The Child Without Sexuality Education: A Reading of Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail*

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Abstract

Some religious beliefs, and some cultural practices do not subscribe to the provision of relevant and healthy information on sex and sexuality to the child, the young and the under-aged. Literary critics, going by the paucity of works advocating sexuality education for the child, seem not to recognise that the rights of the child to education and information cover sexuality education. This paper explores the need for sexuality education for children by critically engaging Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* with conceptualisations of the child's sexuality education provided by world bodies like World Health Organisation, United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, and United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation. This is in order to advocate sexuality education for children by showing the far-reaching harm which the denial of this education can bring to the child and society at large. By subjecting *Becoming Abigail* to this form of critical analysis, this paper reveals that Abani succeeds in making a case for the promotion of sex and sexuality education.

Introduction

Should a child know anything about sex or sexuality? Is it right to talk openly and honestly to children about their sexuality? Would sex talk not prematurely launch a child into the adult world? These are few of the myriad of questions that plague parents, teachers and other stakeholders. With all the controversies surrounding sex and sexuality in today's world, sexuality education becomes more important and urgent than ever before. Technological advancements that ensure indiscriminate generation and dissemination of all kinds of information also bring home the urgency of getting sex education right with the child before s/he gets it wrong elsewhere from all the technological sources at the world's disposal.

Who Is a Child?

UNICEF in *The Convention on the Rights of the Child* defines a child as "a human being below the age of 18 years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" while the *American Heritage Dictionary* identifies a “child” as describing the relationship with a parent or authority figure. The UNICEF placement of the child under the age of eighteen with provision for laws of different nations to specify otherwise is a bit challenging since some countries hide under this loophole to abuse children. Closely related to this is the age of consent and age of responsibility which also differ for different countries and laws. Islam, for example, and, by implication Islamic countries and countries operating the Islamic laws place the age of responsibility at forty (International Community of Submitters) whereas for Canada and the United States of America, it is twelve. For Britain, the age of responsibility is ten. This means that a child can be held responsible for its actions if it commits a criminal offence at ten in Britain and he can be taken to the court and punished for his offence – usually minor punishments like being sent to the remand home and special correctional institutions such as juvenal halls.

The age of consent which revolves around what age a child is legally old enough to consent to sexual act is fluid just as the age of responsibility, with variations ranging between fourteen to...
twentieth years (Mathew Waites,). Jessica Best gives a list of the variations:

In Europe, countries who have the age of consent set at 16 include Cyprus, Finland, Georgia, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, and Switzerland. For Austria, Germany, Portugal and Italy it is 14, and in France, the Czech Republic, Denmark, and Greece it is 15. Spain did have one of the lowest ages of consent on the continent at just 13, but recently agreed to raise this to 16. Throughout the rest of the world, there are big variations. In Bahrain, it is set at 21 for women who want to marry without their father's consent, while in nearby Saudi Arabia, all sex outside of marriage is illegal but there are no laws limiting the age at which you can get married. In China, the age of consent is 14; in Iraq it is 18, while in Japan it is five years lower at 13. The likes of Brazil, Peru, Paraguay, Ecuador and Colombia all have it set at 14. And in some countries - such as Chile - the minimum age of consent is 14, but there are legal restrictions on sexual activities up to the age of 18, and homosexual sex is illegal before that age. Australia's age of consent varies between 16 and 17 depending on which territory you are in, and the same goes for America where it ranges from 16 to 18 between different states. In Angola, the age of consent is just 12. (http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/what-age-consent-around-world-2802173)

The variations in the age of consent around the world have caused issues revolving around the protection of the vulnerable child to suffer major setbacks.

Sex/Sexuality Education and the Child

Because sex is a basic instinct requiring intimacy, unlike...
including access to sexual and reproductive health care services;
· Seek, receive and impart information related to sexuality;
· Sexuality education;
· Respect for bodily integrity;
· Choose their partner;
· Decide to be sexually active or not;
· Consensual sexual relations;
· Consensual marriage;
· Decide whether or not, and when, to have children; and
· Pursue a satisfying, safe and pleasurable sexual life.

The responsible exercise of human rights requires that all persons respect the rights of others.

While it might be argued that not all the points above concern the child, a lot of them touch and affect children and WHO recognises the place of the child in the discussion of sexual rights.

