



**Trauma Narrative and Counter-Story
Telling in Sapphire's Push: From a Story
of Healing into a Story of Resistance**

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The paper makes the novel *Push* by Afro-American novelist Sapphire its area of study where it focuses on the issue of trauma narrative and counter-storytelling. It investigates the physical and sexual abuse undergone by the black teenager, Precious, and her attempt to overcome the trauma resulted from her abuse by concentrating her efforts on learning reading and writing with the help of her new teacher in her alternative school after her dismissal from school because of her pregnancy. Through narrating\writing her personal story, Precious becomes able to overcome her hardships. Precious does not only succeed to heal her traumatic wounds, but she also turns her story of trauma into a counter story of resistance that makes her connected with her ancestors who, like her, have suffered and resisted. In its theoretical approach, the research adopts the theory of trauma narrative and the tenet of counter-storytelling which is one of the tenets of critical race theory. Keywords: Trauma narrative, Counter-storytelling, young adult novel, *Push*.

تتناول الدراسة رواية "بوش" للكاتبة الافرو-امريكية سافاير حيث يركز البحث على دراسة سرد الصدمة او التروما وكذلك السرد المقاوم. تبحث الدراسة في قصة المراهقة الافرو-امريكية بريشوس وما تعرضت له من اساءة جنسية وجسدية سببت لها تروما او صدمة نفسية ومحاولتها التخلص من مرضها من خلال تعلمها القراءة والكتابة بمساعدة مدرستها الجديدة بعد طردها من المدرسة العامة نتيجة لحملها. لم تتجح بريشوس في ان تتخلص من جروحها النفسية والجسدية فقط ولكنها حولت قصتها الى قصة مقاومة ساعدتها على تخطي الصعاب في حياتها وفتحت لها ابواب الامل و جعلتها ترتبط مع اسلافها الذين عانوا مثلها وتحملوا وقاوموا. يتبنى البحث في اطاره النظري نظرية سرد الصدمة وكذلك السرد المقاوم والذي يعد جزءا من نظرية العرق النقدية. الكلمات المفتاحية: قصص الصدمة او التروما, قصص المقاومة, رواية اليافعين, بوش للكاتبة سافاير.

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1. 1. Introduction

Young adult children, especially girls are apt to abuse, sexual violence, and eventually trauma due to their vulnerability and inability to report the harm fearing that they will not be believed or most of the time be blamed. As a result their traumatic stories will be buried under feelings of fear and shame. To give them the opportunity to recount their stories will be a kind of psychological therapy as well as evidence against the harm done to them. So, storytelling in general whether it is a trauma narrative or counter-story telling is "providing a new platform for those marginalized, previously voiceless individuals to recount their stories"(Panaly, 40). Most of the literary studies that have tackled the topic of trauma usually concentrate on novels written for adult people, the present study discusses how a traumatic story of violence and sexual rape has been turned out to be a story of resistance and success in Afro-American young adult novel, *Push* (1996) by African-American novelist, Sapphire.

Roger Luckhurst believes that the origin of the word trauma was originated in Greek to refer to a wound (2). He adds that the "meanings of trauma have stalled somewhere between the physical and psychical"(3). Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was encompassed in *The Diagnostical and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* only in the 1980s. It is agreed that the probable causes of trauma could arise from a huge number of experiences starting with war which could be one of the major causes. Other causes could be psychological and physical mistreatment, rape, childhood abuse, natural calamities, and even terrorist attacks. Besides physical signs, Luckhurst states that "trauma disrupts memory and therefore identity"(1). The signs are classified according to him into three categories. The first group shows "how the traumatic event is re-experienced repeatedly, through intrusive flashbacks, recurring dreams, or later situations that repeat or echo the original"(Ibid). The second group could oppose the first one for it "ranges from avoidance of thoughts or feelings related to the event to a general sense of emotional numbing to the total absence of recall of the significant event"(Ibid). The third group includes "loss of temper control, hyper- vigilance or exaggerated startle response"(Ibid). Traumatic signs can either happen "acutely, persist chronically, or [...] appear belatedly" (Ibid). The uncontrollable effect of trauma on identity can affect not only the traumatized person but on the whole family relations. So, encouraging traumatic people to recount their violent experiences will help to fix their lives and relationships again by making them feel that they are not alone in their suffering and eventually they could overcome their past and live in the future.

