

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 11 : 1 January 2011

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fathi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.



Joyce Carol Oates

From http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joyce_Carol_Oates

Joyce Carol Oates and Her Fiction

Joyce Carol Oates is an American novelist who has written about violence and female victimization. Her world is filled with violence, brutality, sordidness, sexual compulsion and emotional imbalance. Her characters fall back on violence as they realize their sense of impotence, the absence of self-affirmation, the failure to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

establish relationship with other persons. In fact, violence in her works is a reflection of the violence in American society as many of Oates's characters are convinced that they cannot live in chaos and confusion of society. They resort to violence in order to assert themselves in the American society. In Oatesian world, violence is precipitated on female child - usually sexual abuse.

Joyce Carol Oates is prototypically American in her multicultural immigrant origins but she was raised American. The private, fluid, ultimately mysterious core of the self is a subject of bemused speculation in her works. As Oates's perspective is human-centred, only with human consciousness, human perception, and human creativity, she makes interior self a dualistic one made up of both conscious and unconscious contents.

Purpose of Oates' Participation in Feminist Discourse

Joyce Carol Oates is annoyed when the sexist label is attached to her. In fact, in her fiction and in her essays, she participates in feminist discourse by attempting to assess how women are made and unmade by male definitions of womanhood. She writes of violence, brutality, sordidness, sexual compulsion, and emotional duress. Her characters are viscerally entangled in their environment, trapped in and chained to their families and the economic and cultural histories of their towns or villages.

Female Victims Surrounded by Violence

There remains a gothic world – the female victims threatened from all sides – linked explicitly to socially realistic contexts, grounded in the milieu within which they have grown up.

Critics hold diverse opinions about Oates's works, particularly about her repeated use of graphic violence, which some have called a distorted vision of American life as her novels are charged with unrelenting scenes of shocking, random violence or madness and emotional distress that Oates chronicles as dominant elements of experience in the lives of her characters.

Motifs from Oates' Novels – Informal Trilogy

With Shuddering Fall (1964), Oates's first novel, foreshadows her preoccupation with violence and darkness, describing a destructive romance between a teenage girl and a thirty-year-old stock car driver that ends with his death by accident.

Oates's best known and critically acclaimed early novels form an informal trilogy exploring three distinct segments of American society: *A Garden of Earthly Delights* (1967) chronicles the life of a migrant worker's daughter in rural Eden Country;

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

Expensive People (1967) exposes the superficial world of suburbia; and *them* presents the violent, degrading milieu of an inner-city Detroit family.

Her short stories of this period, most notably in **Marriages and Infidelities** (1972), and **Where Are You Going Where Have You Been?** (1974), detail themes of violence and abuse between the sexes. **Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been**, for instance, tells of the sexual awakening of a romantic girl by a mysterious man, Alfred Friend.

Her novels of the early 1980s - *Bellefleur* (1980) *A Bloodsmoor Romance* (1982), and *Mysteries of Winterthurn* (1984)—exploit the conventions of nineteenth-century Gothic literature as they examine such sensitive issues such as crimes against women, children, and the poor, and the influence of family history on shaping destiny; likewise, many of her short stories rely on gothic elements (*Haunted*, 1994; *First Love*, 1996).

Explicit Violence in Later Novels

Most of Oates's fiction of the 1980s features more explicit violence than does her earlier fiction, which tends more towards psychological afflictions but psychological obsessions nevertheless persist. In *Marya : A Life* (1986), for example, a successful academic searches for her alcoholic mother who had abused her as a child, and in *You Must Remember This* (1987), a former boxer commits incest with his niece during the McCarthyist 1950s.

Oates's works of the 1990s continue to address relations between violence and such cultural realities of American society as racism (*Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart*, 1990), affluence (*American Appetites*, 1989), alienation (*I Lock the Door upon Myself*, 1990) poverty (*The Rise of Life on Earth*, 1991), classism (*Heat*, 1992), sexual-political power dynamics (*Black Water*, 1992), feminism (*Foxfire*, 1993), success (*What I Lived For*, 1994), serial killers (*Zombie*, 1995), and familial implosion (*We Were the Mulvaney's*, 1996).

