

Silenced, Scarred & Shattered: Unmasking the Wounds of Child Sexual Abuse in Select American Memoirs

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Abstract

The research brings to light the marginalized voices of three American women who have written about their sexual abuse in their respective memoirs Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of my Body* (2017), Nikki Dubose, *Washed Away: From Darkness to Light* (2016) and Neesha Arter *Controlled: The worst Night of my Life and its Aftermath* (2015). Using these memoirs as primary data and using thematic analysis the study identified three themes which were further classified into different subthemes. Firstly, the research discovered the challenges faced by the survivors in expressing and communicating about sexual abuse due to fear and shame, the survivors do not come forward because of threats, because of rape stereotypes that permeate the society and the fear of what parents and others might think. Secondly, the research explores the various impact of trauma that is caused by sexual abuse which include shame, guilt and self blame, unworthy self, uncontrollable rage, disruption of safety and trust, isolating themselves from everyone, hostility towards body, destructive behaviours which include eating disorder from Anorexia Nervosa to Binge eating disorder, it also includes self harm and substance abuse. Thirdly, the research focuses on the recovery aspect on how the survivors learn to live with the wounds caused by sexual abuse. It focuses on how the survivors came in terms with the abuse, the conflicting feelings of forgiveness and revenge and how they sought redemption through writing their journey.

Keywords: Child Sexual Abuse, Memoirs, Impacts, Victim Blaming, Recovery, writing, Shame, Trauma

1. Introduction

According to RAINN data, an American is sexually assaulted every 68 seconds, and a child becomes a victim of sexual assault every nine minutes. One in nine girls under the age of 18 experience sexual abuse. 82% of all victims were female. The National Crime Victimization Survey serves as the principal data source on RAINN's website. The National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS), conducted annually by the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) within the Department of Justice, is the most extensive and all-encompassing crime assessment in the United States. Every year, researchers conduct interviews with over 150,000 Americans to gather information about the crimes they have encountered. The study utilises the information gathered from the interviews to provide estimates of the overall count of criminal activities, encompassing both reported and unreported incidents to law enforcement authorities. United States Child Maltreatment Survey, 2012 (2013) found that 63,000 children a year were a victim of child sexual abuse. The same survey Child Maltreatment Survey 2016 (2018) found that 57,329 children were victims of child sexual abuse. According to the criminal justice system, statistics provided by RAINN, out of every 1000 sexual assault cases 975 criminals walk away free. According to the National Crime Victimization Survey 2015 – 2019 (2020), for every 1000 sexual abuse cases only 310 are reported to the police more than 2 out of 3 cases go unreported. The reason victims do not tend to come forward is because of the treat from the perpetrators or the fear of being blamed for the abuse. Without a good social environment, in traumatic events such as rape, women and children do not get justice, the perpetrator prepares a wide range of arguments and attacks the victims credibility.

The perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim... After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it upon herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the predator the greater is his prerogative to name and define reality and the more completely his arguments prevail. (Herman, 1992, p. 8)

The voice of the victims goes unheard because of the lack of justice. The society often places the blame on the victim exacerbating the already destructive effects of rape. Due to persisting stigma, rape myth and victim blaming attitudes that perpetuates the society, the victims of child sexual abuse often internalise their blame which leads to negative psychological outcome. Victim blaming leads to self blame and heightened shame (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019)

Individuals who experience CSA are more likely to experience shame as well as powerlessness and stigma subsequent to the sexual abuse due to the nature of the abuse as well as broader societal messages that blame victims of sexual assault for the

traumatic event. (Lynch et.al, 2023)

Self blame and shame predicted post traumatic disorders, depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation among sexually adolescent girls (Alix, et.al 2020). The immediate and long term impact of sexual abuse causes post traumatic stress, cognitive distortions, emotional pain, avoidance, an impaired sense of self and interpersonal difficulties (Briere et.al, 1994). Child Sexual abuse causes a wide range of disorders from depression, dissociation, post traumatic stress disorder and substance abuse (Murthi & Espelage, 2005). Child sexual Abuse disrupts one's sense of self (Briere, 1992; Murthi, Servaty- Seib & Elliott, 2006; Putnam, 2003). Child Sexual Abuse brings about low self esteem, negative feeling about the self, poor self image and feeling of unworthy (Briere & Runtz, 1989; Courtois, 1989; Finkelhor, Hotaling, Lewis & Smith, 1990). Child Sexual Abuse causes anxiety and depression (Bagley & Ramsay, 1986; Briere & Runtz, 1988; Burnam et al., 1988; Sedney & Brooks, 1984) which leads to overconsumption of alcohol and other drug addiction problems (Briere, 1988; Brown & Anderson, 1991; Burnam et al, 1988) which also leads to suicide and self abusive behaviour (Briere, 1988; Briere & Runtz, 1988, Brown & Anderson, 1991; Sedney & Brooks, 1984). Trauma caused by Child Sexual Abuse can be manifested in the form of eating disorders. Research suggest that women who suffer from eating disorder has a direct or an indirect link to the trauma of child sexual abuse (Goldfarb, 1987; Hall et al., 1989; Sloan & Leichner, 1986; Rayworth et al., 2004). Women who suffer from Anorexia Nervosa tend to hate food, and they tend to see food as a means to control and is it also described as a means to repel the perpetrator and avoid sexual contact and feeling (Hall et al., 1989; Sloan & Leichner, 1986). Women who experience Bulimia delineate their disorder as an expression of anger at the predator, imposed as a form of punishment and it is a coping mechanism which is aimed to ease guilt, hatred, PTSD and to make them feel sexually unappealing (Hall et al., 1989; Root, 1991; Root & Fallon, 1989). Women who binge eat aim to gain more weight to be non appealing and they overeat to cope up with self loathing, depression and anxiety (Hall et al., 1989). By examining the memoirs of Roxane Gay, Nikki Dubose and Neesha Arter the research highlights the personal testimonies that have not been discussed in the academic forum. The research highlights the power of storytelling in reclaiming agency and resisting victim blaming. The research accentuates the importance of giving survivors a platform to tell their own stories which inspire other survivors and change society's perceptions. Till today victim blaming is a pervasive issue and the research contribute to dismantling the harmful stereotypes and promote a more nuanced and empathetic understanding of survivor experience in America. The research adds to feminist critiques of how sexual abuse is portrayed and discussed in American society. The memoirs challenge patriarchal norms and advocate for survivor empowerment and contribute to feminist scholarship that seeks to reshape cultural narratives around gender, power and violence.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

