

# **Traumatic Childhood in the Age of Consumerism: A Critical Reading of Joyce Carol Oates's *My Sister, My Love***

**Payel Pal**

Research Scholar in English  
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Indian Institute of Technology Kanpur  
[payelpal@iitk.ac.in](mailto:payelpal@iitk.ac.in)

Joyce Carol Oates recurrently articulates her antipathies for capitalist drives that visit the trauma and deprivation on the children in contemporary America. Oates in her fictions documents instances of child abuse and torture, often including the horrific cases of defilement and turbulent experiences. Undoubtedly, Oates's insightful engagement with this vexatious subject in many of her fictions testifies to her emphasis on the massive prevalence of the problem in the society. The present paper seeks to study her recent novel *My Sister, My Love* (2008) that in offering a bone-chilling picture of child exploitation uncovers the overwhelming consumerist ideology and social pathologies of the seemingly welfarist nation. Simply stated, the novel stridently satirizes the accelerating commercial progress of America that not only disrupts the ethical sensibilities of individuals but also stymies the children from growing into responsible citizens. The essay will focus on Oates's social critique in *My Sister, My Love* that indicts both the proliferating media and cultural fascination for gripping sensationalism as distorting the collective awareness about the ills of child abuse.

As a social thinker, Oates has always expressed a nuanced understanding of the dark sides of commercialized structures. Mourning the loss of American dream, she has unflinchingly voiced the agony and pains of disempowered masses in a success driven capitalist regime. Beginning with *Shuddering Fall* (1964) and *Them* (1969), to her recent works such as *We Were Mulveneys* (1996) and *The Tattooed Girl* (2003), Oates's novels embody the nightmarish realities of dysfunctional families and cultural decay. No wonder, the author's take on the problematic of child abuse befits her oppositional stance to a ruggedly individualistic society that impoverishes the children. Accordingly, it is found that most of Oates's protagonists suffer a lonely and an oppressive childhood. Missing fathers and unsupportive mothers populate her novelistic canon. Naturally, Oatesian children are forced to combat various familial pressures and social antagonisms, and survive on their own. To cite a few instances, in *Blonde* (2000), Norma Jeane aka Marilyn Monroe, an illegitimate child of a low-life actress is abandoned by her mother and has to spend her childhood in unruly foster homes. Rebecca Schwart in *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007) is forever haunted by the horror of domestic violence and murder that she is compelled to witness as a child. More threateningly, physical torment, humiliation, and betrayals turn little Kathleen into a monstrous murderer in *The Rise of Life on Earth* (1991). Ingrid Boone's masochistic submission in *Man Crazy* (1997) also becomes an instantiation of her deprived childhood. By drawing examples from different classes and backgrounds, Oates's literary discourse bemoans the withering of family as a bulwark against external ills and more importantly, bespeaks the loss of humanitarian values such as love, mutuality, sympathy, and compassion in the social realm. Central to all the instances is the keen absence of nourishment and affection in a ruthlessly materialistic society.

In focusing on the miserable predicament of abused children, Oates specifically addresses the post-traumatic stages. The novelist employs the narratives of several trauma survivors to underscore the psychic tumult that draws upon the child victims, even much later in life. Recapitulating a dismaying experience of sexual molestation in her school days, Oates says to Lawrence Grobel that “molested, battered children were in a category that was like limbo. There were no words, no language . . . So a lot of this was never spoken. It was extremely important for me, retrospectively, to have these early experiences of being a helpless victim, because it allows me to sympathize-- or compels me to sympathize with victims.” (*Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1970- 2006* 158). Oates’s authorial voice therefore never refuses to speak about such unsettling accounts of victimization that most of the times go unrecorded and suppressed in a repressive society. In her social thinking Oates invites parallels to her contemporary Toni Morrison, one of the most influential writers on politics of oppression and marginalization. Speaking to Charles Ruas, Morrison expresses her consternation: “Nobody likes them, all children. . . I feel my generation has done the children a great disservice. I’m talking about the emotional support that is not available to them anymore because the adults are acting out their childhoods. They are interested in self-aggrandizement, being “right” and pleasures. Everywhere, everywhere, children are the scorned people of the earth. There may be a whole lot of scorned people, but particularly children. . . They are beaten and molested; it’s an epidemic” (*Conversations with Toni Morrison* 103). Oates’s committed response to psycho-sexual violence on children also inaugurates a dense dialogue with the works of other contemporary writers such as Dorothy Allison, Jayne Anne Phillips, and Kathryn Harrison.

