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Sexual abuse and self- reconstruction: psychosocial study of Dorothy Allison's "Bastard out of Carolina" and Edmund White's "A boy's own story"

Abuso sexual y auto-reconstrucción: estudio psicosocial de "Bastard out of Carolina" de Dorothy Allison y "A boy's own story" de Edmund White

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, there is more interest in studying the perverted sexual relationship; and their causes and effects. The social and psychological impact of such relationships should not be overlooked. Writers who write about such topics are usually inspired by personal experiences; the semi-autobiographical element is usually present in such works, whether Lesbian or gay, the novelist uses his story as a kind of thereby or catharsis in an attempt to seek equilibrium. In her novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison tells a story of a girl who represents the novelist herself.

Keywords: Psychology, gay, lesbian, autobiography, therapy, sex.

RESUMEN

Cada vez hay más interés en estudiar la relación sexual pervertida; y sus causas y efectos. El impacto social y psicológico de tales relaciones no debe pasarse por alto. Los escritores que escriben sobre estos temas suelen inspirarse en experiencias personales; el elemento semi-autobiográfico suele estar presente en tales obras, ya sea lesbiana o gay, el novelista usa su historia como una especie de tal o catarsis en un intento de buscar el equilibrio. En su novela *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison cuenta la historia de una niña que representa a la novelista.

Palabras clave: Psicología, gays, lesbianas, autobiografías, terapias, sexo

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INTRODUCTION

Homosexual issues have become part of the psychological studies of human variety throughout the last few years. The most common terms for homosexual people are gay for males and lesbian for females; however, gay also refers to both homosexual males and females. This study is to shed light on understanding the psychological effects of sexual orientation, whether these studies are about lesbians or gay men, because these perverted relations are essentially related to psychological dimensions. (GARNETS & KIMMEL: 2003, pp. 1-21) The term 'homosexual' is originally a Greek and Latin mixture, with the first element derived from Greek 'homos,' which means "same" (not linked to the Latin homo, "man"). Thus the term, then, connotes sexual acts and affections between members of the same sex. (André: 2018, pp. 7-20). Studying homosexuality belongs to a gender study, a theoretical field dedicated to analyzing gender identity. It contains women's studies / including feminism, gender, and politics /, as well as men's and queer studies. Gender studies are influenced mainly by Sigmund Freud, and they are divided into three types; gender identity, gender expression, and biological expression sex. In other words, these categories are divided into social, biological, and cultural constructions.

Freud was the originator of psychoanalysis, and he introduced this new method of analyzing the human mind according to their; behavior, mentality, and dreams. Actually, personalities and self-identities are constructed mainly from childhood experiences. (MCGLYNN & RACKLEY: 2017, pp. 534-561, MARIE: 2020)

Mistreatment may cause loss of self-worth and create a defamed identity in victims; thus, abused individuals with same-sex predilections may be more willing to adopt another stigmatized identity. (Saewyc et al.: 2017, p. 115)

Sexual abuse for boys differs from that for girls in its psychological effect; when sexual abuse is committed by men, boys come to believe that homosexuality is normal. While sexual abuse for girls by male committers will cause the victim to suffer from a harsh, heartless sexual relationship with men. (Schröder et al.: 2018, p. 2417) An American psychologist, in his "Emerging issues in research on lesbians and gay men's mental health," says "gay men and lesbians suffer from more mental health problems including substance use disorders, affective disorders, and suicide." (Cochran: 2001, p. 939) These constructions prove that femininity and masculinity as gender actions are able to take different pictures according to the circumstances that surround them.

METHODOLOGY

The psychological outlook of society

Affection, erotic and sexual orientation can be understood only within the social environment. The medical term for homosexuality is transformed throughout history to be seen as a psychological diversion. (Savin-Williams: 1998, pp. 49-68) Most of the well-known literature on lesbian, gay, and bisexual adolescences and their parents focuses on the difficulties they face when the child discovers her/ his sex attractions. In the situation of sexuality, lesbian refers only to female homosexuality. The term lesbian is taken from the name of the Greek island Lesbos, where the poet Sappho wrote mostly about her emotive relationships with young women.

