

Violence- A Shared Experience of Colored Women

Rajendra Chapagae, PhD

Abstract:

Violence reproduces the system of aggression and carries emotive states of individuals. Power and violence are interrelated. The definition of violence differs according to the definitions of power and politics. It gets disclosure according to its relation with their attachment with the social system and human relations. All forms of violence have short- and long-term negative effects on mental, physical and spiritual well-being. Ritual legitimizes the violence with the notion of death that is ever present in any sacrificial ritual. Women of color have to endure different types of violence. Psychological and spiritual violence cannot be seen and easily be measured for it is the matter of personal feeling and experience. Black women have to endure violence in their own home, their culture and general society. They find themselves suspended spiritually, culturally, economically and psychologically carrying the burden of multiple fold repression as black women. They are doubly repressed as being black in racial society and being women in patriarchal society. Racial, ritual and sexual violence, repression and resistance constitute black experience as a part and parcel of colored women of American life.

Key Words: violence, aggression, segregation, patriarchal, antagonism, repression, resistance, hegemony, race, gender, masculinity, justice

Introduction:

Violence is an intense, turbulent, or furious and often destructive action or force. It signifies the use of physical force so as to injure, abuse, damage, or destroy someone or something. By and large, violence refers to a situation in which people are hurt. It is an action or word that is set to hurt people mentally or physically. Physical violence occurs when someone uses a part of their body or an object to control a person's actions where as emotional violence occurs when someone says or does something to make a person feel stupid or worthless and psychological violence occurs when someone uses threats and causes fear in an individual to gain control. All forms of violence have short- term and long-term negative effects on mental, physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. Whatever the type of violence is, it often makes the use of force and builds up the environment of unfriendliness, hostility and social convulsion. Violence, in fact, is inherent in human nature. It carries emotive states of individuals and gets disclosure according to its relation with their attachment with the social system and human relations. Violence by its nature carries pungent, intolerable, undesirable and offensive taste. Though violence is inherent in human nature, its manifestation differs according to individual nature, instinct and intention

of people. It also stems up according to the socio- cultural religious and political background. Whatever may be its forms, violence is often employed to reproduce the system of domination.

Physical Violence:

Physical violence is an act attempting to cause, or resulting in pain and/or physical injury. As with all forms of violence, the main aim of the perpetrator is not only to cause physical pain, but also to limit the other's self-determination. The most extreme outcome of violence is to kill the other as "violence has always been associated with crime and war" (Uslu 48). Lynching is also the extreme outcome of violence often practiced in racial violence. According to Christopher Waldrep, "In the nineteenth century, most white people believed that lynching was an appropriate and constitutional approach to crime control" (xvi). A relatively recent development in the enactment of violence by men towards women is spree killing. Anita Harris and Diana Baker add the view that "The relationship between violence and hegemonic masculinity is well documented as interdependent . . . spree killing can be located as a practice consistent with masculinity . . . overwhelmingly committed by men in real life" (595). Daly and Wilson regard "homicide figures as the most reliable source of evidence on human violence because homicide has 'a resultant validity' that all self-report lacks" (12). Men, of course, are the offenders in the large majority of violence cases like spree killing and homicide. Generally supported view is that the "majority of offenders are male, and in the case of non-domestic assaults most victims and assailants are male" (Archer and Lloyd 112) for men engage in more frequent physical aggression with one another than do women.

Violence frequently occurs in young persons of same sex for being young and male as risk factors for same-sex violence. Single young male is more likely to take risk and get into fights than a married man who is likely to "think of his wife and children before venturing into a violent confrontation" (Archer and Lloyd 113). Most of the single young men's violent actions of physical assaults arise from arguments or disputes between casual acquaintances. Afro-American culture involves a high level of segregation and antagonism between the sexes and it allows "men spend a lot of time outside the home in a masculine subculture where they seek to make a living in various ways, often outside the law" (Campbell 117). In patriarchal society, men hold power with their control over the means of production and use of tools and weapons. This control is "confirmed as the necessary condition of their power, based upon violence" (Tabet 62). Briefly, violence is the most basic tool of any system of oppression and is tightly associated with the patriarchal hegemony.