When it comes to studying sensitive subjects such as child sexual abuse, autobiographies are extremely valuable materials. "Life writing has proven to be an especially compelling form of testimonial empowerment for those who are marginalized" (Gilmore, 2019, p. 162). After the rise of #Me Too movement there has been a surge in memoirs. These memoirs explored "histories of oppression, shifted shame from the abused to abusers and demanded accountability. It also cleared space for new forms of listening and understanding to emerge" (Gilmore, 2019, p. 165)

First person experiences of an event, feeling, emotions and thought process are found in autobiographies. Autobiographical accounts from survivors can provide profound insights into the psychological and emotional ramifications of abuse. These accounts frequently depict the process of transitioning from being a victim to becoming a survivor, illuminating the intricacies of trauma and the ability to recover. It is possible to gain insight into coping strategies and the effects of abuse by analysing these stories. Autobiographies can enhance academic research by offering firsthand accounts that support or broaden the conclusions drawn from empirical studies. They have the ability to provide complexity and subtlety to statistical or clinical data. These individual testimonies can function as potent instruments of advocacy, heightening consciousness regarding the widespread occurrence, influence, and requirements of survivors. They promote a sense of empathy and understanding among the broader community by making the issue more relatable to humans. Autobiographies, when employed with careful consideration and moral principles, provide a distinct and individual perspective that enables researchers, professionals, and society as a whole to gain improved comprehension, assistance, and promotion of survivors of child sexual abuse.

1.2 About the Text and the Author

1. *Hunger: A Memoir of my Body* by Roxanne Gay (2017)

Roxane Gay is a prolific writer and a professor, her works include *Bad Feminist*, *An Untamed State*, *Difficult Women*. In her memoir *Hunger: A Memoir of my Body*, Gay discusses about her childhood life, how she was gang raped by her boyfriend and his friends at the age of 12 in a remote cabin in woods. Gay in detail describes about the trauma she faced and how she turned towards food for comfort as she battles with depression and self harm.

2. *Washed Away: From darkness to Light* by Nikki Dubose (2016)

Nikki Dubose is a model and a mental health advocate in America. In her memoir she opens up her battles with drugs, eating disorders and mental illness. Dubose talks about her upbringing in a dysfunctional home where she was abused and traumatized. The memoir recollects how Dubose was sexually abused at the age five by a family acquaintance and how it influenced her in her battles with bulimia and drug addiction and how it affected her relationship with her family and friends.

3. *Controlled: The Worst Night of my Life and its Aftermath* by Neesha Arter (2015)

Neesha Arter is a versatile writer and her work is featured in *The New York Times*, *Vogue*, *The Daily Beast*, *New York Magazine*,

Interview, Teen Vogue etc. In her memoir Arter talks about how she was sexually abused when she was 14 by her friends Rob and Will. She gives an indepth detail about the battle with trauma, anorexia nervosa and suicidal tendencies. She also discusses how she was blamed for the assault by her family members and the traumatizing process of getting justice through legal channels.

2. Research Method & Methodology

The research is being conducted through qualitative analysis utilising autobiographical narratives. Qualitative research, as a humanistic or idealistic paradigm, aims to understand and comprehend a study inquiry. Qualitative methods are employed to study individuals' perspectives, encounters, attitudes, actions, and social exchanges. "Qualitative research views the world more subjectively, acknowledging that the researcher is part of what is researched focusing on meanings and understanding of experience, rather than what can be reduced to quantitative measures" (Gibson, 2004).

Autobiographies function as primary sources for examining personal accounts of effects and resilience of survivors of child sexual abuse the primary testimonies offer profound understanding into the emotional, psychological, and social dimensions, in line with the research goals to comprehend the effects and resilience within each person's narrative. Three memoirs authored by American women have been chosen for the study. All the three survivors have experienced child sexual abuse and they exhibit identical patterns on effects of abuse and recovery. The selection focused on prominent memoirs that are known for their thorough examination that discusses the effects of abuse and how they recovered from their abuse. The autobiographical texts were carefully examined, and relevant sections and themes connected to the effects and recovery were identified and recorded. Important quotes and passages are noted for subsequent analysis. Memoirs such as *Hunger: A Memoir of my Body* (2017) by Roxane Gay, *Washed Away: From Darkness to Light* (2016) by Nikki Dubose and *Controlled: The Worst Night of my Life and its Aftermath* by Neesha Arter (2015) were selected based on their thematic relevance to the effects and recovery. Judith Herman's insights on trauma in her work *Trauma and Recovery*, provides a good framework in understanding the multifaceted effects of trauma specifically in milieu of sexual abuse. Herman theory addresses the effects of shame and self blame in the survivors, the insights are helpful in understanding how the protagonists thrive in the society that is perpetuated by victim blaming attitudes and rape stereotypes. These memoirs challenge the stereotypes and empower the protagonists to reclaim their narratives. Her work also lays emphasis on the prominence of narrating trauma as a vital step in the healing process. Writing their memoirs is a crucial therapeutic tool for the authors to navigate their trauma. It allows the protagonists to navigate and make sense of their experience with trauma.