Precipitating and Orchestrating Violence

Oates precipitates violence in her fiction. According to her, violence is an outcome of tension. It should not be accidental. In fact, her novels are the careful analyses of the forces that drive human beings to violence. Her works take into account the sense of impotence, the absence of self-affirmation, the failure to establish meaningful relationships with other persons, which confirm and bolster one's self-image and the ultimate failure to accept one's limited power.

Her violence is not a programmatic resolution to every situation as suggested by Elizabeth Dalten in “Joyce Carol Oates : Violence in the Head” (75). It is not her handy way of resolving crisis. It is a natural outlet or course of action. Her characters fall back on violence when they are confronted with threats to their self-image or with the exposure of their impotence. Violence in Oates is not the deus ex machina of an artist who cannot write herself out of critical situations. Her novels are so satiated with violence. Violence in her works is a reflection of the violence in society. In fact, her fiction pictures both the culture and the need to resist the assailing violence.

Components and Demonstration of Violence

Rollo May in *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* classifies three components of violence:

1. a need for meaning or significance.
2. A desire for ecstasy or fascination.
3. An impulse to gainsay one’s whole being, to risk all.

One or more of these drives propel a man to violence. In fact, violence arises from powerlessness. When an individual experiences his inability in order to assert or define himself, he resorts to violence to overcome his impotence. The reason for violence is that impotence corrodes self-esteem (182, 233).

Jacob Bronowski in *The Face of Violence : An Essay With a Play* says :

... at the heart of our violence, in art or feeling, lies our wish to show ourselves men of will. Since society is an instrument for controlling our chaotic wills, the gesture of our violence we make is anti-social; we invent a symbol for the forces of society, obscure and impersonal, which still be our scapegoat. But the symbol is only mask for the fear of each of us that society thwarts what is best and personal in him. We fear that society disregards us. In the wilderness of the cities, we look for respect. (76)

An Impulse We All Share!

In fact, violence is an “impulse we all share. The love of violence is [...] the ancient and symbolic gesture of man against the constraints of society” (Bronowski 81).

Oates in her fictional world translates all these theoretical statements into horrifying truth as the sense of powerlessness drives men like Shar Rule, Howard Wendall, Brock Botsford, and Jules Wendall to lash out against societal constraints, to kill, to

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

inflict injury on others; it drives women like Karen Herz, Clara Walpole, and Elena Howe to destroy others, their lovers, their children, and their husbands. They are unconsciously drawn to violence as they are easily provoked to violent deeds.

It is as Hannah Arendt explains: “To resort to violence when confronted with outrageous events or conditions is enormously tempting because of its inherent immediacy and swiftness” (160). Violence is not only a means of destroying others, it may also mean “an effort to transcend the triviality of life, to seek adventure, to look beyond and even to cross the limiting frontier of human existence” (Fromm 267).

A Catalogue of Horrors

Oates’s fictional world is replete with violence, nightmare, destruction, and catalogue of horrors. In **The Edge of Impossibility** she says : “Based on fear, art”, she maintains, “is built around violence, around death” (6). Even fictional characters who are incapable of performing violent acts participate in violence by being victims as there is no escape from violence. In her fictional world, violence is a sense of personal impotence when the characters are not able to affirm themselves. They fail to define, affirm, and assert themselves and enter into meaningful relations with others.

Oates writes of violence, brutality, sordidness, sexual compulsion, and emotional duress. Oates writes of violence because of her happenings in life : the murder of her maternal grandfather in a barroom brawl, her parental grandfather’s abandonment of her grandmother and her father and the great grandfather’s unsuccessful trial to kill his wife. Her father was also fascinated by the romance of violence and its transmutation into masculine power which excludes women.

Chaos and Confusion of Society

Many of Oates’s characters are convinced that they cannot live in chaos and confusion of society and turn to violence to assert themselves and destroy that society as Saul Bird in **The Hungry Ghosts : Seven Allusive Comedies** proclaims : “How can one live in such a rotten society? Why not destroy it with violence?” (44, 50).

