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## When Victims Become Victimizers. Abuse and Neglect in Sapphire's *The Kid*

**Abstract:** In both of her novels, Sapphire depicts disadvantaged gifted children and adolescents. Precious, the illiterate protagonist of *Push* (1996), eventually starts to write poetry. In *The Kid* (2011) her son Abdul becomes a passionate dancer. Both protagonists are also victims of sexual abuse and social neglect. While they try to use their gifts as a way of coping with trauma, only Abdul grows up to be a victimizer. This essay shows that Sapphire challenges the stereotypical understanding of *the child's* innocence. She also depicts social isolation of abused Black children, and, instead of condemning Abdul, makes her readers try to understand the causes of the rage, anger, and abusive behavior of a victim who becomes a victimizer.

**Keywords:** adolescent, trauma, sexual abuse, homophobia, American fiction

Before analyzing Sapphire's second novel *The Kid* (2011), published fifteen years after the critically-acclaimed *Push* and two years after its successful film adaptation directed by Lee Daniels<sup>1</sup>, I want to start with familiarizing readers with a story of abuse and social neglect that has been going on for almost three decades, one that many have failed to notice or have chosen to ignore. Although it is very different from the one found in *The Kid*, I believe it mirrors some of the most important issues in the novel, especially the ones frequently referred to as troubling and exaggerated.

In 1994 the twenty-seven-year-old singer R. Kelly illegally married fifteen-year-old Aaliyah, whom he had met three years earlier while working on her debut album *Age Ain't Nothing but a Number*. The marriage was annulled after a few months but Kelly faced no legal consequences of marrying a minor. Since then there here have been ongoing allegations of Kelly sexually, physically, and mentally abusing numerous underage girls and women. In 2002 a sex tape allegedly showing him abusing and urinating on a fourteen-year-old girl was leaked. Despite all the claims he has had a successful

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<sup>1</sup> *Precious: Based on the Novel 'Push' by Sapphire*. Co-produced by Oprah Winfrey, starring Gabourey Sidibe, Mo'Nique, and Mariah Carey, the movie was critically acclaimed and won two Academy Awards, while receiving additional four nominations.

career, performing at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Salt Lake City, recording numerous multi-platinum selling records, including hit songs with Celine Dion and Lady Gaga, as well as writing and producing for Whitney Houston and Michael Jackson. Even with the backlash caused by the #metoo movement, the #MuteRKelly protest, and the release of the Lifetime documentary series *Surviving R. Kelly* (2019), many of his loyal fans and fellow performers, such as Master P and Erykah Badu, keep on defending Kelly and his despicable sexual preferences. On the contrary, his victims, often referred to not as children but adults, have been blamed for promiscuity and slut-shamed on social media. As Roni Natov observes, “[s]hame and guilt are painfully woven into the abuse – the victimizing of victims – the idea that somehow this awful thing has happened because it is the fault of the victim, which is part of the silencing and coercion of victimizing” (59).

The refusal to accept Kelly's blame and the negative attitudes toward his victims can be linked to a few factors. First, coming from an underprivileged family, he epitomizes the idea of the American dream. Second, Kelly transcends the stereotypical hip-hop Black masculinity (Brown 193) without being accused of “acting white.” Third, as Dream Hampton observes in the interview with Ida Harris, the alleged abuse of Black adolescents has been ignored for almost three decades because “[t]he fact his victims have been dismissed has everything to do with the fact they are Black girls” (Harris 2019). Finally, in the context of the history of denial of some children's social value, this disturbing situation is not that surprising. While adults usually feel the need to protect all children, sometimes they become afraid of those who do not fit into a particular image of *the child* (Cross 9). Kathryn Bond Stockton argues that unlike white middle-class children, children of color, as well as those who do not belong to the middle-class, are expected to “achieve” innocence (31). As she points out, this is possible by experiencing physical abuse from which all children need protection (33). Thus, oppression and helplessness *may* allow children to appear innocent. Equating children's innocence with their assumed asexuality is problematic, and James Kincaid argues that:

[T]he idea of innocence and the idea of “the child” became dominated by sexuality – negative sexuality, of course, but sexuality all the same. Innocence was fled down to mean little more than virginity coupled with ignorance; the child was, therefore, that which was innocent: the species incapable of practicing or inciting sex. The irony is not hard to miss: defining something entirely as a negation brings irresistibly before us that which we're trying to banish. (55)

Adolescents abused by Kelly are frequently treated like adults by their communities because they *are* sexual – as if sex (even sexual abuse) automatically turned children into grown-ups. What makes this case even more problematic, yet comparable to the narrative of *The Kid*, is that R. Kelly was also re-

peatedly sexually abused when he was a child and, despite attending school, he never learned to read or write fluently. Consequently, Robert Kelly, a neglected victim whose traumatic experience was denied by his family and community, used his musical talent to become R. Kelly, a hugely successful performer, but at the same time grew up into a powerful victimizer of the weaker and underprivileged, for years continuing the vicious circle of abuse<sup>2</sup>.

