earlier provided by customary traditions, due to the disruption of the old traditional values and customs which had meaning in the context of a close-knit pre-colonial community in Africa. Anne Tulia Cooper has rightly observed about African-American women that: *The coloured woman... occupies a unique position in this country... she is confronted by both a woman question and a race problem and is yet an unknown or unacknowledged factor in both....* (Whitson 79) The prominent African- American feminist theoretician, Bell Hooks in her essay 'Revolutionary Black Women: Making Ourselves Subjects' explicates the sophisticated system of violence and draws our attention to the fact that violence is not just inflicted by black men on black women, but on their children by black women and upon each other. She talks about the various styles of parenting in diverse black communities which support and perpetuate the use violence as a means of domestic social control. Children are brought up with the notion that violence is an appropriate response to crisis. They take it for granted that they can be verbally abusive and physically violent to each other. Commenting on the lines '*I ain't shit: You must be lower than that to care*' in the poem by Nikki Giovanni, she says how the exploited and oppressed people turn the rage and hostility they experience towards themselves and towards those who care about them. She reads the meaning of the poem as '*how can you be worth anything if you care about me who is worth nothing*' (42) and further adds that '*such deeply internalized pain and self-rejection informs the aggression inflicted on their mirror image - other black women*' (42). Another facet of the problem is discussed by Audre Lorde in her essay '*Eye to Eye : Black Woman, Hatred and Anger*', where she says: We do not love ourselves, therefore we cannot love each other. Because we see in each other's face our own face, the face we never stopped wanting: at the same time which we try to obliterate. (43). Bell Hooks ponders at the cause of violence at the grass root level and concludes that "*the notion of hierarchical rule and coercive authority is the root cause of violence between who dominate and those who are dominated*" (188) and this foundation has to be eliminated to end violence. Patriarchal male rule had always been a very potent factor in the perpetuation of violence in the society and it took a totally different turn with the advancement of capitalism. In the pre-capitalist world, patriarchy allowed all men to completely rule women in their families, to decide their fate, to shape their destiny. They could decide whom their daughters would marry and whether they would read and write etc. But with the coming of the capitalist nation - state in the US, they lost their authority and control over their wives and even their own lives. They were controlled by the economic needs of capitalism. They were made to accept their dehumanization and exploitation in the public world of work, and they were taught to expect that the private world, the world of home and intimate relationships will restore to them their sense of power, which they equated with masculinity. Hence, this system gives birth to a chain of violence, which results in the death of others or their own deaths. In order to break the vicious chain of violence, it becomes imperative for black men and women to criticize the sexist notion of masculinity and to examine the impact of capitalism on their lives. Equal responsibility lies on the shoulders of women who need to question the notions of passive acceptance of violence in day-to-day life, and also that violence can be eliminated by violence. Women also need to withdraw all sorts of support for any kind of war or riot. Women and men must oppose the use of violence in all its manifestations like war, violence, domestic violence, adult violence against children, teenage violence, racial violence etc. Instead of hierarchical structures, human interaction should be based on love, unity, brotherhood, trust and equality. Only this can become the panacea to the evils of violence in our society.

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