It is just as Jean-Paul Sartre in Frantz Fanon’s book **The Wretched of the Earth** maintains: “... this irrepressible violence is neither sound and fury, nor the resurrection of savage instincts, nor even the effect of resentment; it is man re-creating himself” (8).

Two-fold Aspects of Violence

Oates continually exploits these two fold aspects of violence: the ability to destroy the enemy(ies), and the ability to transcend the trivial. She also insists on the ability of violence to help the individual achieve a sense of identity and wholeness. Her writings presuppose a nightmare world which challenges the very limit of man's endurance because violence brings man to the brink of self-discovery and often serves as an affirmation of his humanity. It becomes the agency of self-discovery and self-affirmation.

Oatesian Passage to Murder plus the Role of Incest

Oates in all her works traces the tragic connection between the failure to establish meaningful human relations and the recourse to violence, often to murder. In *Wonderland*, an ironical title, Jesse Harte kills his wife and children and himself because he cannot relate to them as husband and father. His son Jesse is killed by Trick Monk, and his daughter, Sheeley, kills herself for Jesse's smothering love for his daughter. Robbed of childhood and forced into adult ways, her characters also resort to violence-the only way to survive.

Oates's *With Shuddering Fall, A Garden of Earthly Delights, Expensive People, them, Do With Me What You Will, Childwold, Marya, and You Must Remember This* deal with incestuous relations between a father or father surrogate and a daughter.

In fact, in Oates's oeuvres the father-daughter incest represents a paradigm of female sexual victimization due to unimaginable and unequal relationship where the female child is most powerless.

Oates's female victims can be called unliberated women.

Anne Z. Mickelson in "Sexual Love in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates" accuses her of "working out her own fears and obsessions through the medium of fiction" while concerning the centrality "of oedipal conflict in her fiction" (15-34). In fact, all her works are organized around a Freudian premise that all children find themselves confronted by their shameful and guilt-producing attachment to the parent of the opposite-sex. Her female sexual victims are not normal children but they regress to a stage of anal-sadistic sexuality as is evident in "The Molesters", the short story included in **Expensive People**, which concerns itself with an ambiguous sexual encounter between a six-year old white girl and a black fisherman. It is because she was left out of her brother's games and ignored because of her mother's domestic chores. By the end of the story, the six-year old girl is victimized by the system of patriarchy as she becomes ineradicably 'dirty' through sexual violence and abuse.

Marilyn C. Wesley in “Father – Daughter Incest as Social Transgression : A Feminist Reading of Joyce Carol Oates” avers :

Sexual transgression in Oates’s works signals the conjunction of the fixed social restriction of patriarchal culture and the impulse to escape such limitation. The daughter’s oedipal transition often includes incestuous desire, but the object of such longing is most often the dream-daddy as in this instance, who may seem to offer developmental freedom rather than the father who represents coercive constraint. (255-256)

It is as Maria Ramas in “Freud’s Dora, Dora’s Hysteria” says the Oedipus complex,

confronts the child not only with sexual prohibitions of his or her culture, but also with the interconnected meanings of masculinity, femininity, and heterosexuality. Precisely at the ‘moment’ that the girl confronts the demand that she turn from the mother to the father, the connection between activity, possession of the phallus, sadism and masculinity, on the one hand, and passivity, castration, masochism, and femininity, on the other come into sharp focus. (86)

In Oates’s *them*, Maureen Wendall has devastating sexual experience. When she is fifteen years old her mother Loretta married Pat Furlong. It introduces a triadic stepfather into the mother-daughter dyad as the girl child “moves from her preoccupation with her relationship to her mother to a concern with her father and other males” (Chodorow 138). However, Maureen’s development has been delayed by her sensitive awareness of the disadvantages being a female child and by her reluctance to become a woman as “she did not want to live with a man, sleep with a man. It made her angry to think of a future in which she waited in an apartment for a man to come back from whatever man did [...]” (**them** 171).