2.1 Trauma Narrative

Trauma narrative is almost recommended by all trauma theorists. Freud in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, emphasized the need of the patient of trauma to have the "talk cure" in order to get a therapeutic recovery (Freud [1914] 1955:150). Pierre Janet emphasized the need of remembering the past and narrativizing the traumatic experience in order to integrate the event into what he calls 'normal memory'(421). The Researcher Kali Tal states, "Accurate representation of trauma can never be achieved without recreating the event since, by its very definition, trauma lies beyond the bounds of 'normal' conception"(15). This notion of trauma and memory sheds light on the necessity to represent or re-enact the traumatic event through remembering it narratively. Cathy Caruth in her book *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* claims that traumatic experience is only recognized through flashbacks that occur repeatedly and that literally reenact the incident of trauma because the mind cannot exemplify it in a different way: "The historical power of trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all"(17). So, trauma story –telling is an essential procedure in the treatment of traumatic people because it opens for them a new gate for reconciliation with themselves and, hence it helps in their therapy.

Trauma narrative or the gradual exposure (GE) is used for the treatment of adult people, young adults, and children who have suffered sexual abuse, community abuse, or single traumatic events (Cohen, et al., 119). "One of the goals of creating the trauma narrative is to unpair thoughts, reminders, or discussions of the traumatic event from overwhelming negative emotions such as terror, horror, extreme helplessness, shame, or rage" (Ibid). So, trauma narratives are the stories narrated by traumatized people showing the horrible details of their manipulation and suffering as part of their recovery. Well organized and narrated stories "may begin a process of adjustment in our system of beliefs and categories by calling attention to neglected evidence and reminding readers of our common humanity"(Delgado and Stefancic, 50). In her book, *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002), Laurie Vickroy stresses the essential educational role that stories of trauma play in understanding the traumatic experience. Thus, she defines trauma narratives as fictional narratives that help readers to access traumatic experience –[they] have taken an important place among diverse artistic, scholarly, and testimonial representations in illuminating the personal and public aspects of trauma and in elucidating our relationship to memory and forgetting within the complex interweavings of social and psychological relationships.(1)

Moreover, Vickroy illustrates how trauma narrative can help not only traumatized people but also readers and she identifies four roles for it. First, trauma narratives present trauma as a "multicontextual social issue as a result of political ideologies or colonization". Second, they bring the issue of personal point of view into light and interrogate the idea of the "highly individualized subject"(1). Third, they challenge readers with some of their worst terrors, such as those related to death or loss, and "provide a potential space for considering these fears"(Ibid, 2). Finally, the stories of the traumatic can expose the predicament of the connection between people and trauma victims (Ibid).

Trauma narratives are not like horror stories which are based on producing a feeling of fear. They usually "internalize the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures"(Vickroy, 7). These stories also expose the difficulties of connecting trauma like "silence, simultaneous knowledge and denial, dissociation, resistance, and repression, among others"(Ibid). In addition, trauma narratives can also, in Vickroy's opinion, "enact the directing outward of an inward, silent process to other witnesses, both at and outside the texts. Such reconstruction is also directed toward readers, engaging them in a meditation of individual distress, collective responsibilities, and communal healing in relation to trauma"(Ibid).

The responsibility of trauma writer is, first "to expand their audiences' awareness of trauma by engaging them with personalized, experientially oriented means of narration that highlight the painful ambivalence that characterizes traumatic memory and warns us that trauma reproduces itself if left unattended"(Vickroy, 3). The second objective is to "reshape cultural memory through personal contexts, adopting testimonial traits to prevent and bear witness against such repetitive horrors" (Ibid). Thus, trauma narratives give an individualistic view of disasters that have an effect on certain persons, the thing which might help relieve these traumatic people and at the same time brings to public their suffering as victims.