The word "gay," on the other hand, seems to have its roots around the 12th century in England, originally is derived from the Old French word 'gay,' which is derived from a Germanic origin. The origin of the word means "joyful" or "bright." It was around the 1920s when the word started to take a new meaning that is related to sexual meaning, whether for men or women. Later by the 1950s, the word gay officially came to give the meaning of homosexual males, and the term at that time was associated with the disorder. (Cardell et al.: 1981, pp.488-494)

It is during the last two decades, public and scientific awareness for lesbian and gay lives and issues began appearing as knowledge for sexual identities. Such awareness would illuminate mental problems, which

may not only encompasses gender issues but across has racial, cultural, and social dimensions as well. (SCHALK: 2018) And many did write on such topics as a reflection of modern issues.

Dorothy Allison (1949): An Autobiographical Sketch

Fifty years ago, it was hardly possible to identify a form of literature as 'Lesbian.' Although there are novels written by lesbian authors yet they could not be identified as such until the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s. At that time, Women began to produce their own literature, and lesbian writings were considered as part of literary tradition.

Lesbian writers have worked on popular genres in order to highlight lesbian as well as feminist concerns. Their novels deal with the reasons that lead to being lesbianism and are written into plots to be understood by the readers. Lesbian studies have become a category of feminism studies.

The feminist author and incest fighter Dorothy E. Allison (b. 1949) is a lesbian novelist, born in Greenville, South Carolina, to a single teenage mother, Ruth Gibson Allison, who was only fifteen years old at the time. Her mother was poor, trying different jobs to earn her baby's living. She worked as a waitress and cooked and soon, she got married. When Dorothy was five years old, she was a victim of stepfather sexual abuse. Since Dorothy was still young, she did not tell anyone till she reached eleven when she decided to tell her relative about it, and that relative told her mother. Ruth warned her husband to keep away from her daughter, but the stepfather resumed the sexual abuse, ongoing for five years. This act affected Dorothy for years and caused her to suffer mentally and physically. She suffered gonorrhea, which is an infection caused by a sexually transmitted bacterium that infects both males and females. Such an infection left her unable to have kids all her life.

When Dorothy Allison reached Presbyterian College, she hooked the women's movement and became a feminist. When she started to write, she used her life experience; her stepfather's sexual abuse, besides poverty, and her sexual abnormal desire became the fuel of her works. (Williams: 2020, pp 104-121)

In 1992 she published her first novel *Bastard Out of Carolina*, which turned into a film later on.

Bastard Out of Carolina is a semi-autobiographical pain story in which Dorothy decides to lift the veil on child abuse, something she experienced and suffered from. She portrays a little girl named Ruth Anne Boatwright and nicknamed 'Bone' who suffers from repeated physical and sexual abuse by Glen, her own stepfather. What gives the novel a rich imagination is that the novel is narrated by the child who is the victim herself. Bone is the eponymous 'bastard' of the novel's name, and we can feel what kind of feelings this kid suffers from and what is happening in her mind through her narration of the events. The child - victim starts questioning her individual identity; oscillates between sexual abuse and psychological breakdown. Actually, it is Dorothy's own history of abuse that can be seen reflected through Bone's eyes.

In the novel, Dorothy shows the ties between violence, loyalty, and love 'white trash' describing her community as "white trash." The act of narrating seems a conscious act of self – discovery, in which the victim child 'Bone' expresses the influence of the event on her personality and Identity afterward. (Bouson: 2001, pp. 101-123) In many places, Bone seems to be the novelist's mouthpiece, especially when she tries to stop that monster who violates her privacy, destroys her life, and distorts her identity, defying him: "you can't break me," I told him. "And you're never going to touch me again." (Dickinson: 2001, p. 75) Dorothy Alison claims that "under patriarchal law women who are molested during childhood start out as victims, and then victims become complicit with abuse and honor injunctions posed by perpetrators to dismiss the abusers' import or impact" (Dickinson: 2001, p.76). Bone describes her surroundings in her mother's house as if a prison; she feels that the houses they keep on moving to (because of poverty) are small and cold with 'small and close and damp-smelling...tract houses'. It is because that the child is psychologically restless; she has such feelings. On the other hand, she feels her aunt's house to be 'domestic space' and ... 'warm, always humming with voices and laughter'.