Maureen becomes increasingly disturbed when the situation escalates to minister the needs of Loretta’s husband in the middle of the night by serving his supper, making his coffee, absorbing his angry blows, and providing the intimate service of rubbing his painful back. She begins to deteriorate by prostitution in order to stay away from home. She understands the patriarchal meaning of phallus that “the fitting consummation of this transgressive attachment is not intercourse but a scene of sadomasochistic violence which demonstrates that the girl may find in her relationship to the representative father not ‘liberation’ from the mother, but the overwhelming evidence of her own powerlessness within the patriarchal system” (Wesley 6). Oates’s daughters’ violation of this vicious cycle may be understood clinically as violation of patriarchal structure.

In *With Shuddering Fall* Shar Rule is “a man of violence” (168), an impotent, pathetic racer, who frightened and threatened by the infatuation and the stirring of adolescent love of a young girl, destroys himself rather than opens himself to a relationship of love and tenderness. Shar is a man with no sense of self and to him love means the surrender of freedom. He is a symbol of powerlessness and personal inadequacy. He is incapable of loving and being loved like the characters in T.S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party*. In his love for Karen, he appears like an animal or a beast with the realization that he is incapable of taking off his defensive mask of power. Looking at him, Karen says that his appearance suggests the “uneasiness of the predatory beast that suspects he can never achieve satiation” (WSF 166). He wishes to run from Karen as he realizes that he has no power and fails to realize that love itself is power. He is in a dilemma whether to accept love or deny love. He cannot accept her love and tries first to reject her; when this fails, rather than return her love, he destroys himself. Karen’s love has the power to unmask and ruin him. As delusion is heaped on delusion, he believes that “insane fragment of his life would be made whole-cleansed through violence, a communion of power” (WSF 246). Karen is ruthless and coldly determined to win Shar, to defeat Shar. The only way she can conquer Shar is through his death. Rather than create, her love destroys.

In *A Garden of Earthly Delights* Clara Walpole’s move from the squalid poverty of migrant camps to the wealthy home of Curt Revere is accompanied by violence at every step. The only way of life she knows is violence and the only avenue to self-affirmation is to destroy or conquer those persons who seem to be superior or powerful to her. From her sister Sharleen, her playmate Rosie, to Sonya, her co-worker, and finally to Lowry and Revere, she must either exploit or defeat them in order to create an image of herself.

In fact, Clara remains a pathetic picture of the effects of violence on a human being. In her first appearance in the novel, she is described fighting with her older sister Sharleen. They are “locked together in a hot inertia of hatred” (GED 22). This hatred paves way for her tragic life. She leaves her father after he has beaten her one evening for being seen in a tavern. Clara never learns to love. She learns only to use and exploit persons. Her moral education in violence begins with her father, who has killed a man. Lowry continues Clara’s education into violence. She recognizes in him an “invisible insatiable striving. She didn’t understand him, but she sensed something familiar about the hardness with which he lived. It was her father’s hardness brought into a sharper focus” (GED 172). He used to have cruel, violent sex with Clara. With the same hardness and destructive energy he makes love to her. Oates writes : “His face twisted like a rag in a parody of agony” and she felt “as if she had been opened and hammered at with a cruelty that made no sense because she could not see what it meant” (GED 189). When Lowry leaves her, she has to evaluate her and has to school her in violence as she is strongly driven to Revere. She is

driven to Revere to exploit him. She must, at the same time, wait on his desires, prostitute herself, and forfeit her reputation with the community.

Oates's *them* is based on the notion that modern tragedy transforms domestic landscape into wilderness as is revealed in the murder of Bernie besides Loretta Wendall in bed by her brother Brock; her rape by the policeman Howard Wendall; her father's insanity and institutionalization; her husband, Howard, being crashed to death in an accident at work; her son Jule's burning the barn; her daughter Betty's pushing Grandma Wendall down the back stairs; and her daughter, Maureen's prostitution and near fatal beating by Furlong.

In *them*, Loretta is the invincible matriarch who survives the ever-increasing turbulence of her life. Her initiation into violence occurs when her brother Brock, itching for excitement, kills her lover, Bernie Malin, besides her in bed. Brock is a killer needing someone to kill, and it happens to be Bernie. After this incident, Loretta is raped by the policeman who offers to help her dispose of the body. Later, they marry. Her daughter, Maureen is the victim of her own inability to shield herself from her life. Jules recognizes in her something different, something delicate. Maureen begins to prostitute herself in order to make more money to get out of her environment. She is not sufficiently schooled in deceit and cleverness to escape unnoticed and when Furlong, her stepfather, notices the money, he beats her senseless.