The central idea in narrative therapy is the connection of the stories to the traumatic identities. In other words "the idea that we live storied lives"(Brown & Augusta-Scott, ix) is highlighted. Moreover, "stories organize structure and give meaning to events in our lives and help us make sense of our experiences"(Ibid).

So, the essence in narrative therapy is how traumatic people can make their lives significant through facing their traumas, on one hand, and by empowering them to lead more constructive lives, on the other.

3.1 Counter-Story Telling or Counter Narrative

Counter Story telling or counter Narrative is one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory (CRT) which demonstrates prevailing stereotypes and conventions that emerge as impartial, nonetheless, methodically marginalize, disregard, mute, and not tell the truth about people of color (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Counter story telling is used to accept and promote the knowledge of colored people and to make their voice heard. The issue of such narrative is introduced to CRT by (Delgado, 1998/1999; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For Richard Delgado (1988/1989), counter-narratives can establish a social understanding among disregarded individuals by listening and giving power of speech to each other and a room in order to be comprehended by other people. The counter stories can then be presented as an substitute to the main stream story or "*the majoritarian story*" according to (Delgado and Stefancic, 462). For Shaun R. Harper et al., (2009), they are used to counter dominant views that emphasize negative stereotypes. For (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009), counter narratives can gain a deeper understanding of racial dynamics. (Etter-Lewis, 1997; Pollard, 2006) think that counter narrative may function as a basis of enablement for the storyteller and a reader who is considered like the narrator her/himself as other (Ibid, 15). Cassandra L. McKay (2010) believes that counter stories are used for two objectives: First, to confront prevailing cultural ideas about a certain group of people "by providing a context to understand and transform an established belief system", secondly, "to authentically represent marginalized people by showing them 'the shared aims of their struggle'" (27). Moreover, counter narratives are essential in the words of Bamberg (2004) because they "order characters in space and time and, therefore, as a format, narrative lends itself not only to connecting past events to present states (as well as imagined, desired states and events) but also to revealing character transformation in the unfolding sequence from past to future (354)". Thus, counter-narratives are very important for colored people and especially for women of color, and in this case for young adult colored girls. So, both trauma narrative and counter-story telling can help victimized characters to render their stories, be heard and give them support by knowing that they are not alone in their suffering and at the same time, these stories usually challenge the prevailing ones by setting new examples and new perspectives.

Push : The trauma Narrative which Turns into a Counter-story of Empowerment

"Open your notebook Precious." "I'm tired," I says. She says, "I know you are but you can't stop now Precious, you gotta push." And I do". (*Push*, 84)

Most of the critical literary studies written about trauma usually tackle novels written for adults and deal with traumatic adult characters like Tayo in Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (1977) who is a mixed-race American Indian and who is transformed from being a traumatized soldier to a respected storyteller in his Laguna Pueblo community, Will Gatlin in Edward Abbey's *Black Sun* (1971) who suffers the traumatic loss of his girlfriend, Robert Barclay's *Melal: A Novel of the Pacific* (2002) which investigates the traumatic displacement and dispossession of land and community as the result of colonial and imperial pursuits, and even Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) which deals with the trauma of slavery. On the other hand, *Push* is a young adult novel whose protagonist is only a black teenager who suffers the trauma of sexual abuse and who turns her traumatic story from a story of recovery into a story of challenge and resistance. Thus, the novel sheds light on the problems of young adult black girls like incest and its traumatic consequences, mother's abuse, teenage pregnancy and illiteracy to mention only few. The novel focuses on education because it would provide a great opportunity for these teenagers to start more fruitful lives. The real name of the author of *Push* is Ramona Lofton (1950-) who took the penname "Sapphire" because it suggests as she confirms a "belligerent black woman" (Marvel, p. 1). She also adds "Sapphire was to a whole new generation of women a gem stone. New Age feminist interpretation believed the sapphire was a special gem stone that could affect change on a spiritual level. Then there was the association of the color blue with the name, the blues and all their power. I claimed that too" (Wilson, 38). Because of the literary success of the novel, Sapphire released in 2011 her second novel, *The Kid*, a semi-sequel to *Push*, which basically talks about the life of Precious's child after the death of his mother. Sapphire recalled that one of the reasons she determined to write a sequel was because of the support and attention *Push* received in academic research (Ibid, 31). More critical attention was received especially after the film adaption of the novel which came under the title *Precious* (2009). In her novels, Sapphire's major focus is to give a space to those underprivileged women who have not been given much consideration. She states:

A major focus of my art has been my determination to reconnect to the mainstream of human life a segment of humanity that has been cast off and made invisible. I have brought into the public gaze women who have been marginalized by sexual abuse, poverty, and their blackness. Through art I have sought to center them in the world (McNei, 352) Sapphire depended on her experience as a literacy teacher in an alternative school when she wrote *Push*. Sapphire stated: "I did meet a young woman who told me that she has a baby by her father when she was twelve ... then later she told me she had AIDS ... She was brilliant and she said, 'I wanna write'" (Bambara, 109). She also noted somewhere else that Precious is a "composite of many young women I encountered when I worked as a literacy teacher in Harlem and the Bronx for 7 years" (Marvel, 1). So, through her novel, Sapphire gives such invisible women the opportunity to defy their invisibility and to prove to themselves that they are capable of changing the course of their predestined poor and miserable lives. In *Push*, Sapphire brings the story of sexual and physical abuse of sixteen years old Claireece Precious Jones into light. The story is told in first person by Precious who likes to be called by her middle name rather than her first name. The illiterate Precious tells her traumatizing story using her own broken language as she attempts to learn reading and writing for she has spent seven years in school without uttering one word in class or learning to write anything. She sits in her seat until the lessons finish and then she goes home. Without any educational support, she spends her school life voiceless, only reconstructing scenes from her horrible and abusive life which are usually part of the symptoms of trauma. Precious visualizes herself as a black, fat, ugly girl, and this is how her abusive mother has primarily invested in her. She is expelled from school because of her pregnancy as she has been raped by her biological father and left pregnant for the second time. In addition to the sexual abuse of her father and instead of protecting her, Precious has to stand the physical and psychological abuse of her mother who in addition to beating Precious and calling with nasty words, steals the welfare money recommended by the authorities for Precious's first child, the retard Mongo and who accuses her of stealing her husband. So, it seems that Precious has been raped for many years without any opportunity to be saved neither by her mother or by school, or even by the welfare authorities who never inquire for the reasons behind this teenager's early pregnancy. Living in this situation and not trusting anybody to help her, she develops a trauma that has left her silent most of the time. The trauma narratives usually adopt the rhythms and processes of traumatic experience and show the difficulties that face the person to render her/his story like silence and separation or isolation from family or community life and at other times repression or even resistance to admit the experience itself. *Push* comes to give its protagonist the chance to recount her story with all its difficulties. Precious's recovery through the use of writing/narration perhaps is the greatest literary illustration of James W. Pennebaker's experimental observations on the health profits of narrative: "when people transform their feelings and thoughts about emotional experiences into language, their physical and mental health often improve" (2). So, the turning point in Precious's life occurs when she joins the alternative school -Each one/Teach one. As Precious spent her previous years indulged in her traumatic experience, she starts to break her traumatic silence through writing her narrative as a tool first to learn reading and writing after her expulsion from the public school only to become a liberating story from her trauma and at the same time as a story of empowerment. As her teacher asks her to write whatever comes into her mind as an exercise, this kind of a home work has become a means for Precious to break her long silence through expressing her thoughts and feelings without fear and talking freely for the first time about her abuse:

I was left back when I was twelve because I had a baby for my fahver. That was in 1983. I was out of school for a year. This gonna be my second baby. My daughter got Down Sinder. She's retarded. I had got left back in the second grade too, when I was seven, 'cause I couldn't read (and I still peed on myself). I should be in the eleventh grade, getting ready to go into the twelf grade so I can gone 'n graduate. But I'm not. I'm in the ninfe grade. (*Push*, 4)

With the above words, Precious becomes able to "dismantle the power of past abusive experiences" (McNeil, 17). Precious opens her mind and heart to record her suffering. She is encouraged by her new teacher for the first time to push her story forward as she was asked before by the nurse when pregnant to push in order to get her baby out. The experience is very hard but she has to use her own language no matter whether it is correct or not to tell her own life story. By these broken words, she summarizes the agony she passes through. She writes her story of abandonment as she is left by her mother to be raped more than once at an early age only to be pregnant at the age of twelve, and as she is left without any help from school only to remain illiterate. These two horrible experiences have gone unnoticed by those in touch with Precious because she is only a poor black child and then a teenager whose position seems marginal, for she has neither

self-confidence nor a strong voice to protect her from abuse. Lacking self-confidence because of her internalized racism and abusive experience makes Precious vulnerable and this vulnerability leads to her silence and eventually to be traumatic.

According to Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, trauma damages the three major suppositions that people formulate about life: "the belief in personal invulnerability, the perception of the world as a meaningful place and the perception of oneself as positive" (15). Precious begins her narrative as helpless creature who has to receive passively and silently whatever happens to her whether it is the abuse of her father, the aggressiveness of her mother or the bad indifferent looks of her former teacher. At the beginning, Precious feels that her story might not be interesting or it is unimportant, or that people cannot understand her, but the act of writing of her story gives her some courage to face some of her fears by affirming her identity beginning with the emphasis on mentioning her name in full:

My name is Claireece Precious Jones. I don't know why I'm telling you that. Guess 'cause I don't know how far I'm gonna go with this story, or whether it's even a story or why I'm talkin'; whether I'm gonna start from the beginning or right from here or two weeks from now. Two weeks from now? Sure you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not like living when you can only do what you doing. Some people tell a story 'n it don't make no sense or be true. But I'm gonna try to make sense and tell the truth, else what's the fucking use? Ain' enough lies and shit out there already? (*Push*, 4)

So, Precious wants to tell a true story because she becomes conscious that her life is already full of lies. Her desire to narrate a true story shows her first step towards healing for she psychologically begins to realize the reality of being abused without shame or fear. Though she never talks about her abuse to anyone before, writing her trauma story enables her to recollect her unspoken of memories showing to herself and to her readers the details of her agony. Precious is stimulated by her teacher. Ms Rain who encourages her and her colleagues to recount their stories because, as Ms. Rain tells them, : "Writing could be the boat carry you to the other side ... telling your story git you over that river" (*Push*, 97). Suriyan Panlay comments on Precious's condition: "It is the act of telling her own story, of reauthoring her own reality, as she pushes herself towards literacy and visibility, that her sense of self and liberation and empowerment is gained" (159). The act of writing her story and the process of learning in general empower Precious through strengthening her self-confidence. It is the naming of her problem or the externalization of her traumatic experience that liberates Precious, as proposed by Delgado and Stefancic, "Once named, it can be combated" (49). Step by step, Precious begins to combat her problems, namely those related to her trauma and internalized racism. She becomes able to confront her abusive mother, and to depend on herself to start a new life with the aid of her new friends in the school and Ms. Rain.

