

**PARENTAL NEGLIGENCE AND PEDOPHILIA IN JOYCE CAROL OATES'S *FIRST LOVE: A GOTHIC TALE***

Srinithi Sivasankar

*Ph.D. Research Scholar,*

Department of English, Sri Sarada College for Women (Autonomous), Salem.

srinithisivasankar.priya@gmail.com

***Abstract***— Sexual predation is an issue that exists since time immemorial; as a crime, it soars up, its feathers widespread, exploiting women, particularly children. Parental neglect and negligence leads to isolation and alienation of children. This neglect results in a state of mind to crave and yearn for love and care. Sexual predators, especially pedophiles exert their erotic and carnal desires on the prepubescent children who mistake it for love. It leaves the victims with an invisible scar always reminding them of the excruciating agony and torment. This article seeks to explore how parental rejection leads Josie, a child to face sexual trespasses in Oates's novella *First Love: A Gothic Tale*.

***Keywords***— Sexual Predation, Parental Neglect, Alienation.

Sexual predation is an issue that exists since time immemorial; as a crime, it soars up, its feathers widespread, exploiting women, particularly children. The perpetrators exercise their power over the victims, making them their subordinate. This widespread sexual assault or predation questions the credibility of the victims' life and as a result, darkness pervades their future. They are violated and wounded and are left with an invisible scar which permeates throughout their bodies and lives. Victims of sexual abuse live in constant fear of facing shame, guilt and blame. The case of victimized children is even worse. They not only lose self-esteem but also the light to move forward.

Joyce Carol Oates writes about what is the need of the hour. She explains how in the face of violence, the victims become powerless and scared. In child predatory, the victimizers make use of the children's innocence and make them comply to their demands by dominating or coercing them. Oates pens such a grim story in her novella *First Love: A Gothic Tale*, where the little protagonist slips into a reverie of craving for a predator's doings as a result of her mother's neglect:

“The heroine is a not-quite adolescent girl named Josie who suffers physical and sexual abuse at the hands of her demonic cousin, a divinity student named Jared, and psychological abuse at the hands of her neglectful mother. Jared's work includes binding, gagging and other unsavory acts in which blood plays an important role. The mother works her damage through means that are less spectacular but somehow manage to be far more sinister. The big question--is Jared snake or savior?” (Amazon.com Review)

*First Love: A Gothic Tale* is a gripping story of molestation of an eleven-year-old Josie or Josephine Carolyn S——. As the novella's subtitle suggests, Josie's life is a tale stricken with fear and horror.

Neglection from her mother and great aunt, and abandonment in the huge house make her mistake the kind of attention shown by her cousin to be love. This grim novella showcases the relationship between the victim and the victimizer through the chaotic labyrinth of violent first love and unknown fright in the naïve Josie's mind.

Falling in love at the cusp of adolescence is natural. The ironic title *First Love* suggests Josie's misconceived notions of love for the sexual predation and intrusion of Jared, Jr. He is her cousin, who has come to live with his grandmother Esther Allan Burkhardt in the same old house shared by Delia and her daughter. Jared Jr. is a twenty-five-year-old student of theology, who will become a Presbyterian minister just like his father and grandfather. As of now, he has taken a break from the Presbyterian seminary. He is sent home as he had nervous exhaustion. At the outset, he showcases himself as a secluded and religious person. But his actions and intentions reveal his beastly attitude and erotic nature lurking inside him. The story unfolding through the eyes of little Josie depicts the pitiful yet agonizing journey of sexual trespasses and psychological conflicts of an eleven-year-old.

The novella begins as Josie takes a stroll in the marsh on her first day in Ransomville and the sight of a black snake frightens her to death. As an element of gothic, the black snake or the black hawk she witnesses are supernatural or symbolical representation of Jared, Jr himself. The images diminish as soon as she stops believing and obeying Jared, Jr. Josie undergoes a series of torments as he watches and follows her; constantly manipulates her with child pornography; calls her "Filthy little bitch" (78); abuses her body with a broken shell by drawing a "half-moon" (36) on her breastbone until blood drips, makes her lick her own blood and draws between her breasts with its sharp edge; violates her "In the marsh. In the library. Beneath the collapsed bridge. In Jared's bedroom, the door safely locked" (64).

Jared, Jr. takes Josie his prisoner and she becomes his incarcerated soul undergoing immeasurable conflict that an eleven year cannot withhold or surmount. He becomes her master, she his slave. Oates brings in the image of the black hawk which represents Jared, Jr. who devours and relishes his prey Josie:

"the beautiful black-feathered wide-winged sharp-beaked hawk climbed the sky...dive into the snowy marsh to seize its prey (Josie) which were...defenseless against its superior size and strength and the cunning of its attack and no evidence remained atop the snow except scattered bloody feathers, marks of flailing wings, for the black hawk lifted its prey in its talons and flew away to devour it" (69).