In *them* opposed to Maureen's delicate flight from violence is Jules's head-on attack. Jules had seen a plane crash in which a man's head had been split into two. He had run away and hidden in his fear and horror. A very close call with death robs Jules of some of his spirit. But he gets involved with revolutionaries and with the Detroit riots. The looting, plundering, shooting only bring to the surface that latent violence of the city. And Jules, who had seen death so often and had barely escaped it himself, kills a policeman.

Oates in *Do With Me What You Will* turns to a residual influence of violence which is discernible. In it, the focus has shifted from the causes of violence to the effort to transcend and liberate oneself. Elena Howe suffers at the hands of her own insane father, who kidnaps her and takes her to California where she nearly dies of dehydration and malnutrition and at those of her mother, who constantly uses Elena to better herself, marrying her off to Marvin Howe and virtually ignoring her the rest of her life. However, Elena succeeds in lasting off the effects of violence. She can and does liberate herself.

Oates's *Bellefleur* is a reimagining of the family saga, which uses a technique called experimental Gothic. In this novel, Oates establishes herself a magical realist. In this novel, Ghosts walk, spirits haunt, trolls bowl in the woods, a vampire lives, a room is

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

contaminated, the family patriarch insists that a drum to be made from his skin after his death, and so on. The Bellefleur and the Bellefleur's family dramatise the quest for both material betterment and spiritual fulfillment – the dualities at the heart of the American dream. “This lust to acquire material possessions expresses itself across the generations of the Bellefleur family and sows the seeds of its own destruction – the desecration of the land, the avenging resentment of the exploited and dispossessed, the despairing emptiness and elusiveness of the quest” (Creighton 39).

In this novel Jean-Pierre establishes a dynasty, which spans the War of Independence to the present. The family is sustained through the eventual marriage of Louis' widow, Germaine, to Jedediah, the second of Jean-Pierre's sons. Jedediah was on a 20 year quest for God but in the end of the novel he was called back by an angel, a messenger from his brother Harlan, to sustain the family line and avenge the murders. He is called back from his self-absorbed quest to join the human community, to unite with his widowed sister-in-law Germaine, whom he has always loved. His return proves the forces of love that are resilient. Like Jedediah, several members of the family escape into the realms of unconsciousness. Raphael is mesmerized by Mink Pond and escapes the pursuing Canine boy, Doan, by submerging himself in it. Lamentations of Jeremiah, disgusted over the greed of his family and the cannibalism of his silver foxes walks into the flooded river as his mother Violet had years before.

Oates writes:

Yet still he wanted to plunge into the stream, he yearned to submit himself to it, as it only so violent a baptism, from the rude claims of Bellefleur and blood, could exercise his memory of the foxes and their hideous blood jaws. I am not one of you, as you see, drowning man pleaded. (B 511)

But he did not drown. Years later he walked out of the river and remarried his former wife Elvira. Vernon tried to escape being a Bellefleur by seeming to drown in the river. He admits : “I am not a Bellefleur, I am only myself, Vernon, my essence is Vernon and not Bellefleur. I belong to God. I am God. God dwells in one... the poet... must take the chance of drowning in God” (B 155).

In this novel, one can see the pull of the dark which is sinister and malevolent. The Noir vulture snatches Garner's child. Lake Noir is full of the whisperings and proddings of nighttime spirits which drive the murderers of Jean-Pierre into frenzy. Great uncle Hiran is haunted by capricious night self that differs from the fastidious day self and leads him into nocturnal ventures, including one in which he is drawn to Lake Noir in the winter where he observed a mysterious figure. Leah, in despondency, is feeling herself to be floating. Oates violently writes : “bodiless, at the bottom of a great dark pool of water. She was the drowned Vernon, she was

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

Violet, she was Jeremiah who had been swept away in a flood. What remained of Leah cared to protect nothing” (B 407). Yolande, who ran away from love, as a young girl, reappeared like a celluloid image, Samuel, infatuated by the ‘Room of Contamination’ had alien spirits; Tamas disappeared into the clavicord he lovingly made for Violet; Hepatiza’s husband, a brutish man, turned into a bear; Johnny Doan, a Canine boy, became a dog. However, the main course of the action dealt with the marriage of Gideon and Leah and Leah’s effort to restore the glory of Bellefleur’s family which was not wiped out.