Of interest to this study is the way in which religion and morality have influenced sexuality education in not just Africa, but all over the world. Parents rarely talk about sex to their children and leave the job of breaking the sexual news to the school Biology or Elementary Science teachers. This is as a result of the repression and inhibition that people generally feel in talking about sexual matters which are deeply entrenched in morality. So, the ones that do talk at all mostly emphasise the laws/rules guarding against perceived wrong practices. Most parents, and people generally, talk about the genitals to their children in metaphors and hence, establish the notion that there is something wrong with calling the sex organs by their names. Sexual rights advocate that the right information be given at every point in time on sexuality to people that seek and need it. There is provision for giving sexuality education to the young and underage persons using the language appropriate to the age of the child. The two religions under focus in this study, Christianity and Islam, encourage conservative approaches to sexuality education. With the chains of laws in place against various forms of sexual practices, the idea of right and wrong is deeply entrenched in the minds of people belonging to these religions. Even in the perception of the natural/biological workings of the body, like erection, wet dreams, menstruation and breast enlargement, offering factual explanations that are devoid of morality proves difficult. Both Islam and the Hebraic culture that pervades in the Holy Bible see the woman as unclean when she is menstruating and prescribe thorough cleansing after the end of the menstrual flow. This belief is not limited only to these groups since Nik Douglas and Penny Slinger state: “The taboos associated with menstruation are practically universal. They exist in both primitive and sophisticated cultures, from India to China, Japan, the Pacific Islands, North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Europe” (282).

United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) notes that few young people receive adequate preparation for their sexual lives. This leaves them potentially vulnerable to coercion, abuse and exploitation, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV. Many young people approach adulthood faced with conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender. This is often exacerbated by embarrassment, silence and disapproval of open discussion of sexual matters by adults, including parents and teachers, at the very time when it is most needed (2).

To guard against this, sexuality education becomes a necessity and
UNESCO, bearing in mind “the impact of cultural values and religious beliefs on all individuals, and especially on young people, in their understanding of this issue and in managing relationships with their parents, teachers, other adults and their communities” (2), recommends sexuality education which it defines as: “an age-appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, non-judgemental information” (2). The importance of effective sexuality education, UNESCO continues, lies in the “structured opportunities for young people to explore their attitudes and values, and to practise the decision-making and other life skills they will need to be able to make informed choices about their sexual lives” (2). Despite the laudable intentions of UNESCO in advancing sexuality education, it has met with resistance from religious bodies and moralist/conservative bodies which see sexuality education as providing young ones with inappropriate information, even when these bodies do not have any programme directed at providing what it would see as the appropriate ones.

Family Watch International vehemently kicks against this UNESCO document and warns parents to beware of the corruption which UNESCO in collaboration with UNICEF, UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund) and WHO, are easing into families under the guise of education programmes, ending their document on this note:

The Guidelines undermine parental rights and state that “teachers are likely to be the most skilled and trusted source of information” and “have a responsibility to act in the place of parents.” These Guidelines ultimately will increase the very negative consequences of sexual behavior in youth they claim to prevent. So as defined by UNESCO, “comprehensive education on human sexuality” is very dangerous indeed (2).

If the parents whom Family Watch International calls upon to take action gave the required appropriate sex education, there may not have been the need for the UNESCO document which acted on the ignorance perceived in the youths on sexuality and related matters, so, the consolation this group can take will be to equip parents with the kind of information it thinks proper and to ensure that they give it to the youths. Churches and mosques, instead of emphasising the laws on prohibited behaviours should invest in sexuality education which will in turn see to the reduction in the frequency of some of the behaviours, they consider inappropriate.

The economic dependence of any human being on another opens the dependant up to courses of treatment that s/he may not like as what is in existence becomes a power relationship with the more economically powerful wielding power while expecting compliance from the less economically endowed. Going by this, it is obvious that children are conditioned by their economic status to suffer the denial of their sexual rights. Abuses that can arise from the economic factors for the child include sexual harassment, rape, non-consensual sexual relationships for economic benefits, acceptance or other favours. The economic status of individuals also enhances or inhibits their level of education which directly touches on their right to wholesome and proper sexuality education. This might discourage them from gaining access to or acquiring information on researches on sexuality and its surrounding topics as they affect their lives. It also discourages them from seeking proper assistance from resource persons and medical personnel in the cases where specialised services are required. The implications of the points raised tell more on children who are at the base of the economic chain and depend totally on adults for almost everything.

Sexuality is no longer a feminist topic. It has become a
cultural and religious battleground and has gained a loud voice in politics – a voice which has always been there but has been stifled sometimes for political reasons and some other times from sheer ignorance of its controlling networking with other areas of existence. With on-going debates all over the world on sexual identities and orientations, and diverse sexual practices/behaviours, sexuality education, sexual and reproductive rights, etc., the African writer processing his society in the course of art creation cannot escape being entangled in this sexual forest. The crucial role that sexuality plays in human interactions demands that literary criticisms should be replete with explorations of its workings but the reverse is the case. Janell L. Carroll's observations of generally high discomfort in holding talks/discourses on sex explain why critics are reluctant to navigate the subject. Ada Uzoamaka Azodo and Maureen Ngozi Eke in their Preface to *Gender and Sexuality in African Literature and Film* acknowledge the difficulty writers and critics have in exploring the sexual forest, especially an area of difference like homosexuality, for which their reason is: “because African cultures do not yet readily and openly address these issues” (xvii).