All the memoirs are systematically read and sections highlighting the effects of the abuse and recovering strategies the survivors used were identified. Passages that described personal challenges, methods of dealing with them, crucial moments, and personal development were selected and categorised according to their themes. The autobiographies were subjected to reflective thematic analysis in order to identify repeating patterns and distinctive experiences. Reflective thematic analysis is widely used qualitative analytic method that is been not recognised and not widely used in the field of psychology (Roulston, 2001). The research adopted RTA approach based on the framework outlined by Braun and Clark in their article *Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology* published in 2006. The advantages of using thematic analysis are they possess a high degree of flexibility. They possess the ability to meticulously condense essential characteristics of a substantial amount of data and provide a comprehensive depiction of the dataset. It can identify both commonalities and distinctions within the dataset. Has the ability to produce unexpected revelations (Braun & Clark, 2006). The data was collected by the six step guide given by Braun & Clarke. The phase for thematic analysis include "Familiarisation with the data, Generating initial codes, searching for themes, Reviewing themes, Defining and Naming themes and Producing the report" (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

3. Procedure

The autobiographies were thoroughly read to get familiarized with the content, narrative structure and integral events. Initial notes were made while reading the texts jotting down important passages, quotes and themes. The text was coded by tagging sections through specific themes. Similar codes were organized into potential themes. The identified themes were reviewed to ensure that they capture the essence of the data. For more coherence and in depth analysis the themes were more refined and merged at necessary places. The following themes emerged: *Challenges of expressing and communicating sexual abuse due to fear and shame, Impacts of sexual abuse, Learning to live with the wounds*. The finding under each theme was further categorized into sub themes. Reflective process was used while interpreting the themes. The research ensured that there was consistency in interpreting the themes across autobiographies. Specific quotes and passages are mentioned as supporting evidences for each theme.

4. Findings

4.1 Challenges of Expressing and Communicating Sexual Abuse due to Fear and Shame

4.1.1 Scared to Tell because of Threats

In case of Nikki Dubose, Dubose was silenced by threats she recalls "his threats prevented me from speaking up. I felt defenceless in my surroundings and thought I had no one to turn to guidance and protection" (Dubose, 2016, p.33)

4.1.2 Fear of what Parents and Others Might Think

Children are scared to talk to their parents about the trauma they experience no matter how good parents are. In Arter's case even when her aunt saved her, she was so scared of what her aunt would think "I breathe a sigh of relief ... but then fear seized me again. What would my aunt do? What would she think of me" (Arter, 2015, p. 24). "My mind was filled with dread over whether or not I would get into

trouble” (Arter, 2015, p. 26). “What would my parents say when I returned home ...I was going to be in so much trouble” (Arter, 2015, p. 32).

I tried to brace myself for the inevitable punishment I would receive from my parents and tensed my entire body thinking of what frightening reaction they would have. After all it’s entirely my fault. I couldn’t possible stand up to my parents after what just happened. My mom and dad would surely take their side. (Arter, 2015, p. 52)

“Deep inside I felt invisible. I was the other women, and I didn’t have a voice. Even if I spoke up who would listen? I was a home wrecker, the whore” (Dubose, 2016, p. 117).

I tried to be the good girl my parents thought me...I wanted to tell something was wrong, that I was dying inside, but I couldn’t find the words. I couldn’t find a way to overcome my fear of what they might say and do think of me. The longer I stayed silent, the more the fear grew until it drafted everything else. (Gay, 2017, p. 42)

4.1.3 Victim Blaming Attitude

After the horrible incident Gay did not seek help from her parents and in school the boys who abused her changed the versions of the story and started to call her slut for the rest of the school year.

I immediately understood that my version of the story would never matter, so I kept the truth of what happened a secret and tried to live with this new name. He said/she said is why so many victims don’t come forward. All too often what He said matters more, so we swallow the truth. (Gay, 2017, p. 40)

4.2 Impacts of Sexual Abuse

4.2.1 Shame, Guilt & Self Blame

The survivors share overwhelming sense of shame. All the three hated to look themselves in the mirror because all they felt was shame. “I stopped looking at my reflection in the mirror because I felt nothing but guilt and shame when I did” (Gay, 2017, p. 46). They feel that they are dirty and tainted by their experience. “I couldn’t share the shame and humiliation of it. I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me” (Gay, 2017, p. 41). “Shame still overwhelmed me and I could not even imagine being happy again. It felt impossible” (Arter, 2015, p. 124).

They grapple with misplaced guilt and they internalise the belief that they were somehow fault for their abuse.

