



Victimization, Gender and Child Sexual Abuse in Michael Wilcox's *Massage*.

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse has become a central issue in academic as well as judicial discourses. With the increase in incidents of child sexual abuse and the increase in awareness regarding the issue, child sexual abuse has emerged as a central theme in television dramas, films, and theatre. Representations of child sexual abuse in theatre stands apart from other representations in that the intensity of the experience is conveyed more poignantly to the audience. This paper focuses on paedophilia and the role of gender in Michael Wilcox's play *Massage*. The misconception regarding the gender of the child being subjected to sexual abuse has found its expression in literary representations of the issue too. An analysis of the fictional representations of child sexual abuse would show that the abused child is almost always a girl. By taking the audience through a conversation between a survivor of abuse and a paedophile, Wilcox shocks his audience into the realities of sexual abuse and conveys the message that gender is no prerogative for abuse to occur.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, gender roles, theatre, paedophilia

I. Introduction

With the number of crimes being perpetrated on children increasing at alarming rates, child sexual abuse has become a central issue in academic as well as judicial discourses. Prevention of child sexual abuse has largely focused on meting out maximum punishment to perpetrators of abuse. However it is important to understand the problem of child sexual abuse and the psychology behind it in order to prevent it. As per the reports of the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) about 120 million girls "under the age of 20 (about 1 in 10)" (1) have been subjected to some or the other form of sexual abuse. It further observes,

Systemic reviews of country-wide surveys show rates of lifetime child sexual abuse range within and across regions from 14-28 per cent of girls and 4-

12 per cent of boys in Europe, to 20-27 per cent of girls and 7-8 per cent of boys in Canada and the United States, 8-13 per cent of girls and 2-14 per cent of boys in South America, 20-43 per cent of girls and 10-30 per cent of boys in Africa and 7-68 per cent of girls and 4-35 per cent of boys in Asia. Where similar measures have been used in the surveys, findings on the prevalence of child sexual abuse tend to be lower in Europe compared with the United States, while Eastern African and South Asian countries have the highest rates." (6).

The notion that boys cannot be or are not abused sexually is still prevalent in many parts of the world. With the over emphasis that is still being put on the concepts of virginity and chastity of girls, boys are given little or no awareness on the dangers of sexual abuse, thus making them easy preys to sexual predators. The report of the UNICEF states that even though boys are at risk, report rates of girls being abused sexually are three times more than the report rates of boys. However, this statement is accompanied by the footnote: "a global estimate for boys is unavailable because of the lack of comparable data in most countries" (1). This highlights the extent to which sexual abuse of boys is being overlooked in most parts of the world. Studies on child sexual abuse, its causes and possible prevention become all the more relevant in this context.

With the increase in incidents of child sexual abuse and the increase in awareness regarding the issue, child sexual abuse has emerged as a central theme in television dramas, films, and theatre. Representations of child sexual abuse in theatre stands apart from other representations in that the intensity of the experience is conveyed more poignantly to the audience. It offers to the audience a glimpse of the survivors, perpetrators, family members, police officers and the like. The complexity of the issue is more felt by the audience through a theatre experience. This paper focuses on paedophilia and the role of gender in Michael Wilcox's play *Massage*. The misconception regarding the gender of the child being subjected to



sexual abuse has found its expression in literary representations of the issue too. An analysis of the fictional representations of child sexual abuse would show that the abused child is almost always a girl. By taking the audience through a conversation between a survivor of abuse and a paedophile, Wilcox shocks his audience into the realities of sexual abuse and conveys the message that gender is no prerogative for abuse to occur.

Plays dealing with the theme of sexual abuse of children gained popularity during the 1990s. Wilcox's *Massage* came out in 1986, a year prior to the infamous Cleveland child sexual abuse scandal. Following a controversial diagnostic test at the Middlesbrough Hospital in 1986, 121 children were diagnosed as being subjected to sexual abuse and were subsequently removed from their homes. However 94 children were sent back to their homes in the following year in the light of the Butler Sloss Inquiry which reported the allegations to being false. The Children Act was implemented in 1991 in the light of the scandal. However there has been divided opinion regarding the scandal and the Inquiry, with the 1997 documentary *The Death of Childhood* claiming that at least 70 per cent of the diagnoses were found to be correct by individual experts and that a number of children were again diagnosed as at risk and were referred to social services after two years.