As a trait of patriarchal system, men are thought to be the agent of violence and it is viewed as male problem. However, it does not mean that women should reject it as a structural component of patriarchy. Women are also involved in violence in direct or indirect ways. According to John Archer and Barbara Lloyd, "when women from countries such as USA come into conflict with

their male partners, they engage in physical aggression to a greater extent" (109). It is their direct involvement in violence and aggression like that of men. Women admire the masculine power and toughness of males and encourage male violence. From the ancient time, "two men fighting over a woman still exists today" (109) as a tradition. Then and again, John Archer and Barbara Lloyd remark:

Women have often played an important part in encouraging soldiers going to war. There is also increasing evidence that girls and women engage in covert expressions of aggressiveness, such as spreading malicious rumours about the person. (109)

It is axiomatic to state that women have often played a vital role to inspire and encourage men to be involved in physical violence like fighting and killing and also sometimes, engage themselves in secret talk to spread nasty gossips about men which for that reason, grounds a terrible fight between men.

Emotional Violence:

Emotional violence occurs when someone says or does something to make a person feel stupid or worthless. Human history shows that most of the violence has been committed by men. John Archer and Barbara Lloyd state that "human violence is often viewed as a male problem" (109). Most of the violent actions like "violent crime and homicides are carried out by men, usually young men. . . . Violence is seen as the masculine way of reacting to the difficulties and frustrations of life" (109). When a person falls in extreme frustration, he responds to it through displaying violent aggression individually or collectively. Stuart Palmer remarks, "The violent aggression results from individual frustration or frustrated collectivity" (153). Monica Blumenthal points out, "Lack of understanding, communication, trust and respect between people" causes individual violence where as collective violence is caused by "general frustration, dissatisfaction, feeling discriminated against changes not happening fast enough" (21). Lack of love, understanding and communication is naturally the most important reason for the violence.

Cultural Violence:

Cultural violence occurs when an individual is harmed as a result of practices that are part of her or his culture, religion or tradition. It occurs when someone uses an individual's spiritual beliefs to manipulate, dominate or control that person. Rituals and rites are associated with culture. They have been used mostly to make the exposure of inherent violence. Ritualized violence basically fulfills the hidden instincts of human nature and also serves societal purpose. According to Rene Girard, sacrificial ritual, as a social product, arises from "mimetic desire and ritualized scapegoating to prevent universal violence" (3). Violence is inevitable whether it is good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Girard further adds, "Violence is not to be denied but it can be diverted

to another object" (4). Debasish Lahiri asserts that "religious violence implies a moral attitude that is anathema to our sense of what justifies violence" (57). In fact, human life, in the past, was guided and governed by religion and it would justify the legitimacy and illegitimacy of all human activities. Ricky Jones in his book *Black Haze* states, "Ritual sacrifice was not about victim of guilt at all, but was concerned with the preservation of a particular social order" (65). Violence is presented in different guises though its underlying purpose never changes. Ritual legitimizes the violence and one "can precipitate the forging of new social forms that address violence as an autonomous, culturally generative, and meaning-endowing practice" (Feldman 258). Obviously, all sacrificial rituals demand some form of sacrifice that may be real or symbolic death because the notion of death is ever present in any sacrificial ritual.

Violence has been passed down to black fraternities through multiple ritualistic traditions. These rituals were established to redirect and legitimize the inevitable violent social interactions. Violence of this type has become integral in black culture. Ricky Jones states "it is now regarded as an important tool in the construction of black male identity and manhood . . . unfortunately, violent physical struggle has come to be regarded as a key ingredient in building this manhood" (7). Graeme Newman in his book, *Understand Violence*, defines violence as "that which leads to physical injury or damage, since historically and statistically it is the only aspect of violence that we are able to observe or record" (2). Likewise, Richard Gelles and Murray Straus argue that violence is "an act carried out with the intention of, or perceived as having the intention of, physically hurting another person (554). These definitions are all limited by their preoccupation with the physical aspects of violence and neglect the psychological aspects. They all take violence as the intentional use of physical force of a person on another person.