Dorothy's identity is not stable due to her changing experiences. It is the shameful feeling of guilt, and her silence is what hurts the little girl more. She hates that disgraceful act, but as a little girl, she cannot decide whether to talk about or remain silent. Her stepfather, while continue abusing her, tells her: "Mama wouldn't

know. More terrified of hurting her than of anything that might happen to me, I would work as hard as I can to make sure she never knew". According to Gilmore, if a child is still young, fathers will be responsible till reaching the legal age. (Gilmore: 2001, p.59) Bone remembers when her mother accepted Glen's proposal for marriage, he told her, "'You're mine, all of you mine' (Bastard: p.36). Therefore, Bone believes that she is 'Owned' by Glen, her stepfather, and the idea burns her from inside and forces her to keep silent.

During the second wave of feminism, there was a belief that: "In a patriarchal society the father is the one the patriarchal family is understood as a microcosm of the relations between men and women in a society in which authority and power are dispensed by the father and licensed by his name." (Firestone: 1972, p.66) Nevertheless, incest is a crime for 'the threat it poses to middle-class notions of family that subtend the legal constructions of rape and property' (Gilmore: 2017, pp. 680-687; Gilmore: 2020, pp. 179-185). Sometimes it is difficult to prove incest a crime since incest differs from rape. Rape is forced sex, while incest means convincing the hesitant child that he should accept and submit because it is part of the parent's responsibility. Bone is unable to answer all the questions that pop in her mind, whether she can tell or not, and whether others will believe him or not. All such questions have no answers, especially for a young child like Bone.

When Bone is born, her mother was only fifteen years old, being a single mother. She is declared as 'illegitimate' and certificated as a bastard. The word 'bastard' at that time means warning and punishment. Bone says that her mother hates that name; "Mama hated to be called trash...The stamp on that birth certificate burned her like the stamp she knew they'd tried to put on her." This is reminiscent of Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne when she is forced to wear the badge of shame as a sign of illegitimacy. So Bone though a kid yet, she can feel she is a misbegotten child. A feeling hurts her psychologically because she feels she is unprotected by a father and unwanted by a mother.

With the progress of the novel, Bone's psychological suffering increases, she starts to enjoy the sexual violence of Glen's attacks. The more she is hurt, the more she hurts her self - image and wicked self, and that adds pleasure to her. She even starts to masturbate to fantasize about being beaten by her stepfather. She remarks:

I lived in a world of shame. I hid my bruises as if they were evidence of crimes I had committed. I knew I was a sick and disgusting person. I couldn't stop my stepfather from beating me, but I was the one who masturbated. I did that, and how could I explain to anyone that I hated being beaten but still masturbated to the story I told about myself?

Glen starts physically and sexually abusing Bone on a regular basis, dragging her into the bathroom for minor offenses and beating her savagely with a belt; that sadistic practice brings her pleasure as if punishing herself for her guilt. If she cannot declare to others that she is a victim, then she feels she is part of that guilty practice, which makes her share her stepfather in the incestuous relationship. Keeping that big burden hidden stigmatizes her soul and her self - image, which leads to self - destruction. It is obvious that her fantasies are a reflection of her inner psychological conflict for her remaining silent. As a child, she takes the blame for a crime that is not hers.

Rolph Harris, in his article "Victim Blaming -Abuse is Never Your Fault," asserts that:

One of the worst elements of sexual abuse is the term 'victim-blaming.' This occurs when the abuser blames their victim for the actions they have carried out but also when the victim also blames themselves for the abuse they suffered.

What this means to the victim is a lifetime of confusion and, in many cases, complete mental breakdown. Few people walk away unscathed by extreme abuses of this kind, as it affects their very outlook on life. (Harris: 2020, p. 1-13)

With the passage of time, however, Bone begins working in a matrilineal network on the margins of patriarchy and capitalism. She becomes a strong woman the time she realizes how to voice her pain and tell her aunts about her suffering. Her past suffering creates a lady resisting the bourgeois patriarchal society. The most noteworthy person with whom Bone forms a good relationship is her aunt Raylene, a woman who symbolizes both the masculine and feminine personalities of the Boatwrights. Bone's aunt Raylene's appears

in the second half of the novel as an independent woman who helps Bone to shape her personality; by transforming her shame. Bone decides to be with her aunt, whom she always feels having a warm, welcoming home, away from the city leading private life and "seemingly happy that way" (Bastard: p.178). She pulls trash from the river to sell it afterward. Raylene is somehow "different" for she is odd in more than one way; Once she chooses to live away from the rest of the society, Raylene once tells Bone that "out here I can do just as I damn well please" (Bastard: p.18). In another case, she is an outsider because she's a lesbian. Her living situation on the borders of town is emblematic of her status as an outsider in general.