Incest as a Norm of Cultural Violence and Misogyny

Oates treats incest as a norm of cultural violence and misogyny. In *Bellefleur*, the child Little Goldie is first raped by Ewan and then by Gideon. In *You Must Remember This*, Felix feels less guilty in having sex with 12 year old niece Enid. In these examples, sexual violence, mind-body split, and incest are identified as revulsion for female sexuality and of exceptional, dysfunctional family patterns as is seen in “Blindfold”, “The Daughter”, and “Ruth” in *The Goddess*, in the incestuous relationship in *Bellefleur* (Gideon and Ewan’s rape of Little Goldie), between Marya and Lee in *Marya : A Life*, and between Georgina and her father, Justice Kilgurven in “The Virgin in the Rose Bower,” and between Karen and Hertz in *With Shuddering Fall*.

Violence Marks the Language and Context

Oates’s verbal ambiance is always violent. It is confirmed by her choice of images, figures of speech, and her basic rhetorical devices. Her fictive world is crowded with violent conversations that are angry and charged with hostility. The interaction between characters is often brutal and savage. A persistent and growing fear parades all through her works.

The fear that one will be destroyed makes the characters establish and maintain a sense of order and meaning in one’s own life. In her oeuvre, she describes even the trivial subjects in terms of violence by her unique language and aesthetic tragedy. She generates an ambiance of violence integral to her tragic vision by creating sensationalism and titillation.

Violence is used to bring an awareness of mortality. Violence is used to reflect the confusion inherent in human beings as John Fraser in *Violence in the Arts* observes: “some violences make for intellectual charity and a more civilized consciousness, while others make for confusion” (ix). She, in fact supplements the narration of violent actions with rhetorical violence. Her narratives mirror the turbulence and disorder of the nightmarish world. Oates creates a totally violent fictive world by

describing the even most common, ordinary, mundane incidents / events of human actions in terms of hostility.

In *With Shuddering Fall*, Oates adeptly sets an ominous tone in the description of the night club where Shar, Max, and Karen celebrate Shar's recent racing victory. She writes : "Music from the jukebox exploded (WSF 143), a woman is "teased into prettiness" by "a violent, exotic outing of her lips" and couples "gallop together violently" (WSF 144). These images create the tension and as a result Shar kills another driver during the race and prepares for the violence soon to come into the narrative.

Rhetorical Violence

In *them*, the events that lead up to Nadine's shooting of Jules are described with rhetorical violence. Even during their meeting in the apartment that Nadine arranged for, Jules wants to "gather her violently into his arms and penetrate her to the very Kernel of her being, to her deepest silence, bringing her to the release of this joy" (*them* 381). In *Do With Me What You Will*, Leo Ross is very cool and callous in shooting smiles at questioning passers-by. It suggests how close he is to restoring physical violence. Oates writes, Ross "shot them small half-mocking, half-inquisitive smiles" (DWM 33). Even the ducks' annoying quacking in a park makes him want to shoot the ducks. His world is full of violence, it is like a sieve, "a lot of little holes that things fall through like water, like blood... like blood bleeding out of your arteries while you stand there and watch.... The world is filled with holes that surprise you [...]" (DWM 30, 31). The image created in this rhetoric is incongruous but however it creates violence, rhetorical violence.

Suggestions of Violence

In addition to the direct and overt use of violence, there are the subtle and pervasive suggestions of violence. In *A Garden of Earthly Delights*, she creates a collision between a truck of migrants and an auto, an angry fight between the two drivers and the birth of a child. In *With Shuddering Fall*, the opening scenes describe the flight of Karen Herz from the cruel domestic setting. *them* in the beginning pages narrates the cruel and senseless murder of a boy, the depressing domestic conditions of the Botsford family, and Loretta's rape by a policeman. *Wonderland* recounts a mass murder and suicide. One of the most horribly explicit scenes in all the Oates's fiction is Brock's shooting of Loretta's boy friend beside her in her bed to death. Loretta is stunned and mused "one shot had done it, like magic" (*them* 38).