Political Violence:

Violence is a difficult concept to define despite its multiple definitions. Its definition differs according to the definitions of power and politics that determines who gets what, when, and how in a group or societal structure. The political process is primarily concerned with "gaining, maintaining and using power" (Karenga 359). Power is the ability of an agent to force another to do something and the agent is not necessarily an individual or individuals but can be social or political groups. Power and violence are interrelated.

In America, black people are not able to make an easy access in mainstream politics and power for centuries. Ricky Jones points out, "From chattel slavery through the twentieth century, black men have been historically attacked physically in the United States through lashings, dismemberments, hobblings, lynchings, burnings, and police brutality" (107). As a result "a potpourri of violence, toughness and symbolic control over others constitute a prime means through which black men can demonstrate masculinity" (Cazenave 177). Many black men who refused to accept the meek position allocated to them were called 'bad nigga' or 'bad men' and "they used a conscious show

of some type of physical force to prove themselves" (Majors and Bilson 33) as masculine. Black men, therefore, regarded violent physical struggle as a medium to prove manhood and masculinity as physical toughness has been equated with manliness in patriarchal society of America.

Racial Violence:

There is a permanent misunderstanding between whites and blacks. Whites think themselves ever superior to blacks. There lies "an inherent white prejudice that they are superior to blacks simply because they are white" (Murugan 156). This misunderstanding also invited violence between them. On the other hand, "black Americans understood that whites felt they had a right to kill them (Waldrep 1). If blacks tried to resist whites' oppression on them, they could be thrashed or lynched or tortured" (Moorer 118). Physical violence upon blacks like thrashing, lynching, and killing were common practices in slave era. Waldrep writes:

Any white person encountering a black person in a public place, on a rural road, for example, could demand to see the black person's pass, proof that he or she had permission to be off his or her owner's property. Uncooperative blacks, those that fled rather than present their pass or explain themselves, could be shot. (4)

White American's of feeling superiority and cruelty has ever placed African American in a shadow and incited them to involve in violence and incest with the sense of defeatism and aggressive attitude towards their oppressors. Colette Guillaumin remarks that "So-called 'race' relations are relations of exploitation, domination and violence (80). However, she further adds, "racism cannot be equated with aggressivity and violence; not all aggressivity is racist, and racism is not necessarily aggressive" (3). It is generally acknowledged that whites have used violence, especially sexual violence, as a tool of oppression against blacks. Audre Lorde also remarks, "Racism, sexism, and homophobia are inseparable" (98). Violence, to a large extent, is the byproduct of racism and sexism. Both white and blacks have exerted violence upon each other. First whites exerted violence on black men for keeping them under their severe control and on black women to use them as objects of service and sexual pleasure. Law itself is discriminatory as Calvin Hernton states, "the legal system is 'criminal and immoral' in its treatment of African Americans " (80). Blacks were compelled to submit themselves to whites' violence and tyranny even by the legal system. However, sometimes blacks also took up violent tool to fight against the whites when the repression and oppression became unbearable to them. The result of the fight often was unfavorable for them. Rene Girard argues, "Violence does not work as a solution for societal ills because it simply makes both sides the same rather than causing change" (47). Of course, any act of revenge leads to more revenge rather than to justice.

Sexual Violence:

Sexual violence occurs when a person is forced to unwillingly take part in sexual activity. In the male dominated society, sexual violence is exerted upon women to exploit them for fulfilling male purpose. Colette Guillaumin, in this context, remarks, "women are harassed, beaten, raped, maimed and murdered because they are women" (13). However, women, especially white women, resist the action of offenders either physically or verbally but black women mostly remain mum to it. Black women have been the victim of physical and psychological violence from both white and black male and even from white women. Ritual violence as female circumcision is the most extreme form of genital mutilation practiced in black women in African countries. Seema Murgan states, "Traditional cruelty within black community itself is the custom of female circumcision- a kind of most painful memory" (165). It is the product of patriarchic cultural context and it denigrates women's bodies, mind and spirit. This type of ritual violence is designed to deny sexual pleasure for women. In this context, Charles R. Larson opines, "the cultural intent of such mutilation is absolutely clear: the denial of pleasure for women from all sexual activities" (28). Irene I. Blea remarks that black women were brought to America just as "a means of exchange and sexually available beast of burden" (94). They have been the worst sufferers of sexual violence by both white and black male. Richard Barksdale also asserts that "sexual conflict is rooted in the tradition and practices of slavery with its emphasis on male prerogatives and patriarchal control" (409). Patriarchal ideology allowed men to exert different kinds of violence on women and the black women became the most awful victims of it.