In both of her novels, Sapphire depicts similarly disadvantaged and gifted adolescents. Precious Jones, the illiterate protagonist of *Push*<sup>3</sup> who at the age of sixteen has two children by her father and is HIV positive, eventually learns to read and starts writing poetry. In *The Kid* Precious' son Abdul also becomes a victim of sexual abuse and social neglect but turns out to be a gifted dancer. While both protagonists try to use their talents as a way of coping with trauma, the novels are not typical trauma narratives. Sapphire shows that talent is not enough to succeed and fully overcome trauma. Precious dies of AIDS at the beginning of *The Kid*, and dancing cannot help her son, who is not only a victim as he grows up to be a victimizer, deal with trauma and the consequences of his actions. While *Push* met with mostly positive response, *Chicago Times* even called it "a story of faith and possibility," professional reviews of *The Kid* were mixed, with some critics expressing dissatisfaction with Sapphire's choice of Precious' son as the unlikable protagonist, the vicious descriptions of sexual abuse, including pedophilia and homosexual rape, and the ambiguous ending. Most readers responded negatively, believing the story to be an exaggerated and disappointing sequel to *Push*<sup>4</sup>. By analyzing *The Kid*, I want to demonstrate that Sapphire displays social isolation of abused Black children and adolescents, and, instead of condemning young Abdul or giving him a fairytale ending, makes her readers try to understand the causes of his violence, anger, and abusive behavior.

#### DISAPPEARING AND REAPPEARING

Reading novels about overcoming trauma may give young readers hope and "a recognition that this terrible thing has happened to others and that they have survived" (Natov 58). Sapphire offers a different type of trauma narrative. In *The Kid* she confirms that Precious did not break the vicious circle of abuse

<sup>2</sup> In *Surviving R. Kelly* Kelly's ex-wife Andrea argues that Robert and R. are two dramatically different sides of the singer.

<sup>3</sup> In the alternative school Each One Teach One Precious starts reading and writing a journal which helps her develop skills of self-expression. Books that her teacher Ms. Rain asks her to read, including *The Color Purple*, make her believe that happy ending can happen, that "shit like that can be true," because "[l]ife can work out for the best" (83). Her teacher, however, disapproves of the novel's "fairytale ending" (83).

<sup>4</sup> As of late 2018 *The Kid* has a 2,6 average on Goodreads and Amazon.

and social neglect, thus, she dismisses the “easy route of reading” *Push*<sup>5</sup>. This time there is no mentor, no Ms. Rain to push and help Abdul, as his teachers are also his oppressors. Some readers, probably remembering the more optimistic ending of the film adaptation, tend to forget that *Push* does not end happily. Although Precious becomes literate, she ends up as an HIV positive single mother. From Abdul's recollections in *The Kid* readers learn that Precious managed to become a good mother who tried to raise a reasonable boy.

When the readers are introduced to Abdul in *The Kid*, he appears to be a sensitive and intelligent nine-year-old boy whose mother has died of AIDS. Because she was evicted, Abdul loses all of his belonging, all of the artifacts that would remind him of Precious and his heritage<sup>6</sup>. The boy is given to foster care, and on the first day he is beaten, and the jacket that his mother bought him is taken away from him. After losing the last thing that reminds him of Precious, he starts to change and for the first time in his life acts violently. Instead of getting help after his mother's passing, the traumatized boy has to face the vicious circle of bureaucracy and abuse. Abdul loses everything; also his identity as someone steals his and Precious' files and their social security numbers in order to collect welfare checks. For four years he is believed to be dead and social workers mistake him for another Black boy. Consequently, for a few years he is known as J.J. (Jamal Jones) and does not stay in touch with his living relatives – grandmother Mary, great-grandmother Toosie, and sister Mongo. The case of Abdul's name is problematic as there is probably nothing more significant in the creation of one's individual identity than the possession of a name distinguishing one from the others. After all, “to have no name is a disaster, absolute disorder” because “in order to really exist, it is necessary to have first been named; names carry meaning and reveal vocation” (Tosene 3). Using nicknames, pen names, diminutive forms of one's legal name, allows one to play with the idea of identity. The choice of using various names allows one to perform different roles, and sometimes even become someone else.