When Bone is 17 years old, she runs off to live with her aunt, cuts her hair short, and calls herself a boy's name 'Ray' to be like a man. Raylene shows Bone how to live joyfully with her shame despite what others think. As a way to bridge between shame and pride, Bone reconsiders her shame to mean how to feel good about one's self. The trauma the little girl went through gave her strength to find happiness from the 'Trash' she and her aunt collect to earn their living. However, Walerstein, in her article "Recomposing the self: Joyful shame in Dorothy Allison's *Bastard out of Carolina*," declares that Bone words "Cleav[es] to her preoedipal desire" implies Bone's lesbian tendencies, by being a tomboy way and refuses to submit Glen's authority. "Glen's authority, stimulate the abuse she later suffers _ as opposed to her abuse being what generates her presumed lesbianism" (Walerstein: 2016, pp.169-183).

A Boy Own Story (1982)

In 1982, White wrote his semi-autobiographical novel *A Boy's Own Story*. The novel is the first of a trilogy, followed by *The Beautiful Room Is Empty* (1988) and *The Farewell Symphony* (1997) (WHITE: 1982)

The novel is narrated by an unnamed narrator who is now in his forties, who retells his 'Own Story' since he was fourteen years old. The narrator tells his suffering that caused him to look down on his ego as a child due to the everyday humiliations that he used to go through; from unable to communicate with his school mates, the feel of alienation from his parents, to his mean sister teasing him all the time. The only place he could find himself in is reading books or being attached to nature; "For I could thrive in the expressive, inhuman realm of nature or the expressive, human realm of books—both worlds so exalted, so guileless—but I felt imperiled by the hidden designs other people were drawing around me."The narrator tries to escape his reality by his imaginative fantasy life, containing three fantasy friends, all with fully developed and often contradictory characters. When he becomes fifteen years old, he experiences his first sex experience with his twelve-year-old close friend Kevin O' Brien, whom the last has taken the lead in the sexual activity though he is younger. Edmund White keeps the protagonist unnamed, on purpose, for he believes in what he knows to be shameful. As the story progresses, the protagonist, who comes to be an adult, starts to have extra desires for this kind of sex. So the early suffering leads him to be a gay person. The narrator declares that:

In our imaginations, the adults of our childhood remain extreme, essential — we might say radical since they are the roots that fed luxuriant later systems. Those first bohemians, for instance, stay operatic in memory even though were we to meet them today — well, what would we think, we who've elaborated our eccentricities with patience, the professionalism they never knew?

As a kind of escape from his reality, the boy dreams of an old man taking him away from his harsh life to a refined world:

I entertained fancy ideas about elegant behavior and cuisine and friendship. . . I wanted to run through the surf or speed off with a brilliant blond in a convertible or rhapsodize on a grand piano somewhere in Europe.

Unfortunately, bridging the gap between his reality and his dreams seems impossible, and his dreams never come true.

RESULTS

Undeniably, the autobiographical element in the first novel cannot be overlooked. The novelist's early experience with her stepfather psychologically affected her attitude towards men and the idea of sex in general. That perverted sexual relationship paved the way for her towards lesbianism. Gradually, she begins developing a hatred for the male sex and gets attracted to those who share her concept about sexism. (Rawlins: 2017, pp. 117-135)

This sexual perversion is also the focal point of Edmund white's novel *A Boy's Own Story* but in a different way. Edmund White (1940) is an American essayist, memoirist, and novelist on literary and social themes. Born in Ohio, and when he reached seven, his parents divorced, so he lived with his mother outskirts of Chicago. He spends summers with his father in Cincinnati. He did not have a happy childhood; his father is a tyrant, nice-looking man, a womanizer, and a source of money. His father left his mother for a younger woman and used to utter sexual words. He noticed that his father even slept with his daughter, all that is too much for a teenage boy, he declared once:

Writing has always been my recourse when I've tried to make sense of my experience or when it's been very painful. When I was 15 years old, I wrote my first (unpublished) novel about being gay at a time when there were no other gay novels. So I was really inventing a genre, and it was a way of administering a therapy to myself, I suppose. (Shankbone: 2007)

Much of his writing is about same-sex love, as a kind of therapy as he declared for his confused mind. When he grew up, he was an unsociable man. As soon as he finishes his work, he gets back home to eat and sleep directly. Consequently, he found difficulty in having proper relations. At the beginning of the 1970s, he began having relations with gay writers from New York. They spent most of the time together reading and criticizing their works. After years, precisely in 1990, he discovered that he had AIDS, and four of his close friends had died because of that disease. (Edelman: 2017)

For me, these losses were definitive. The witnesses to my life, the people who had shared the same references and sense of humor, were gone. The loss of all the books they might have written remains incalculable."