Since a black man has to face violence in the white dominated society, he exerts violence with obsession upon his woman to prove his manhood and masculinity. Murugan states, "They [black men] vent their frustration through inflicting violence on their women . . . because they dare not take them out on white person of either gender" (163). She further adds, "In the cruel treatment of their women, they mirror the inhuman lifestyle of their white masters and overseers" (164). Therefore, many black women have to be the victims of domestic violence. Physical violence exercised against women, especially the domestic violence mostly remains invisible. Victimized women feel hesitation to express it publicly and it is considered to be an individual or circumstantial happening. Even if it is reported to the police, it is considered to be minor offense as the matter of private life.

Violence – More Destructive than Constructive:

Violence is undesirable for it creates a chaos and disorder in an individual or in the society. It threatens the lives and physical and mental health of millions of people. Violent behavior *often begins with verbal threats but over time escalates to involve physical harm*. Violence refers to the acts involving great physical force. John Archer and Barbara Lloyd in their book *Sex and Gender* define the term violence as a forceful and violent action that causes physical and psychological damage to the person upon whom it is exerted. They remark, "When applied to

humans, it may be useful to restrict the term violent to those physically aggressive actions that cause physical or psychological damage to the recipient" (110). So, violence is associated with physical or emotional pain and harm. It stems from extreme hatred, anger and frustration, and threatens generally accepted norms of the society or human life.

Violence is inherent in human nature. It causes a great deal of harm. Didem Uslu remarks, "Violence is destructive and negative but an inborn quality The satisfaction of violence usually turns into outburst and flow of emotional energy" (49). Susan Sontag also adds, "human beings everywhere do terrible things to each other" (103). These remarks stress that violence is an innate characteristic of human nature. However, every now and then, violence also holds good aspects too, while restoring the lost or decadent socio-political order. In this context, Colette Guillaumin views it "as one means of restoring a decadent or degenerated order" (119). Sometimes, it carries some social and human values back that were trampled by different individual or socio-political agents. According to social psychologists, there are three forms of violence as "violent act is either instinctive or the result of frustration or is a socially learnt deed" (Uslu 49). Violence gets exposure through different human activities.

Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence:

Violence has been categorized as legitimate and illegitimate. According to Ricky Jones, "Legitimate violence is the socially sanctioned use of threat of harm such as police action and war. Illegitimate violence is that which goes against existing laws and the accepted norms of society" (70). However, Husein Abdilahi Bulhan, in his book *Frantz Fanon and the Psychology of Oppression*, asserts that "there is no such thing as legitimate violence. What some thinkers have labeled as 'legitimate' violence would be considered something different altogether and could be defined as force or authority" (18). In violence, one makes the use of physical force against another person with intensity of feelings and "the action or intent must lack social or legal sanction . . . [and] one must demonstrate the effect in term of physical damage" (Bulhan 18). This assumption also stresses only on physical violence but ignores psychological violence.

Conclusion:

Women of color have to endure different types of violence. Literary works specially by Afro-American women writers deal with the common theme of violence over women and their resistance to it. Psychological and spiritual violence upon women of color cannot be seen and easily be measured for it is the matter of personal feeling and experience. Black women have to endure violence in their own home, their culture and general society. They find themselves suspended spiritually, culturally, economically and psychologically carrying the burden of multiple fold repression as black women. They are doubly repressed as being black in racial society and being women in patriarchal society. Violence and double repression on black women are the common

theme in the literary works by black women writers of America. After all, racial, ritual and sexual violence, repression and resistance constitute black experience as a part and parcel of African American life.

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