Using several names in various situations can also lead to the experience of an identity crisis or the complete substitution of one's initial self with a newly created one. With no doubt alternation of a name usually leads to some other changes in the way one is perceived by oneself and by others. Even though J.J.

<sup>5</sup> In ‘Learning to Read Politically: Narratives of Hope and Narratives of Despair in *Push* by Sapphire’ Lydia Kokkola argues that Sapphire offers readers an easy route of reading the book which celebrates her character's success in becoming literate in a school based on Freirian principles. However, she also claims that the novel can be read differently, as Sapphire “challenges her readers to reject this easy, optimistic trajectory and learn to read more politically” (Kokkola).

<sup>6</sup> At Precious' funeral her friend Jermaine tells the truth about Precious' situation: “I'm not supposed to mention Medicaid didn't want to pay for her drugs or that the [wel]fare was threatening her again to leave school or lose her benefits, that there's a padlock on her door and that she died broke and depressed, deeply depressed.[...] her life sure the fuck was hell” (20).

(Abdul) tries to remember his mother's face, he forgets about his real name and the things she taught him. The protagonist continues being J.J. when he ends up in St Ailanthus, a Catholic orphanage where his custodians and teachers sexually and mentally abuse him. Despite being a good student, at the age of thirteen Abdul is eventually kicked out of the orphanage after being accused of raping the five-year-old Richie Jackson, an act he rejects to admit. Then he is reunited with his great-grandmother who calls him Abdul, a name that he refuses to accept. When he starts dancing, Abdul calls himself Crazy Horse – a Native American name he associates with freedom and unlimited opportunities. While living with Roman, an older white dancing instructor, he starts using the white-sounding name Arthur Stevens, which is more suitable for his new middle-class status. At the age of seventeen he leaves Roman and decides to finally use his real name – Abdul Jones. As he says:

I never hid, I never ran. I never had to. All that shit- J.J., Crazy Horse, Arthur Stevens- nobody knew my fucking name. But the deal was, nobody cared I was gone once there was no ass to eat or check to collect [...] I didn't have to hide. I never existed for nobody, no way. (228)

Finally, after trying to commit suicide, he is once again mistaken, this time for a thirty-year-old criminal Abdul-Azi Ali and ends up in a mental institution where he is drugged and beaten for twenty-one days. When a doctor examines him and asks about his real name, he answers: Abdul Jamal Louis Jones. By telling the doctor the story of his abusive childhood, the history of neglect, the struggles with his sexuality, and finally admitting to all of the bad things he has ever done, he symbolically becomes complete. The doctor lets him go. Jamal, J.J., Arthur, Crazy Horse, and Abdul symbolically become one. He can leave and start living his life as Abdul Jones but understands that “[w]hat's going to be hard is existing. Reappearing” (228), as well as coping with trauma.

Abdul is right – starting over, taking ownership of his actions, and breaking the vicious circle of abuse is not easy. As *The Kid* introduces readers to Precious' family background, it also makes reading *Push* as a story of hope more difficult, as both novels talk about the corruption of the welfare system and the stigma and discrimination associated with sexual abuse and HIV/AIDS. Abdul is desperate to learn more about his background and his father, but when he meets his great-grandmother Toosie, he dismisses her and does not want to believe they are related. Abdul is shocked when she tells him about the abuse *she* experienced as a child. At the age of ten, while working at a cotton plantation, she was raped by a man she calls Nigger Boy and then gave birth to Mary, Abdul's late grandmother. After a few years, she escaped with her daughter from Mississippi to Harlem, New York. When she got there, she was still a minor but became a prostitute and changed her name from Gal to Toosie. This seems symbolical as Gal means a young girl and Toosie was the name of the neighbor's bitch. In order to survive Abdul's grandmother had to leave her