The image of entrapment is linked to violence. In *With Shuddering Fall*, Karen feels, when a fight erupts between her father and Shar, "once more a creature trapped within a dream, waiting for release. The unreal violence of the past few minutes

rushed to a climax and exploded in her brain as she felt the impact of her father's disgust" (WSF 72). Suggestion of entrapment is further suggested in the description of Karen's feeling that "they might have been two people condemned to an eternity in each other's presence, lovers or criminals who had sinned together on earth but who could not understand precisely what they had done, or why, or in what way it was a sin demanding damnation" (WSF 167).

Powerlessness

Familial violence is only social violence scaled down and the riots are only domestic nightmares played out on a larger stage. The root of it all is powerlessness. In *Wonderland* familial violence is at its worst. It includes not only the shooting deaths of Harte family but also the even more horrifying living deaths of Pedersons. The tragedies of the two families are similar as the strangling sense of impotence experienced by the fathers of both families drives each one to destroy his offspring. Willard Harte being unschooled, unemployed, incapable of grappling with the problems and pressures of his growing family destroys his family and himself. His violence explodes into murder as he is precipitated by the proximity of Christmas and the closing of his gas station.

Like Shakespeare's Othello, he stalks the woods and fields behind his home in search of a way to resolve his growing sense of powerlessness and helplessness. In the end, in his desparate loneliness and alienation, he chooses death. On the other hand, Karl Pederson, whose philosophy of life is "A human being [...] must become what he was meant to be [...]" (W 73) admits his life is incomplete; he has been failed by his wife, and his two children, Hilda and Frederick, and sets out to find his family into his idea of them but it fails and he turns to Jesse Harte. It is a self-inflicted violence, a kind of punishment not surrender.

Why This Abundance of Violence in Oates' Novels?

Many critics have faulted Oates for the wealth of violence in her fiction. Oates in her essay "Why is Your Writing so Violent?" answers that the question is always "insulting [...] always ignorant [...] always sexist [...]" war, rape, murder and the more colorful minor crimes evidently fall within the exclusive province of the male writer, just as, generally, they fall within the exclusive province of male action" (Lee 130). Her "Pastoral Blood", in the short story collection of **By the North Gate** prefigures many of Oates's later tales of female self-annihilation where a young woman named Grace impulsively decides to die and sets out to deliver herself to an unknown murderer on the anniversary of her father's death but is raped by a drunken African-American thug.

Oates's young woman wanders into new territory where she meets a man who victimizes her (he beats, exploits, deserts, and forgets her). Her victimization is sexual and violent, her control minimal. Her victimization is through her passivity and vulnerability. Almost, her women are pitted against patriarchy and it does not matter whether one is beautiful as in "The Girl", intellectually powerful as in "Magna Mater", objective and scientific as in "Psychiatric Services", artistic as in "A Premature Autobiography", whether one seduces her father as in "Ruth" or battle with her mother as in "The Daughter" as seen in the collection of short stories under the title *The Goddess and Other Women*. Pamela Smiley in "Incest, Roman Catholicism, and Joyce Carol Oates" says :

Powerless in a sexually violent world, the women of *The Goddess* [...]repeat a tripartite Oatsian pattern of enmeshment. First, the small, pretty, young, and aimless feminine character drifts into a dangerous situation that leaves her vulnerable; second, a manly man (associated with masculinity through boxing, cars, machinery, or patriarchal power and knowledge), as if sensing her powerlessness and disorientation, finds her and initiates her into violent sexuality; third; instead of being repelled by the initiation, the feminine character is drawn back to the man or his substitute in a repetition compulsion. Again and again Oates's couples meet the violent and sexual, she passive, dependent, and seemingly separated from her body-until, she in Oates's terms, absorbs his violence and 'wins'. (38)

Further, she is vulnerable to repeated victimizations in the form of repetition compulsions that mimic the original incestuous relationship and self destructive impulses such as eating disorders, drug abuse, alcoholism, suicide attempts and so on. She is highly sexualized yet sexually dysfunctional. In fact, Oates has a fondness for an incest theme which makes her woman a victim of the violence of modern American society.