“With each passing year, I became more and more disgusted with myself. I was convinced that having been raped was my fault, that I deserved it, that what happened in the woods was all a pathetic girl like me could expect” (Gay, 2017, p. 74). “I must brought the night on myself... This was my fault and I was making not only myself miserable but everyone else” (Arter, 2015, p. 80). When Neesha uncle blamed her that it was her fault, Arter started to internalise the blame. “Don’t pretend they did this. This is your fault, Neesha. All of it. That was the moment when I started to blame myself for everything that has happened on New Year’s Eve. Every single thing” (Arter, 2015, p. 30)

4.2.2 Unworthy Self

After the abuse, there is a change in how the survivors perceive themselves. They develop a sense of insignificance, worthlessness and they feel inadequate. “I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me. I was not a girl. I was less than human. I was no longer the good girl and I was going to hell” (Gay, 2017, p. 41). “I no longer want to believe I deserve nothing better than a mediocrity or downright shoddy treatment. I am trying to believe this with every fibre of my being” (Gay, 2017, p. 222). “What about me? I was a goddamn insignificant thing a poor excuse for a human being” (Dubose, 2016, p. 169). “The sense of worthlessness overflowed inside me... within days myself value was gone and it was not coming back anytime soon” (Arter, 2015, p. 84). All the three of them struggle with relationships because they are not able to be satisfied and they feel they are unwanted. They feel that they don’t deserve love, happiness or success.

I had no rights to seek satisfaction...I accepted this because I did not deserve kindness or gentle touch. I was called terrible names and I accepted this because I understood I was a terrible repulsive thing. Sweet words were not for girls like me. I was treated so badly or indifferently for so long that I forgot so long that i forgot what being treated well like felt. I stopped believing such thing existed. At least I am in a relationship, I always told myself. At least I am not so repulsive so abject that no one will spend time with me. At least I am not alone. (Gay, 2017, p. 219-220)

I stood numb and turned my head to the mirror, I saw a cheap girl, girl like the wine momma brought. I saw a girl not worthy of perfume, this girl in front of me was destined to be whore. I scrubbed of the makeup with washcloth and unmasked the ugly girl. (Dubose, 2016, p. 54)

All the three of them struggle to grapple with the loss of their innocence and they struggle to change their past with their present self. They feel that they weren’t the same person before. “My childlike self was gone” (Arter, 2015, p. 63). “I wish there was a button to turn life off...there was no delete button. My childhood was gone and there was no way to fix it” (Arter, 2015, p. 171). “I constantly attempted to convince myself that I was still the same person before New Years, yet I did not know who that was anymore” (Arter, 2015, p. 119)

4.2.3 Uncontrollable Rage

All the three of them grapple with intense episodes of rage. They direct their anger towards their family members, towards the abuse and towards the world.

For so long I closed myself off from everything and everyone. Terrible things have happened and I had to shutdown to survive. I was cold I have been told...I am not cold. I wasn't ever cold. My warmth was hidden far away from anything that could bring hurt because I knew I didn't have the inner scaffolding to endure any more hurt in those protected places. (Gay, 2017, p. 229)

When Neesha her aunt and uncle ignored her and blamed her for the abuse, she was angry "I waited for one of them to say something...I had never felt this type of rage towards him. I didn't want to be related to him anymore. He was no family of mine" (Arter, 2015, p. 33). "Rage began to build inside my chest. I was not sure how to deal with this unexpected anger with myself over something so trivial, but I was furious. The little things pissed me off lately. I never used to be so short tempered, but now everything sent me overboard" (Arter, 2015, p. 95). "Memories of Uncle Robbie came back. I became aloof and held on to a quite rage" (Dubose, 2016, p. 98).

4.2.4 Disruption of Safety & Trust

All the three of them get betrayed by their loves ones and family acquaintance. Their betrayal hurts them deep and they lose their trust in everyone. And it shatters their whole belief and leads them to existential crises.

I hated that I thought Will had the nicest eyes before any of this happened. He had the longest eyelashes I had ever seen. I thought he was perfect, but now I despise myself for having those thoughts that night. I loathed myself for being so stupid. How completely pathetic was I for letting this happen? What the hell was wrong with me? (Arter, 2015, p. 80)

"I was hungry to connect with God... however sadness and shame came over me. Maybe I was too much of a mess and didn't deserve god's love" (Dubose, 2016, p. 248).

I no longer believed in God because surely if there was a God, he would save me from Christopher and those boys in the woods. I no longer believed in God because I had sinned in a way I hadn't even known was possible. It was lonely and terrifying from everything that had been so important in my life-my family, my faith, myself". (Gay, 2017, p. 43)

"What did I do that was so terrible for this to happen to me? Helplessness and lost, I did not want to play the victim, but it began to tear me up inside/ why did they do this to me" (Arter, 2015, p. 81).

4.2.5 Isolating themselves from everyone

The profound disruptions in basic trust, the common feeling of shame and guilt foster the survivors to withdraw from close relationships and isolate themselves.

Loneliness remained a constant companion. I didn't have many friends. I was awkward. I was maladjusted around the friends I did have...I regularly said the wrong things...I had no fashion sense. I didn't know how to style my hair. I didn't know how to be a normal girl. I didn't know how to be human. (Gay, 2017, p. 60)

"I wandered aimlessly through the halls...I kept my head down...sulked in the back of the class, afraid to utter a single word" (Dubose, 2016, p.71). "I quickly absorbed myself in loneliness" (Arter, 2015, p.85) "Avoiding volleyball and avoiding friends, I continue to immerse myself in solitude. Selfish and Isolated" (Arter, 2015, p. 165).

4.2.6 Hostility towards Body

All the three of them hated the body that betrayed them, their body became a source of anxiety and depression. "I simply gave myself, gave my body to whoever offered me the faintest of interest. This was all I deserved, I told myself. My body was nothing. My body was a thing to be used. My body was repulsive and deserved to be treated as such" (Gay, 2017, p. 219).