childhood behind and become *a bitch*. The apartment she lives in used to be a brothel where Mary saw her mother working and her procurer being killed. Abdul is disgusted and shocked by her story and starts masturbating in front of her, as he does not want to listen and sexual stimulation is his only protection, it allows him to forget about the reality, to block it out. Toosie tells him that his father was also his grandfather and that both of his parents died of AIDS. Abdul does not believe it, as he is constantly told that only drug addicts and gays can be HIV positive. Toosie asks Abdul to stay and says that he is the first man in the family who can challenge the vicious circle of abuse, but Abdul decides to run away. Although he later often thinks about his parents, when Roman wants him to get tested, he says: "It never crossed my mind I might be HIV-positive. [...] Kids don't get it" (216). Unlike all of the adults in the novel, he never doubts that he is just *a kid*.

#### ABUSE, SEXUALITY, AND HOMOPHOBIA

While Abdul is bright and educated, he reads Shakespeare and loves modern art, especially Jean-Michel Basquiat, being a gifted student is not enough to succeed when one is a poor, Black, and abused orphan who knows nothing about his roots. The neglect of his family and the social system turn Abdul into an abusive teenager. Even though he is *a kid*, just like his mother, at the age of thirteen Abdul is tall and mature looking. Unlike her, he is not obese and grows up to be a handsome and muscular teenager. Even though he used to be a pretty child, no one wants to adopt him because he looks too mature and is too Black. Like his mother, Abdul becomes a victim of sexual myths<sup>7</sup>. As Jewelle Taylor Gibbs rightly observes, "young Black males have been forced into a defensive position of unwilling victims, caught between a rock and a hard place. They have responded to this victimization quite predictably, with feel-

<sup>7</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan's notorious "The Negro Family" report (1965) promoted the belief that Black women had weakened African-American men by being matriarchs (hooks 12). Moreover, it endorsed the sexist attitudes of many men and "legitimized their efforts to subjugate black females" (hooks 12). It also popularized the image of matriarchs – the "bad Black mothers" – who in the 1980s during the Reagan/Bush's efforts to lessen social welfare funding for families became known as "welfare queens." As Tricia Rose observes in *Longing to Tell: Black Women Talk About Sexuality and Intimacy* (2004), the term "welfare queen" seems to make fun of references to African Americans as "being the descendants of king and queens" to improve their self-worth by reminding them "that despite their history of enslavement, many of African Americans descend from royalty" (390-391). Sexual myths stigmatized not only Black women but also their children, who appeared as violent, wild, unruly, and inappropriate playfellows for White children because "in the absence of strong fathers, their too strong mothers could not teach them properly so the children repeat the cycle of inappropriate gender behavior" (*Black Sexual Politics*, Collins 138).

ings of rage and anger” (142). Despite being a child, Abdul is treated as no more than a sexual object. At the age of nine for the first time he is sexually abused by his teachers, two Catholic Brothers who represent different types of pedophiles. Brother John, who was an orphan raised by a Black mother, buys Abdul gifts and claims to love him “[y]ou’re pretty. You know I love you. [...] Don’t you know it hurts me to hurt you,” he says (74). On the contrary, Samuel is violent and does not treat Abdul like a child as he is tall and looks much older: “I was never a... a kid to Brother Samuel,” Abdul says (216). Samuel is a sociologist and tells Abdul that “[w]elfare and AIDS, that’s what [...] is wrong with African Americans, we’re disproportionately represented on the welfare rolls and our lifestyle predispose us to criminality” (137). His abusers also make Abdul incapable of distinguishing between love and sex: “I wanna be loved” – he says – “I want someone to open me up like I did the kids and Jamie” (122).

Abdul eventually becomes a dancer and a member of the New York queer community. After being intimate with men only, he starts questioning his sexuality. Still, just like his mother<sup>8</sup>, he struggles with homophobia. In the hospital he confesses and tells the psychiatrist that when he worked as a teenage prostitute, he often used to beat his clients, he also wanted to kill Brother Samuel. At a very young age Abdul starts using violence, both physical and sexual, as a means of coping with trauma. Thus he continues the vicious circle of abuse. He mistakes pedophiles for gays and attributes his misery to them, but at the same is afraid of being queer: “I’m not what they were-baby-butt-busting homos. Or maybe I am, maybe they came for me for that shit because I’m one too. Maybe I am a fag” he says, and then adds “[d]oes what I did with the kids at St Ailanthus make me a faggot? What I did with the kids wasn’t nothing they weren’t doing already. Shit, I did what they were doing to me” (242). Abdul also becomes aware that his pedophilic relation with Roman, a wealthy white man, was built on mental abuse: “I felt like he had me in a cage lined with money. I couldn’t get out even though the door was open,” he says (357). Abdul begins to understand that his skin color made no one question the fact that an adult gay man lived with a minor: “[i]t’s alright because I’m a nigger [...] When was the last time you saw a nigger walking down the street with a white underage? Huh?” (368). Despite his previous intimacy with men and the inability of hav-