References

Arendt, Hannah. "On Violence". *Crises of the Republic*. New York : Harcourt Brace, Jovanovich, 1972 : 105-198.

Bronowski, Jacob. *The Face of Violence : An Essay With a Play*. New York : World Publishing Corporation, 1967.

Butler, Sandra. *Conspiracy of Silence : The Trauma of Incest*. San Francisco : New Glide Publications, 1978.

Chodorow, Nancy. *The Reproduction of Mothering : Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1978.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy

- Creighton, Joanne V. *Joyce Carol Oates : Novels of the Middle Years*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992.
- Dalton, Elizabeth. "Joyce Carol Oates : Violence in the Head". *Commentary*. (June, 1970) : 75-77.
- Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York : Grove Press, 1963.
- Fraser, John. *Violence in the Arts*. New York : Cambridge University Press, 1974.
- Fromm, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York : Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1973.
- Gallop, Jane. *The Daughter's Seduction : Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. Ithaca : Cornell UP, 1982.
- Lee, Milazzo. ed. *Conversations with Joyce Carol Oates*. Mississippi : University Press of Mississippi, 1989.
- May, Rollo. *Power and Innocence : A Search for the Sources of Violence*. New York : Norton, 1972.
- Mickelson, Anne Z. "Sexual Love in the Fiction of Joyce Carol Oates". *Reaching Out : Sensitivity and Order in Recent American Fiction by Women*. New York : Metuchen Scarcrow, 1979 : 15-34.
- Newton, Judith L, Mary P. Ryan and R. Walkowitz. eds. *Sex and Class in Women's History*. Boston : Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *By the North Gate*. New York : Vanguard, 1963.
- _____. *With Shuddering Fall*. 1964. New York : Vanguard, 1964.
- _____. *Garden of Earthly Delights*. 1967. New York : Vanguard, 1969.
- _____. *Expensive People*. 1968. New York : Vanguard, 1968.
- _____. *them*. 1969. New York : Vanguard, 1969.
- _____. *Wonderland*. 1971. New York : Vanguard, 1973.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *The Edge of Impossibility : Tragic Forms in Literature*. 1972. New York : Vanguard, 1972.

_____. *Do With Me What You Will*. 1973. New York : Vanguard, 1973.

_____. *The Goddess and Other Women*. 1974. Greenwich : Fawcett, 1974.

_____. *The Hungry Ghosts : Seven Allusive Comedies*. 1974. Los Angeles : Black Sparrow Press, 1974.

_____. *Childwold*. 1976. New York : Vanguard, 1976.

_____. *Bellefluer*. 1980. New York : Dutton, 1980.

_____. *The Profane Art : Essays and Reviews*. 1983. New York : Dutton, 1983.

_____. *Mysteries of Winterthurn*. 1984. New York : Dutton, 1984.

_____. *Marya : A Life*. 1986. New York : Dutton, 1986.

_____. *You Must Remember This*. 1987. New York : Dutton, 1987.

Ramas, Maria. "Freud's Dora, Dora's Hysteria". *Sex and Class in Women's History*. Ed. Judith L. Newton, Mary P. Ryan and R. Walkowitz. Boston : Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983.

Smiley, Pamela. "Incest, Roman Catholicism, and Joyce Carol Oates". *College Literature*. Vol. 18. Issue, 1 (February 1991) : 38-50.

Wesley, Marilyn C. "Father – Daughter Incest as Social Transgression : A Feminist Reading of Joyce Carol Oates". *Women's Studies*. Vol. 21. Issue 3 (June, 1992) : 251-263.

=====
J. Samuel Kirubahar , Ph.D.
Research Centre in English
VHNSN College
Virudhunagar – 626 001
Tamil Nadu
India
samuelkirubhakar@yahoo.in

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 1 January 2011

J. Samuel Kirubahar, Ph.D.

Oatesian World of Violence and Female Victimization - An Autopsy