*My Sister, My Love* (2008) can be read as one of the most significant texts which posits the abject victimization of children as a reflection of pervasive social anomalies. The novel owes its genesis to the real life incident of the murder of prodigy girl child Jon Benet Ramsey. Jon’s death under mysterious circumstances in the year of 1998 raised hue and cry across the nation but even after a series of serious police investigations the case remained unsolved. By giving a fictional form to this appalling instance of child violence, Oates seeks to trigger the public conscience. *My Sister, My Love* is not like a journalist reportage that wantonly documents the details of the crime or is a didactic account that gestures toward poetic nemesis. It is rather a confessional memoir that tellingly recaptures the life stories of Rampike family, the fictionalized equivalent of the Ramseys, and thereby chronicles the malaises of a pathologized culture. Hence, the novel for the most part is narrated by Skyler Rampike, brother of murdered Bliss Rampike and the only living member of the Rampike family. Nineteen years old, Skyler still traumatized and guilt-stricken, desperately tries to recollect the past on the tenth anniversary of his sister’s death as the only way of redeeming himself.

Set in an upper middle class family residing in the posh locale of Fair Hills, Oates’s novel undermines the traditional standardization of American white middle class family as an ideal paradigm. The hideous act of violence that the novel centralizes not only interrogates the safety of children inside their own homes but also puts in crisis the attendant role of parenting. No less does it call into question the postulations of ethics and humanity. Unlike *The Rise of the Life on Earth* and *The Gravedigger’s Daughter*, the child protagonists in this novel belong to the most advantageous section of society though they are perilously left dispossessed, at the mercy of the predatory forces. Bix and Betsey Rampikes as parents not only fail to protect the children but

inadvertently collude with the consumerist hegemony to jeopardize them. The Rampikes are crazily driven by the lures of monetary success and social fame. While Bix is zealously obsessed with his success in the corporate world, Betsey fanatically competes for glamour with other Fair Hill women. Indifferent to family life, both of them neither enjoy a happy conjugal life nor do raise their children as responsible citizens. Instead Bliss's and Skyler's childhood is marred by narcissistic pervasions of their parents, thanks to the vicious demands of consumerist society. Bereft of love, care, affection, and togetherness, Bliss and Skyler remain lonely and neglected.

Bix and Betsey represent culturally devalued parents who eventually usurp the lives of their own children for realizing their wild aspirations. Betsey imposes her unfulfilled dreams of becoming a fashion diva on her daughter and discovers in her potential means to regain her own unfulfilled social worth. As part of her success project, Betsey renames her little daughter as 'Bliss' and starts investing the child's prodigious talents in ice skating. Pathetically at the tender age of six, Bliss is indoctrinated by her mother to be successful in each and every competition. Betsey inhumanly pressurizes Bliss to perform at her optimum best in all the skating competitions to aid in the valorization of the Rampikes' public reputation. To add to these rampant desires, Betsey insists on refashioning Bliss and glamorizing her innocent beauty, and thereby unwittingly sexualizes her into a media commodity.

Much to Bliss's chagrin, Betsey treats her as a "mechanical doll" (*My Sister* 162) snuffing out her innocence. Piteously enough, Betsey puts lots of cosmetics on Bliss to prepare her as a 'little painted harlot' and forces her to wear "glamorous zebra- stripe" dresses and "tight bodices" (*My Sister* 162) in the skating rings. Moreover, Bliss's "almost nonexistent eyebrows" (*My Sister* 162) are artificially penciled up and "pale lips" (*My Sister* 162) reddened with gaudy coral pink lipstick. Coerced to suit the demands of the celebrity world that privileges exhibitionism, Bliss's narrative thus encapsulates a dreadful account of child exploitation. Bliss's victimization brings Oates's social vision closer to Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in that both the novels render the violation of childhood as stemming from consumerist mechanisms of American culture. Pecola in Morrison's novel is devastated by the symbolic ideologies of white capitalism. Betsey Rampike and Pauline Breedlove, Pecola's mother in *The Bluest Eye*, though they differ in their social status draw easy comparisons, since both succumb to the lures of commercial world and in the process endanger the lives of their own children.