DISCUSSION

Edmund White's gay novels give him a kind of therapy for his confusion by telling the truth he could not reveal for more than thirty years because of social and cultural restrictions. Telling a story for him a confessional act; the narrator is a mask who voices White's inquiries:

"What if I could write about my life exactly as it was? What if I could show it in all its density and tedium and its concealed passion, never divined or expressed?" The "realism" of the 19th-century fiction he devours seems to him a kind of fantasy, creating a "parallel life," "tinglingly far-fetched." Could there be a new realism that faithfully depicted the inner and outer worlds he actually lived in? In the midwest of the 1950s, the growing-up of a young gay man is a vulnerable, marginal, barely visible thing, riven by confusion, self-hatred, and doubt.

A Boy's Own Story (1982) is basically a story about mid-century America, an autobiographical tale of a boy who suffers psychologically from having an uneasy relationship with his father. Accordingly, the protagonist complains of not having fatherly protection or understanding. Feeling shy and unable to express his feelings, he gets enraged with fury. Being gay is also part of his revolt against social norms. The protagonist reveals: "The notion that I might have been able to court friends, win attention, conjure it, would have spoiled it for me. Unbidden love was what I wanted.". The boy in his teens feels physically attracted to another male friend, but he fears being labeled as homosexual and therefore suppresses his feelings. He feels shame inside but is unable to deal with it like everything else he goes through. In the 1950s, such desires were not accepted and were considered immoral. White claims that he looks back to his own experience through the remarks of the

protagonist: "I see now that what I wanted was to be loved by men and to love them back but not to be a homosexual."

The author illustrates how growing up as gay is not a choice, but it is a reaction of teen's or children's torture that cannot be discussed at time homosexuality was not tolerated. According to Freud, personality develops through a cycle of early childhood experiences in which desire shapes the identity. So if a child experiences frustration at any of the developmental stages because of familial or social restlessness, he will suffer anxiety. If that anxiety cannot be appeased by speaking or through a source of protection, it would pave the way for adulthood mental ailments such as obsession, hysteria, and mental disorder. (Freud: 1905) The protagonist thinks lonely: "Perhaps I became so vague, so exhilarated with vagueness, precisely in order to forestall recognition of the final term of the syllogism that begins: If one man loves another he is a homosexual; I love a man...". Feeling ashamed of his homosexuality, he tries to cure himself of his sickness. It was hard for him to grow up with separated parents and a cruel sister. On the other hand, he is harshly ridiculed by his classmates, and unable to reveal his sufferings, he seeks new relationships. He even tries hard to have a date with a girl from school, he declares his love for her, but he fails again, for she rejected him: "For me, who'd never even read about the sort of union I longed for, marriage became more and more impossible, transubstantiation as eerie and irreversible as death." On another occasion, he tries to convince his father to put him in a private school to be away from home, but no one in the adult world gives him a hand or to escape from his shameful reality.

CONCLUSION

From a psychological perspective, the child's early experiences shape his identity and his future social life. When children are sexually abused, they get confused and lose their personal and social balance. They begin undergoing the negative feelings of fear, shame, and frustration. Such a traumatic experience would oblige them to distrust others and to withdraw from social activities towards a world of their own. They remain entangled between the ego and the superego.

Ruth, the protagonist of Dorothy Allison's semi-autobiographical novel, undergoes an experience that distorts the innocent world of her childhood. This is represented by her sexual abuse at the hand of Glen, her stepfather. Through sexual and physical abuse, she remains silent for fear of breaking the family. For the rest of the life, she remains socially lonesome.

Edmund White's novel *A Boy's Own Story* tells another story of sexual abuse. The unnamed boy in this semi-autobiographical novel is the male counterpart of Ruth in Allison's novel. The child grows under the persecution of a tyrannical and morally corrupt father, the man who is supposed to love and protect him. This leads him to seek intimacy in other men; the thing that re-shapes him as a gay person; a thing that is socially rejected. His experiences inside and outside his home leave him confused and socially restless.

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