Wilcox's play was a step ahead in the sense that it pre-empted the trend in dealing with the trend and also in representing male survivors of abuse.

The play presents before the audience two survivors of abuse – Rikki and Simon, of which Simon never appears on stage. Rikki, an orphan, was brought up in a children's home from where he was adopted. His adoptive father not only molests him, but also sends his friends to his step son's room to molest him and they used to leave him money after molesting him. As the play opens, Rikki is a masseuse and has been called by Dodge. Dodge had in fact called Rikki not for a massage, but for company. It was the birthday of his girlfriend's son, Simon and Simon has been denied permission to attend dinner with Dodge by his mother who had recently found out that her son had been sexually abused by her boyfriend. In the conversation that ensues between Dodge and Rikki, the relationship between Simon and Dodge and also Rikki and his step father is revealed. Rikki could be seen as a representation of an adult Simon had his mother not intervened. Rikki recognizes Dodge to being a paedophile, but he denies it. However his attempts to justify his actions reveal the paedophile within him.

II. The paedophile as represented in the play

Paedophiles, as defined by *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, are individuals who are solely or preferentially attracted to prepubescent children. A paedophile is differentiated from a child molester in that paedophiles believe themselves to be in love with the children whom they are molesting and consider themselves as the child's well-wishers. They view the society as an enemy that fails to understand the love that they hold for children and hence attempts to separate them from their objects of desire. A paedophile's mode of operation is also quite different in that the abuse does not start abruptly. The paedophile seeks to win over the trust of the child as well as their parents through a process called grooming and the abuse starts only after the child has been sufficiently groomed. They also believe in the righteousness of their actions, thus making them all the more dangerous. Both Rikki and Simon fall prey to paedophiles as both of them were craving love and affection. Rikki spent the first ten years of his life in an orphanage hoping that his parents would come back and take him with them. He was elated when he was adopted and got what he had always wanted – a family. His adoptive father takes advantage of his dependency and also the fact that he has no one to turn to. Simon's case is complicated by the fact that his mother is a single mother working hard at making the ends meet and in the process neglecting the emotional needs of her child. Dodge makes use of the opportunity in showering love and affection upon the child, becoming the father figure he never had and grooming the child in the process and gradually abusing him.

Dodge is the classic paedophile in the sense that he believes Simon to be his "companion" and also the initiator of the relationship between them. He justifies his position by portraying Simon as a neglected child whose mother was solely focused on her career. He fulfills the role of the father in Simon's life and gives him the love and care that he wanted. Rikki tries to burst his bubble in the following conversation

Dodge: Am I wicked?
Rikki : Definitely.
Dodge : I don't think so.
Rikki : Not all the time, maybe ...

With the kid you are.

Dodge : It was an accident.
Rikki : Not after the first time.
Dodge : Who said it happened

again?



Rikki : ‘Course it did! You done him, Mr. Dodge.
That’s a fact. And you shouldn’t of.

....

Dodge : He calls the tune.

Rikki : He shouldn’t.

Dodge : Why?

Rikki : You shouldn’t let him.

Dodge : Why?

Rikki : You’re grown-up. He isn’t.

Dodge : He is grown-up. In his way he is.

Rikki : You were like his dad, with his mum and that.
Dads shouldn’t do things like that. Dads are for other things.

He further points out to Dodge, “You think you’re doing good with little Simon. People who’ve done things never think they’re the ones who’ve done wrong. It’s everyone else, but not them! Truth is, you were good for Simon if you hadn’t done what you done.” Through casual conversation, Rikki also brings out the trauma associated with child sexual abuse and its long term effects. He says, “Well... it doesn’t happen. Not to me. Never been in love with anyone. Not like you’re supposed to. Just sex. Bodies. Coming off. Together. Alone. It’s dead. If it was ever in me. I don’t love anyone. I don’t know how. I’m different. They done it to me.”

In majority of instances of child sexual abuse, the perpetrator is often a close relative or a very trusted person. For Simon, Dodge ought to have been the absent father figure. He was his mother’s boyfriend whom she trusted enough to take care of him like a father. However Dodge’s true allegiance was to the child’s body and he takes advantage of the child’s innocence. Schinaia observes,

While grooming his or her child victim the paedophile fosters the impression that they are the child’s best friend or special companion. The child victim’s expectation is radically contradicted in the sexual climax of the seduction. Reality was not what it appeared to be. When a child is sexually abused, this contradiction of expectation amounts to a global betrayal ... When generational and sexual barriers are breached and the child’s physical integrity is violated by a paedophilic act, Oedipal relationships are turned upside down. The mind of the seducer becomes incomprehensible and the original, expectable object is destroyed. The victim is left without a trusting orientation to the mind of the other within which to find a representation of itself. (Schinaia, xv).