Not surprisingly therefore, as Bliss performs marvelously in several competitions and wins the prestigious Miss Jersey Ice Princess 1996 title, Betsey's aspirations inflate incredibly. Shockingly, she not only restricts Bliss's normal diets and keeps her on high doses of medication but also injects her with steroids to boost her performance. Strict surveillance on her daily routine and excessive medical interventions gradually degrades Bliss into a passive and docile child. At times when Bliss falters in skating rings, she silently endures the pain, scared that failing to perform well would annoy her mother. Inwardly drained out of her tender exuberance, Bliss sadly feigns "shy-smiling expressions" (*My Sister* 210) in the media photo shoots. By charting the degeneration set in Bliss, Oates meditates on how the natural proclivities and freedom of a child are upstaged by malevolent social trappings.

Bogged down by a packed schedule of training, beauty make-ups, and medical treatments Bliss bewails her lot but all in vain. She refuses "to take Codeine 7- slimy clam-colored capsules-

as hated all other ‘meds’ and the nasty weekly injections in her ‘bottom’ and the nasty plastic-and-wire ‘bite’ that made her mouth hurt and having to go to beauty salon with Mummy to have her hair lightened with harsh-smelling chemicals that made her eyes sting and her nose run” (*My Sister* 186). Horrendously, Betsey’s obsession crosses all limits when she complies with sponsoring agencies and agrees for ‘electrolysis’, a cosmetic surgery which promises to make “Bliss’s forehead . . . higher, and her eyes larger” (*My Sister* 289). Her vicarious wish to “raise” Bliss’s hairline “just slightly” (*My Sister* 289) testifies to her own perverted longing for incredible beauty. Frightened and unwilling, Bliss pathetically cries to her mother “I don’t want ’[e]lectrolysis” (*My Sister* 289), but Betsey detrimentally wills it. Unfortunately this is not the end, and as time passes, Betsey’s personal insecurities finally incite her to kill Bliss, which she later reveals in a letter to Skyler “the truth is your mother was the instrument of death and this out of vanity” (*My Sister* 536). If Betsey’s bizarre fascinations prove fatal to the little child, then Bix’s depraved habits demotes him from being a shielding father to his children.

Significantly, Oates’s sympathetic outlook in the novel focuses on the psychic upheavals of Bliss and Skyler which underscore their predicament. Fatigued and depressed, Bliss bitterly understands that “Mummy and Daddy don’t love [her] anymore. Since [she has fallen] on ice, nobody loves [her]” (*My Sister* 302). Bliss’s painful realization that filial love is attendant on the acquisition of material glory poignantly captures Oates’s comment on failed parenthood. Likewise, Skyler’s failure to become a gymnastic champion as wished by his parents embarrasses him. Physically retarded and academically incompetent, Skyler has to endure the ignominy of being treated as a burden by his parents. In one of his private moments, Skyler ruminates that “in the lives of his parents whom he loved so desperately as in the vast world beyond the Rampike household [he] was, at the most, but a footnote” (*My Sister* 280). Humiliation and rejection turn Skyler into a child of low confidence. Though he loves Bliss and becomes a privy to her tormented self, he sadly fails to save her life. Helplessly witnessing the frenzied drama surrounding Bliss’s rise to prosperity, Skyler retreats like a “panicked squirrel” (*My Sister* 400) after her sudden death. Haunted by Bliss’s memories, Skyler can never outlive the tragedy nor regain his normalcy. Disastrously, his parents send him away to a rehabilitation centre where he is kept under regular “professional care” (*My Sister* 413) and psychiatric vigilance. There he is treated for ‘Premature Depression Disorder’, ‘Chronic Anxiety Syndrome’ and lately with ‘Autism Spectrum Disorder’ (*My Sister* 395) the fear of which, as Oates’s novel says, has become widespread among child mental health experts of contemporary era in America.

Bliss’s and Skyler’s doom indicate the faultiness at the heart of the American dream. The novel not only comes as a timely warning about the crisis in parenthood but also accentuates the need to revise and revive the ethical discourses that have become obsolete in a predatory culture. No wonder, Oates is disheartened to find the abundance of drugs and pills in American homes as surrogates to parental love and care. Oates’s text can therefore be also seen as a reminder of cataclysmic impact caused by the inundation of anti-depressants and steroids. It is instructive to note that Oates’s novelistic foray bears enormous significance for her readers, as she meaningfully investigates the psychic and physical welfare of children in a liberalized economy.