Sense of strength vanished when I looked at myself in the mirror. My body felt divided and broken from my mind, like a shattered piece of glass on the floor. Those two boys have damaged it beyond repair. It had no beauty left in it and I didn't think it deserved my respect anymore. The memory of their hands on my body and inside of me took away any ownership I had for myself. (Arter, 2015, p. 54)

"My fragile broken body was like a ragdoll. It was a ragdoll that everyone was playing with. It was the ragdoll that the two boys had played within the exercise room. It was a ragdoll that my parents would try to fix. It was a rag doll that was permanently torn" (Arter, 2015, p. 65) "I had no love in my body at all. I didn't love myself anymore" (Arter, 2015, p. 65). "I felt that there were insects eating my body. I couldn't stand being in my skin. I wanted to burn it off. I needed to tear off each and every layer of my skin until only my bones were left" (Arter, 2015, p.160).

I lay in bed and looked at my body. I found nothing pretty about it. Not in the sense of being fat, because I knew I wasn't, but it did not feel like my anymore. It felt like an object that no longer belonged to me. Knowing the ugly things it had been through New Year's, I wished I had the unharmed body from Dec30. (Arter, 2015, p. 73)

4.2.7 Destructive Behaviours

In order to cope with the trauma, shame, guilt, the survivors often indulge in self destructive behaviour. They cope with unhealthy eating habits, they turn to alcohol and drugs. And they try to harm themselves as coping mechanism.

4.2.7.1 Anorexia Nervosa, Bulimia, Binge Eating

All the three survivors suffer from eating disorders. They turn towards food for comfort. They binge and purge as a form of punishment. They assume that by controlling food they able to get some control over their life which was shattered due to abuse. And through their unhealthy eating habit they thought that they could change their looks, to keep the perpetrators away and be unappealing to men.

4.2.7.1.1 Comfort from Food

“I binged to cope with rejection... I stuffed slice after slice into my mouth... letting cheese and bread numb my rage” (Dubose, 2016, p. 45).

I do not know why I turned to food. Or I do. I was lonely and scared and food offered immediate satisfaction. Food offered comfort when I needed to be comforted and did not know how to ask for what I needed from those who loved me. Food tasted good and made me feel better. Food was the one thing within my reach. (Gay, 2017, p. 47)

4.2.7.1.2 Dislike towards Food

Starvation was how I was fixing myself not for anyone else, only for myself” (Arter, 2015, p.122). “I imagined starvation would be the world where I could be without haunting memory” (Arter, 2015, p. 84).

4.2.7.1.3 Binging and Purging as Punishment

“I binged like an animal. I felt repulsive but liberated at the same time...I fed myself more as punishment” (Dubose, 2016, p. 48). “For once I did not feel shame after eating. I felt incredible. I felt in control. I wondered why it had taken me so long to try purging” (Gay, 2017, p. 178).

4.2.7.1.4 Food as a means of control

“Having the power to say no to food gave me a sense of strength and a coping mechanism. I had the chance to change the way my life was going and or the first time in few years, I could control my own fate” (Arter, 2015, p. 85). “I tried to convince myself that I was in control. Lie. I didn’t have any control; food controlled me” (Arter, 2015, p. 191).

4.2.7.1.5 The need to Change the Look

“I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I would keep men away” (Gay, 2017, p.11). “I was determined to fill the void and food was what I used to built a shield around what little was left of me. I ate and ate and ate in the hopes that if I made myself big my body would be safe” (Gay, 2017, p. 19). “I rejoiced in the ability to change how I looked. The less conventionally pretty I appeared, the less afraid I would be of something bad happening again” (Arter, 2015, p. 108). “If I could alter my appearance maybe I could feel better again” (Dubose, 2016, p. 71).

I sneak bags of candies and chips into my bedroom, then I binged and worked off the calories for hours on end. But no matter how much I exercised I couldn’t see a pretty girl in the mirror, only a freakish creature that deserved to die. (Dubose, 2016, p. 43)

4.2.7.2 Substance Abuse

Roxanne Gay and Nikki Dubose use drugs to heal their emotional pain. “Smoking felt good and always gave me a light buzz. Smoking also made me feel cool when I was very, very uncool. I loved the ceremony of smoking” (Gay, 2017, p. 69). “I felt like a rebel. I loved that feeling, that I was interesting enough to break rules to believe rules did not apply to me” (Gay, 2017, p. 70). “I woke up coughing and all my clothes reeked of stale smoke and the habit was becoming prohibitively expensive, but I was cool, and I was willing to make a few sacrifices to be cool in atleast one small way” (Gay, 2017, p. 70) “I grappled a cup of vodka ...I felt warm inside and like I belonged. I realized that this, this feeling was what i had been missing all along. This was home” (Dubose, 2016, p. 75). “The cocaine flew up my nose and transported me to a place I had never been before. In this world there was no love or happiness, but I had something better: I was indestructible and I felt like I could fly” (Dubose, 2016, p. 125).

4.2.7.3 Self Harm

Arter and Dubose suffered from negative thoughts and they developed bizarre fascinations with pain. “I believed that I deserve pain and automatically accepted my depressive thoughts” (Dubose, 2016, p. 45). “Deep seated rage burst within and to quiet it I screamed and threatened with butcher knives. I smashed my head into walls and doors. Really I just wanted to see blood” (Dubose, 2016, p. 149).