Rikki differentiates the abuse he encountered in the hands of his father from the ones encountered in the hands of his father’s friends as he tells Dodge, “At least those guys with the money

didn’t promise one thing and take another... it was simple. Just trade. No emotions. No feelings. Me selling. Them buying.”

III. The representation of gender roles in the play

Apart from the survivors of abuse, Wilcox presents before his audience two mothers – that of Rikki and that of Simon. Jane, Simon’s mother, confronts Dodge when she comes to know of the abuse, but backs out from reporting the incident when Dodge points out that the investigation would bring out her inefficiency as a mother and put Simon in care. Dodge exploits the fact that Jane leaves her son with him while she, a single mother, engages in work-related travel. Jane- never reports the incident to the police because of Dodge’s threat of exposing her as an unfit mother. He asks her, “Do you want everyone to find out how you’ve been neglecting him?” Rikki’s mother, on the other hand, was aware of the abuse, but did nothing about it as she was scared of her husband. Both the mothers fail in some way or the other as both of them are unable to prevent their children from abuse. No matter how much Dodge accuses her of being a negligent mother, Jane succeeds in preventing further abuse of her son as not only does she confront Dodge and attempts to record his confession, but also prohibits all further correspondence between Dodge and her son, thus redeeming herself before the audience. By making the characters question each other’s roles as mothers and fathers, the playwright succeeds in making the audience question their own roles as parents.

IV. The paedophile’s point of view

The play also stands apart in that the molester gets a voice in the play. However Wilcox’s presentation of Dodge’s point of view does not intend at making the audience sympathize with him. Dodge’s point of view serves the purpose of making the audience aware of the workings of a paedophile’s mind. The complexities of pedophilia and the psychic state of the pedophile are brought out successfully through the character of Dodge. Like all pedophiles, Dodge does not believe his actions to be wrong. Paedophiles believe their actions to be motivated by love and according to them, they have the best interests of the children in their hearts. They also tend to believe that the child to be happy with their so-called relationship. Dodge too echoes the same sentiment when he says,



“Who says it’s not natural, Simon and me? He’s entitled to his own body, his emotions, his feelings.... If Simon wants me... it’s important to him! I am! I’m part of his life! There are plenty of kids like Simon who need a mate. That’s what I was. We were good for one another and balls to anyone who says we weren’t ... it may be finished.. But we didn’t get our sums wrong!”

He also goes to the extent of saying that it was Simon who made the advances towards him- “He’s really made me love him. He worked at it day and night. He picked me out, Rikki. I never went after him. He chose me. He honored me.” Whatever Rikki says to make Dodge realize the fault in his actions falls into deaf ears as he is still convinced of the righteousness of his actions as he keeps asking, “Why do people hate me for loving him? What do they know?” In short, he never comes out from his illusions.

V. Conclusion

Wilcox’s play serves as a wake-up call to all those who believe that boys never get abused sexually. The play displays a reversal of traditional notions of gender not just in portraying the survivors of abuse. In the case of Simon, his mother replaces the role of the busy, absent and emotionally unavailable father, while Dodge replaces the traditional mother figure in that he is the one who takes care of Simon’s mental and emotional well-being. However once the audience comes to know of the abuse that is being perpetrated on the innocent boy, all of Dodge’s actions are judged through a lens that views him as nothing more than a predator and none of the justifications from his part is enough to convince the audience of the so-called love that he holds for the child whom he has constantly been abusing. Through the character of Rikki, Wilcox also presents before the audience and Dodge the trauma associated with child sexual abuse. He is also a representation of a grown-up Simon had his mother refused to act. Rikki’s mother is differentiated from that of Simon in that Jane attempts and succeeds in protecting her son to an extent. Though her intentions of complaining against Dodge falters in front of his threats, she succeeds in separating her son from an abusive father- something which Rikki’s mother was not able to do. The play thus highlights the significance of voicing out as an essential step in preventing abuse.

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