Likewise, the ferocious aggrandizement of media in today’s America is also brought under scrutiny. While the media celebrates Bliss’s prodigious skills, at times idolizing her as a

little angel, after her death it overtly intrudes into the domestic privacy of the Rampikes. The news media prowled like “hyenas, jackals, and vultures . . . pursu[ing] the Rampikes” (*My Sister* 426) and even shamelessly “try[ing] to approach poor Skyler, and to inveigle anyone associated with him . . . into being interviewed” (*My Sister* 426). The later part of the novel shows that the overriding media not only telecasted sensational versions of the crime but also manufactured a catchy story of suffering, remorse, and salvation. Oates’s essay “The Mystery of Jon Benet Ramsey” appearing in *The New York Review of Books*, after the original incident lashes at the media that reinforced and catered to sexual underpinnings of capitalist culture. The novelist says:

In our media-saturated era, tabloid publications like the *National Enquirer* (which has published more than forty cover stories on the case) and the *Globe* (which featured pirated photographs from the autopsy on the dead child and of the crime scene), the *Star*, *American Journal*, and others replicate her image endlessly. . . The six-year-old’s posthumous celebrity as a (possibly sexually molested) victim led to a *People* cover; mainstream publications like *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Vanity Fair*, and *The New Yorker* have printed extensive articles on the case. As of March 1999, there were nearly 2,100 items about JonBenét Ramsey on the Web, many of these involving photographs of the child in her provocative beauty-pageant costumes. . . JonBenét Ramsey’s face in these reproductions is in fact a face grotesquely transformed by cosmetics. Imposed upon her childish innocence like a lurid mask is a look of sexual precocity. (“The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey” 4)

The society and individuals are so commercialized that the gruesome story of “child abuse [is altered] from a social problem into a social spectacle” (Costin, Krager, and Stoesz 7). Casting Betsey as an archetypal “grief-ravaged” (*My Sister* 385) mother, the tabloid culture successfully packages and markets the narrative of her personal bereavement for its own profit. In other words, the author makes it clear that the media is unabashedly complicit in the problematic of child abuse. Instead of awakening social conscience about this issue, media functions only as a business enterprise. So, by allowing the anguished Skyler to reminisce and renarrate the tragedy, Oates powerfully challenges the truth claims of media reports and legitimizes a personalized version of the same story. In so doing, the author successfully invokes the pathos and prolonged repercussions of childhood trauma from a humanist perspective.

What distinguishes Oates is surely her inclusive attitude to the problem of child exploitation. Reassessing the systemic discrepancies, Oates lays bare the fact that in America children of all classes are in grave danger. She debunks the normative assumptions that family affluence and economic progress can guarantee healthy lives to children. *My Sister, My Love* explicitly illustrates that the thriving consumerist ethos and success mantras are not enough to ensure a peaceful existence. The epidemic of health disorders and mental problems among children testify to this stark reality. More importantly, as Oates’s text implicates, such catastrophes cannot be simply eradicated through the institutional means i.e., by punishing the pedophiles, the victimizer or the wronged parents. Instead, Oates’s visionary insight heralds a regeneration of social psyche that can possibly be formulated through the bonds of love, care, and nurturance in family and cultural spheres. Fittingly, the novelist affirms the act of writing in her interview with Stig Borgman: “[M]erely to write fiction is an optimistic gesture: pessimists don’t



write novels. To write is to make a plea for some sort of human sympathy and community” (*Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1970- 2006* 193). Needless to say, *My Sister, My Love* quintessentially promotes these ethical propositions as potential means to contain the capitalist forces and thereby secure basic human rights for the children.

### Works Cited

- Costin, Lela B, Howard Jacob Krager, and David Stoesz. *The Politics of Child Abuse in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996. Print.
- Denard, Carolyn C. *Toni Morrison: Conversations*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *My Sister, My Love*. 2008. London: Harper Perennial, 2009. Print.
- . *Joyce Carol Oates: Conversations 1976-2006*. Ed. Greg Johnson. New Jersey: Ontario Review Press, 2006. Print.
- . “The Mystery of JonBenet Ramsey.” *The New York Review of Books*. 24 June 1999. Web. 28 June 2012 <<http://www.usfca.edu/jco/mysteryofjonbenetramsey/>>.