The sole reason why she undergoes and accepts pain is that she is in need of love. Josie misconstrues his actions as love showered on her. She feels special and adores him, since she has not been loved before. She does not know what true love is. She cherishes her moments with him and takes joy in it as he has chosen her in all of the world in assigning his mission—a mission which will bring a transition inside her, a mission to act his accomplice in bringing a living prey, an innocent little girl like her for a blood sacrifice. But Josie disobeys her captor's order, freeing the little Bobbie and herself from his hold. She changes her mind and finally comes out of the trance she is caught in. Josie's mother should have taken care of her. But she pays little attention. As John Pistelli says, "Josie has refused to perpetuate her family's evil;

her soul returns to goodness as the earth awakens in spring, free of social corruption.” Just like nature which remains incorruptible, Josie’s moral nature prevents her from being Jared’s accomplice by resisting evil and understanding that the bond between Jared, Jr. and herself is not love.

Oates beautifully puts together the story of a self-conscious mother and a daughter yearning for mother’s love and care. If Delia, the mother of the innocent Josie, had known the truth the moment she had seen the scars, bruises and cut on her daughter’s body, Josie would have had escaped from her tormenter’s shackles. But Delia, having been convinced by little Josie that the scars are the result of having fallen down while riding her cycle, coolly chides Josie that she should not be clumsy, “A girl your age—almost twelve—isn’t a child” (54). The cycle is indeed her tormenter’s cycle, given to her to seal her mouth from blabbering anything to her mother or to the great aunt. But she is a child who is just afraid to reveal the truth to her mother. She is psychologically deceived and conditioned by her tormenter. She is always in a trance which she believes to be love. But the reality is contrary to it. She is constantly reminded of his warnings of how she should behave and tackle the tight corners. When Delia scolds Josie for hiding details, fear-stricken Josie’s eyes well up but she does not cry. Instead, she thinks of his words: “If once you start you might not be able to stop. So, I warn you!” (55).

It is Delia’s self-centered attitude and negligence that lead her naïve child to fall a prey to her tormentor’s psychological manipulation and sexual obsession. Delia never lets Josie know the reason why she has separated from her father. They move to live in her aunt’s mysterious ‘Reverend’s House’ in Ransomville. It is Delia’s duty to comfort her in the new place, pacify her when she is frightened on seeing the black snake, protect her from the nightmares and mind games played on her by her tormentor. Leaving Josie unattended in the house, Delia goes to a new job, dates new men, and eventually goes on vacation for umpteen number of days. Her careless attitude is the root cause of Josie’s vulnerability. If only she had been a little more caring, she would have found out her daughter’s agony and difficulty. Even after finding out her wounds, “Cuts, scratches, bruises” (54), Delia cannot understand the cruelty inflicted on her daughter. Delia’s lack of awareness of Josie’s condition is rightly expressed by Oates, as she “creates a claustrophobic atmosphere of festering evil.... speaks volumes about the pain and helplessness of sexually abused children too frightened to speak out to uncomprehending adults” (*Publishers Weekly*).

Victimisers inflict violence making the victims voiceless and powerless. An unknown fear clutches them. The fear of being unheard silences them. Even if heard, they are treated as outcasts. The refrain “Fear is good, fear is normal. Fear will save your life” (3) in different occasions in the novella indicates the pathetic condition of the sexually abused. They live in constant fear; fear of the past; fear of their incapability to have escaped the horrendous situation; fear of being judged by the society; fear of being labelled an untouchable. This fear crumbles their lives. What remains of them is an empty soulless life. This grim story shakes the hearts of its readers and stresses the need for parents to nurture their children, especially girls, with utmost care and concern.

**Reference:**

“Amazon.com Review.” *Amazon*, Amazon, 21 Aug. 1996,

<https://www.amazon.com/First-Love-Joyce-Carol-Oates/dp/0880014571>.

“First Love: A Gothic Tale.” *Publishers Weekly*. N.P., n.d. Web. 21 Feb. 2019.

<<https://www.publishersweekly.com/978-0-88001-457-1>>.

Oates, Joyce Carol. *First Love: A Gothic Tale*. Hopewell, NJ: Ecco, 1996. Print.

Pistelli, John. “Joyce Carol Oates, First Love: A Gothic Tale.” *John Pistelli*. N.p., 25 Oct.

2015. Web. 21 Feb. 2019. <<https://johnpistelli.com/2015/10/25/joyce-carol-oates-first-love-a-gothic-tale/>>.