I started to develop bizarre fascinations with the pain. I felt almost wanting to cause more. I would were rubber bands on my wrists and snap them to distract me whenever I had memories of Houston. If I felt pain on my wrist, it would take away the deeper agony that ate me up. (Arter, 2015, p. 112)

I cried so hard that it burned my stomach and my lungs. I needed to feel that pain...I squeezed my stomach as hard as I could because I wanted more pain. I thought throwing up would evoke the suffering I needed to feel at this moment. I wanted to bend my hand back enough to cause something to tear in my wrist. (Arter, 2015, p. 159)

I felt tempted to slit my wrists with the razor... the craving for the sight of blood never left my mind... stabbed myself in the leg with the pencil. The pain was thrilling it sent an electric charge throughout my entire body and confirmed that I was alive". (Arter, 2015, p. 82, 83)

Destruction was the only control they had "I was focused solely on self destruction but I felt completely in control" (Dubose, 2016, p. 76).

The terrible feelings and memories buried inside flew out of the deepest part of my soul: Stephen and Momma as they beat me senseless... remembering uncle Robbie hands on my thighs all made me want to kill myself. When the images flooded...I smashed my head repeatedly determined to obliterate myself. As I smacked my skull I prayed for each hit to be my last. I wanted to die and I wanted god to kill me swiftly...I don't care kill me now... I hate myself ...I am nothing... the physical pain was nothing compared to the scars left on my soul, though in some way I enjoyed the suffering, it was the only time I felt anything. (Dubose, 2016, p. 50)

I needed to do something to kill the pain I felt inside. I needed to kill my insides...I found Ex-lax...took 3 laxatives... I felt sharp pain. But for the first time it was rewarding. I sighed and felt powerful knowing that I could get rid of what was inside me with such ease. (Arter, 2015, p. 161)

4.3 Learning to Live with the Wounds

As far the research goes one can never find out when one recovers, the protagonist recover in different points in life. Gay recovers after an accident, Dubose recovers after the death of her mother, and Arter recovers after deliberately trying to kill herself. They never forgive nor do they seek revenge against their victims rather they seek justice through writing their lived experience. Through writing they regain control over their body and they write to reach their inner self.

4.3.1 Coming in Terms with the Abuse

On October 2014, Gay nearly broke her ankle. She realized that "part of healing is taking care of your body and learning how to have a human relationship with your body. I was broken and then I broke some more and I am not yet healed but I started believing I will be" (Gay, 2017, p. 259).

I am a lucky girl I guess. I think most of my sad stories are behind me. There are things I will no longer tolerate. Being alone sucks, but I would rather be alone than with someone who makes me feel that terrible. I am realizing I am not worthless. Knowing that makes me feel good. My sad stories will always be there...these sad stories will always weigh on me, though that burden lessens the more I realise who I am and what I am worth. (Gay, 2017, p. 228)

Arter started to realise it was not her mistake anymore. "I was taking the punishment for the boys... I did nothing wrong" (Arter, 2015, p. 179). Nikki Dubose seeks help from psychiatrist. She seeks comfort in religion and believes God healed her body and soul.

4.3.2 Forgiveness/ Revenge

Gay and Arter never forgive their abusers whereas Dubose finds healing in forgiveness.

I am as healed as I ever going to be. I have accepted that I could never be the girl I could have been if, if, if. I am still haunted. I still have flashbacks that are triggered by the most unexpected things. I don't like being touched by people with whom I do not share specific kinds of intimacy... I will never forgive the boys who raped me and I am thousand percent comfortable with that because forgiving them will not free me from anything. (Gay, 2017, p.276)

Nikki Dubose decides to forgive her abusers through the grace of God. "Forgiveness was not for the other person it was for you"(Dubose, 2016, p. 269). "I went for many years without realising how my abuse from my childhood was affecting my life... Once I became aware...Forgiveness is not for others, it's for us" (Dubose, 2016, p.283).

4.3.3 Writing for Healing

Gay writes to heal her inner self and through writing her story she seeks validation for what her body has become. "I am writing my way back to her, trying to tell her everything she needs to hear" (Gay, 2017, p.19). Arter writes to take control over her life, she believes that the rapists ruined her life and through writing she takes back control.

"I recognised my mistakes. I realized I couldn't live like this anymore... There was something I need to do. I reached over to my dresser and picked up a ball point pen...Grabbing the yellow notepad, I began to write" (Arter, 2015, p. 192). "You controlled my life, every second of everyday...I am writing... You won't control me anymore" (Arter, 2015, p. 194). "The book has been my redemption" (Arter, 2015, p. 197).

I wrote a lot of dark and violent stories about young girls being tormented by terrible boys and men. I couldn't tell anyone what happened to me, so I wrote the same story a thousand different ways. It was soothing to give voice to what I could not say out loud. I lost my voice my voice but I had words. (Gay, 2017, p.58)

Writing this book is the most difficult thing I have ever done. To lay myself so vulnerable has not been an easy thing. To face myself and what living in my body has been like has not been an easy thing, but I wrote this book because it felt necessary. In writing this memoir of my body, in telling you these truths about my body, I am sharing my truth and mine alone...here I am showing you the ferocity of my hunger. Here I am finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am revelling in that freedom. (Gay, 2017, p. 278)

I sat one day and wrote letters from all the people who had hurt me from childhood, including the individuals who have sexually abused me. In them I expressed my sadness and rage and how I felt that the abuse had taken away so much of my life...I wrote a letter to my rapist and threw it away. Honestly I felt so confused and numb when I wrote the letter because I struggled with the memories for a long time. (Dubose, 2016, p. 284)

Writing turned into a drug. The more I wrote the more I needed to write to feel okay...and forced myself to read the stories again and again, when I did the desire to harm myself went away. I realized that I had another ally a comfort in the darkest times. Writing empowered me, which was something that modelling never did, it only demoralised me. (Dubose, 2016, p. 251)

5. Analysis

The results show how the survivors navigated through sexual abuse. The study delineated the challenges of articulating the horrific encounters with sexual abuse, describing the efforts to navigate the effects and the journey to recovery.