<sup>8</sup> Even though white people have frequently posited sexual otherness as intrinsic in African Americans (Richards 23), Black people have often seen same-sex desire as prevalent to whites, and homosexuality as “a white disease” (Smith 101). Precious cannot believe that Ms. Rain is a lesbian. Her teacher becomes her mentor and shows her to deal with her problematic situation by learning how to read and write. She is the one to say “you can’t stop now Precious, you gotta push” (95). Still, Precious finds it difficult to understand and accept her teacher’s homosexuality. She is homophobic but at the same time curious about Ms. Rain’s otherness. Precious knows that she is supposed to despise Ms. Rain because she is not heterosexual, but she sees her happiness and dreams about being a lesbian.

ing sex with a pretty white girl who makes him once again question his sexuality, Abdul eventually falls in love with My Lai, an Asian girl who is an artist and through art tries to heal her trauma – she was also sexually abused by her adoptive father and exploited by her adoptive mother. Because of My Lai Abdul realizes that he is not the only one who was raped.

Just like his mother<sup>9</sup>, Abdul finds some unwanted physical pleasure in the abuse “I wish he would get off me. I wish he would get in deeper it feels so fucking good like God I hate myself I hate him,” he thinks while being raped (78). He tries to block it out and later wants to feel better by hurting weaker and younger boys while still being raped by the Brothers. This leads to a cause and effect situation when a traumatized victim becomes a victimizer. Abdul and J.J. seem like two different sides of the boy. Abdul blocks his own abusive behavior out, does it at nights and pretends to be dreaming, he even sees J.J., the abuser, in his dreams but seems unaware of the fact that it is he. He consequently mistakes abuse for love and even tries to build a relationship with Jamie, the first boy he rapes. When some years later they meet again, Jamie attacks Abdul and accuses him of rape: “[f]or God’s sake! [...] I was a little boy. You made me!” (321). Abdul finally realizes that it was not love: “I’m thinking, *they* made me. [...] The brothers had us, *me*, I figured; I thought he, the kids, love me. I thought that was love” (322). The unexpected confrontation with Jamie is one of the reasons leading to Abdul’s suicide attempt. Struggling with his conscience, the protagonist starts hearing voices in his head saying that he is just a pretender who has no identity of his own. He also realizes that his heterosexual relationship with My Lai and dancing career will not magically absolve his actions. At the end of the novel, he finally admits to himself to being both a victim and a victimizer.

#### CONCLUSION. NO HAPPY ENDING

The rejection of *The Kid* reveals the extent to which market readers are attached to the therapeutic narrative of hope, and the sentimental notion of the innocent victim. Even though for most of them *The Kid* is a narrative of despair, Sapphire creates a multilayered story that can be appreciated by those readers who decide to finish the book and read it as “detectives,” like Blu Rain encouraged Precious to do with her set books. In an interview Sapphire said: “He [Abdul] has more capacity to do good, but he also has more capacity to do bad...and that is who we are as human beings, on some level. Some people

<sup>9</sup> In a 2006 study on *Push*, Mary Thompson shows that her predominantly white and middle-class women’s studies students misunderstood and criticized teenage Precious for not leaving her abusive parents earlier, forgetting that as a poor, obese, and illiterate teenager she has limited opportunities. Moreover, they were predominantly offended by Precious’ claims of having experienced sexual pleasure (Thompson 33).

channel and hide it better, but we all have the capacity for good and evil” (qtd. in Kearney). Some reviewers seem to dismiss the fact that Abdul is still a child who becomes abusive after (and while) being regularly abused, both sexually and mentally. Sapphire does not offer the reader a likable protagonist and a superficial happy ending that we are used to finding in such novels. Instead, she demonstrates how a young Black male, a victim of poverty, discrimination, and social isolation progressively turns into a victimizer of the weak and underprivileged, the mirror image of his own misery and alienation.

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