The final pages of *Push* are written in a different language as Precious improves her writing skills along with her self-improvement. She ends her confessional story of abuse to begin another story of facing the consequences of her abuse. As she heals from the trauma of her past, she has to confront the fact that her story cannot end happily for she discovers that her biological father had an HIV before he died, the thing that makes her afraid for herself and her new born baby. As she has been confirmed that her baby is safe, but she is not, Precious begins her story of resistance. She begins her counter-story telling when she begins to accept herself as she is and not as others want her to be. When she is exposed to some black icons such as author Alice Walker and political activist Farakhaan, Precious finds parallels to her: "One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black. I wish I wasn't fat but I am. Maybe one day I like that too, who knows" (*Push*, 96). From self-hatred, Precious turns to a person who tries to live in peace with her body. She rejects the tenet of the 'majoritarian' (Delgado and Stefancic, 462) or the main stream story that underestimates her because she is black, fat, and not beautiful and to accept her marginalized self and thus marginalized story as the real one.

Counter-storytelling provides the marginalized with a tool to (re)construct, create or rewrite their own stories (Panlay, 162). The novel ends with 'Our Class Book' recommended by Ms Rain for the girls in the school to write their stories of oppression and suffering. Precious declares her desire to be "poet or rapper or an artist" (109). She contributes three poems '*everi morning*', 'Morning', and 'Untitled'. The three poems show Precious's negotiation with her new situation after she has passed her trauma by pushing the past to the corner of her mind. She still does not feel liberated: "I'm not really free" (*Push*, 140) but she begins to think of herself as a trauma survivor and an HIV patient, moreover, she tries to connect herself with her black heritage. In her first poem '*everi morning*', Precious compares herself to the character of Mary, mother of Jesus Christ. Both are only girls, but mothers. But while Mary has been accepted as sacred, Precious is

not. In fact, by making this comparison, she challenges the dominant story by creating a black story whose main protagonist could be herself:

marY Had a little lamb
but I got a kid
an HIV
that folow me
to school
one day.(Push,122)

Precious's story sheds light on the problems a black teenager could find herself in, not only to be pregnant and has a child that she can hardly take care of neither psychologically or even financially, but the story alludes to dangerous diseases that such a girl might have like HIV without any opportunity for convalescence especially at the nineties of the twentieth century where such a disease becomes a deadly one in addition to poor medical care in the black districts. But, these difficulties do not prevent Precious from going to school, hoping one day she could get a better future. This kind of optimism gives Precious and her alike the chance to be liberated from their invisibility to obtain a deserving life independent on welfare as Precious's mother does. Precious's third poem is an invocation of the people who have a great impact on her, those who guide her towards the reconciliation with herself. They help her to become stronger and to resist her oppressive past and look for the future.

PLAY THE HAND YOU GOT housemother say.

HOLD FAST TO DREAMS Langston say.

GET UP OFF YOUR KNEES

Farrakhan say.

CHANGE Alice Walker say.

Rain fall down

wheels turn round

DON'T ALWAYS RHYME Ms Rain say

walk on (Push, 141)

By invoking the names of such Afro-American icons like Langston Hughes, Alice Walker, Farrakhan or even Ms Rain who has pushed her ahead, Precious has woven her story with that of her ancestors showing that like them she has resisted and that she is going to thrive despite hardships.

Conclusion

In *Push*, Sapphire writes about a black teenager who becomes a victim of sexual abuse from her own father and physical abuse from her mother. Sapphire turns the traumatic story of this teenager from a story of recovery into one of resistance. By merging trauma narrative with counter-storytelling (counter narrative), the novelist gives voice to the marginalized young adult black girls to talk about their problems like incest and its traumatic consequences, mother's abuse, teenage pregnancy and illiteracy.

Precious, the novel's protagonist, who has been raped by her father, is a mother of a mentally challenged child, and pregnant with the other while she is still only sixteen years old. By making precious herself the narrator of the story, Sapphire gives the protagonist the chance to tell her own story, using simple broken language at first, then showing a progress in language and character, as she grows stronger and more independent. Sapphire in this novel, besides shedding light on young adult trauma, criticizes many institutions, starting with family, passing through school, welfare authorities, and society in general. In spite of all the difficulties Precious faces in her life, she managed to make her story universal, showing a great will of resistance and that she, and many others like her, can and will thrive despite hardships.

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