Theme 1: Challenges of Expressing & Communicating Sexual Abuse due to Fear and Shame

It is categorized into three subthemes: *Scared to tell because of threats, Fear of what parents and others might think and Victim blaming attitude*. Even in today's world women are given very little privileges to express themselves freely. Family plays an important role in the aftermath of the traumatic event. Children do not tell about the abuse because they are held back due to fear and shame and what their parents or others might think. "I was scared. I thought I would get into trouble" (Gay, 2017, p.261).

Family members may decide on their own course of action in the aftermath of the traumatic event and may ignore or override the survivor's wishes thereby once again disempowering her. They may show little tolerance for her anger or may swallow up her anger in their own quest for revenge. Thus survivors often hesitate to disclose to family members, not only because they fear they will not be understood but also because they fear the reaction of the family members will overshadow their own. (Herman, 1992, p. 65)

Being brought up in abusive home Dubose was not able to tell her parents about her sexual abuse. She was five when she was raped by a family acquaintance named Uncle Robbie. And she was threatened by him and was convinced that her family won't believe her and she kept it to herself. When Gay was sexually abused she was terrified to tell her parents because she was afraid of 'what they might think'. Arter got blamed for the abuse, her aunt and uncle blamed her and she started to internalise the blame. In case of Arter, she gives a detailed account of how the legal battles were traumatizing, even though she did not want to press charges, her parents in a quest to justice put her through a traumatizing process, and furthermore she does not get justice in the end. "Fear of conflict or social embarrassment may prevent victims from taking action in time" (Herman, 1992, p. 69). All the three survivors are victims to victim blaming attitudes that perpetuates in the society. We are in a culture

In which most victims of sexual assault and rape do not report it because they fear that they won't be believed and know that even if they are believed, they are likely to be mortified and harassed, blamed and shamed, through a legal process that ultimately leads to nowhere. (Harding, 2015, p. 1)

Because of the rape myths and stereotypes that exists the bystander always succumb to take sides with the perpetrator. The perpetrator tries to silence or attack the credibility of the victim (Herman, 1992). And in order to escape from their crimes they change the story, in Gay's encounter, the boys who abused and gang raped her went around and called her 'slut' for a whole year. She believed that her version of story would not be heard and she kept it to herself "He said/she said is why so many victims don't come forward. All too often what He said matters more, so we swallow the truth" (Gay, 2017, p. 40). In Arter's case her aunt and uncle blamed her for what happened and they took the side of the perpetrator. Due to the lack of evidence the perpetrators were not convicted. Due to rape myths and stereotypes survivors tend to internalise the blame, they suffer from shame and guilt which further aggravates trauma.

Theme 2: Impacts of Sexual abuse

The essential element of rape is the physical, psychological and moral violation of the person. Violation is, in fact a synonym for rape. The purpose of the rapist is to terrorise, dominate and humiliate his victim, to render her utterly helpless. Thus rape by its nature is intentionally designed to produce psychological harm. (Herman, 1992, p. 57-58)

The subthemes that emerged are: *Shame, Guilt and Self Blame; Unworthy Self; Uncontrollable Rage; Disruption of Safety and Trust; Isolating themselves from Everyone; Hostility towards the Body; Destructive Behaviours which include i. Eating Disorders, ii. Substance Abuse, iii Self Harm*

The first three sub themes focuses on the emotional impacts of sexual abuse. All the three survivors battle with shame, guilt, anger and the feeling of unworthiness. Sexual abuse causes emotional distress which includes depression, anxiety, anger and impaired sense of self

(Biere et al., 1994). Sexual abuse leaves the person prone to shame. "Shame is the response to helplessness, the violation of bodily integrity and the indignity suffered in the eyes of the other person" (Herman, 1992, p.53). All the three survivors felt intense shame because they grappled with misplaced guilt, no matter what they blamed themselves for what happened and feel disgusted because they allowed disgusting things happen to them. They were afraid to look in the mirror because they feel ashamed and because of the rape stereotypes they internalized the blame which heightens the shame they already grapple with.

No matter how brave and resourceful the victim may have been, her actions were insufficient to ward off disaster. In the aftermath of traumatic events as survivors review and judge their own conduct, feeling of guilt and inferiority are practically universal...It is the victims not the perpetrators who feel guilty. (Herman, 1992, p.53)

These emotions (Shame & Guilt) further leads to the sense of unworthiness. All the three survivors believe that they don't deserve anything good in their life. They perceive themselves to be insignificant, inadequate and worthless. All the three of them struggle with relationships because they are not able to be satisfied and they feel they are unwanted. They internalize the feeling that they don't deserve love, happiness or success. Feelings of shame, guilt, unworthiness leads to uncontrollable rage. "Difficulty in modulating intense anger survivors oscillate between uncontrolled expressions of rage and intolerance of aggression in any form" (Herman, 1992, p. 56)

In all the memoirs, all the three survivors mentioned how they become frustrated and easily triggered for even the smallest of things. They are angry that their body has been betrayed and violated and they tend to direct the anger towards their family and friends. The self and identity is irrevocably changed and destroyed in the aftermath of abuse (Herman, 1992).

The next two subthemes is *Disruption of Trust & Safety & Isolating themselves from Everyone*

In the aftermath of sexual abuse, the sense of safety and trust is compromised. They don't trust themselves or anyone and even deny the existence of God and they start to isolate themselves from everyone.

Trauma impels people both to withdraw from close relationships and to seek them desperately. The profound disruptions in basic trust, the common feeling of shame, guilt and inferiority and the need to avoid the reminders of trauma that might be found in the social relationship, all foster withdrawal from close relationships. But the terror of the traumatic event intensifies the need for protective attachments. The traumatized person therefore frequently alternates between isolation and anxious clinging to others. The dialectic of trauma operates not only in the survivor's inner life but also in her close relationships. It results in the formation of intense, unstable relationship that fluctuates between extremes. (Herman, 1992, p. 56)

All the three survivors grapple with relationship issues. They are sexual abused by their loved ones so they feel betrayed and they don't trust anyone. "When trust is lost traumatised people feel that they belong more to the dead than to the living" (Herman, 1992, p. 52).

"I am always paralysed by self doubt and mistrust" (Gay, 2017, p. 221). They long for relationships but they feel unsatisfied and they break from their relationships. Their intimacy is compromised by conflicting feelings of want and trepidation. This extends to family and friends. They believe that they are not the same person anymore. Sexual abuse always causes a rift between the individual attachment to the family and community. "They undermine the believe system that give meaning to human experience. They violate the victim faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crises" (Herman, 1992, p. 51) . In the aftermath of sexual abuse all the three women lose faith in divine existence and they lead into existential crises. The feeling of unworthiness creeps in and their self esteem is damaged by shame, humiliation, guilt and helplessness. "I was hungry to connect with God... however sadness and shame came over me. Maybe I was too much of a mess and didn't deserve God's love" (Dubose, 2016, p. 248).

The next two subthemes are *Hostility towards the Body & Destructive Behaviours*

"Traumatic events violate the autonomy of the person at the level of basic bodily integrity. The body is invaded, injured, defiled. Control over the bodily function is lost" (Herman, 1992, p. 52-53). All the three survivors believe that they don't recognise themselves in the mirror and whenever they look in the mirror they are grappled with shame, hatred, humiliation and they constantly fluctuate to change their appearance. They believe that if they could change things would become better. They find comfort in drugs. They suffer from bingeing & purging and self mutilation. In order to gain control over their lives and as a form of punishment they indulge in eating disorders. Gay finds comfort in food, she tries to fill the void with food on the other hand Arter dislikes food, and she sees food as a means to control. Dubose sees comfort in drugs and bingeing & purging. Due to self blame and shame they felt that they don't deserve a place in the world and want pain to numb their emotion, they indulge in self mutilating behaviours.

Theme 3: *Learning to live with Abuse*

The following subthemes emerged: *Coming in terms with abuse, Forgiveness/ Revenge, Writing as Therapy*

"Remembering and telling the truth about terrible events are prerequisites both for the restoration of social order and for the healing of individual victims" (Herman, 1992, p.1).

Gay recovers after an accident, Dubose recovers after the death of her mother and Arter recovers after nearly killing herself. Dubose forgives her abuser whereas Gay and Arter do not forgive their abusers. All the three of them find comfort in writing and sharing their stories. "Through writing, authors transformed experiences of silence and shame and demonstrated how their craft emerged from the broken places of suffering" (Gilmore, 2019,p.163). Writing is a form of catharsis where they purge their emotions and feelings and seek

validation and comfort through their readers. Their memoirs have been their redemption. Through writing they represent themselves and get justice and validation in a society which failed to give them justice.

6. Conclusion

The research used thematic analysis to explore the challenges faced by survivors in expressing and communicating sexual abuse due to fear and shame, the various impacts of trauma and how the survivors learn to live with the wounds that have been caused due to sexual abuse. The study explored all these predominant themes using memoirs as primary data. Due to the shame and secrecy surrounding sexual abuse and rape myths that still perpetuates the society lot of women and children do not come forward to report. Only after 1970, due to the rise of feminist movements and consciousness raising groups the concepts such as incest, marital rape, spousal rape, and child sexual abuse were pulled from the closets and discussed and debated in the academic forum. After the #Me Too movement in 2017 lot of women started to represent themselves through writing in form of memoirs, blog post, personal writings etc. Often in a large canon these memoirs tend to be trivialized and ignored. The research brought to light the voice of the marginalized writings and through their writings the research explored how the survivors navigated through physical and emotional abuse that has been caused due to sexual abuse. The research shed light on the victim blaming attitude that perpetuates the society and how this affected survivors in confiding about their abuse. The research focused on how the survivors grappled through emotional impacts such as shame, guilt, and rage. The study in detail found various impacts of trauma which include substance abuse, eating disorder and self-mutilating behaviours, how the survivors succumbed and navigated through it. And by writing about the experience the survivors confronted and processed their trauma and gradually came in terms with their abuse. The process of reflecting and expressing what happened to them played a key role in recovery, by making them confront their painful past and exploring their emotions which eventually lead them to find empowerment. Through writings they discovered their self and reclaimed their agency which was lost in the aftermath of sexual abuse.

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