In Africa, the effects of the traditional religions, Christianity and Islam weigh much on individuals. Most cultural practices are embedded in traditional religions while, for Christianity and Islam, literature provides evidence on how they limit people's sexual rights and access to sexuality education. Scott Long emphasises the clamp down of the church on the expression of homosexuality and identifies the stance of the Vatican against contraception as being part of the backbone to the promotion of narrow sexuality education for young people which focuses on abstinence only and the focus on pro-life movements. Narrow sexuality education, Long maintains in his study of how morality-promoting religious, governmental and non-governmental institutions violate sexual rights, has increased the cases of unwanted pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and increase in the spread of sexually transmitted diseases and HIV/AIDS.

In most discussions on sexual rights of children, the focus is usually on sexuality education, the abuse of their sexuality and the violation of their rights. This emphasises that the under aged are sexual beings with sexual feelings, habits, behaviours, various sexual identities and orientations. African writers are waking up to the call of championing the sexual rights of the child by showcasing the dangers children are exposed to when left to wallow in ignorance. Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* is used for illustration.

**Becoming Abigail – Summary**

Abigail loses the mother while she is giving birth to her and ends up living all her life in her shadows as her father refuses to recognise her for herself but as the mother's younger image. She suffers neglect and abuse from the males that come into her life. Her father decides to give her to Peter who takes her to London where she is expected to serve him as a sex worker. A few days before her departure with Peter, her father hangs himself, leaving her an orphan with nobody to return to in Nigeria. Abigail resists Peter's plans for her as a sex worker and is subjected to inhuman treatment until she succumbs to his plans. This does not last long as she revolts one day, bites off Peter's penis and runs into the streets with it. The police take her to the hospital while searching for the owner of the penis. She is assigned to a social worker, Derek, and soon, they are having an affair which is terminated when Molly (Derek's wife) finds out and reports to the police. Derek loses his job and is imprisoned while Abigail commits suicide out of grief for the loss of the love of her life, Derek.

**The Place of Sexuality Education for the Child in Chris Abani’s* Becoming Abigail***

The relationships between Abigail and the men in her life
Abigail's father is so consumed with the wife's death during childbirth that he overlooks the fundamentals of sexuality education which he ought to provide for his daughter who looks every inch like her mother that he cannot wait to have her grow into the deceased wife. His sorrow blinds him to seeing the daughter for who she is but as the mother's shadow. Abigail's efforts at self-assertion do not amount to much with her father: “She tried to talk to her father about this need to see herself, but he couldn't understand what she meant. It maybe he just pretended not to. The desire to be noticed for herself didn't go away though. She couldn't be the ghost he wanted her to be” (31). It is therefore an embittered Abigail who decides to talk to the father about her menstrual period. The father's reaction lacks the understanding required to see a girl through this difficult phase of maturing:

Looking up, her father smiled.

“Hey, baby, can I get you anything?” he asked.

“No, Dad, I just wanted to talk.”

“What about?” he asked, folding the newspaper he had been reading into a neat square, which he placed on the table…

“About my period,” Abigail began. “About being a woman.”

He looked away uncomfortably. “Abigail! How can you bring that up, eh? I was just about to ask you to make dinner.”

“But Dad.”

“Your mother would never have talked like this, you know? She knew the right way to conduct herself,” he said (31-32).

Her father's reaction gives the impression that he perceives menstrual period as a subject unfit for discussion, a taboo perhaps, or something propriety does not allow girls/women to openly talk about. So, by implication, the female anatomy is made obscure even to them by the imposition of rules that interpret its unveiling as improper conduct. Without being informed, it is not surprising therefore that Abigail grows up exposed to many dangers and conflicts in the area of her sexuality.

Peter, from the first time he appears in Abigail's life, has had nothing positive to offer her. At twelve when Abigail was a bridesmaid at his wedding to Mary (Abigail's cousin), Peter lays a foundation for his subsequent abuses two years later:

Peter had cornered her in the bathroom. She didn't shrink away like other girls her age might have at being surprised in the bathroom... Surprised at her fearlessness he kissed her, his finger exploring her. Later, when he was back at Mary's side, she caught him sniffing his finger occasionally, a smile playing around his lips... Even at that young age she knew what men were like (47-48).

The novella does not specifically say why Abigail does not raise an alarm at Peter's behaviour towards her to anybody, but much can be inferred through the preceding events in her life. Her father, from his reaction to her when she wanted to talk about her menstrual cycle, is not accessible for such conversations. Again, two years before the wedding incident, Edwin, her fifteen year old cousin, had disvirgined her at the age of ten in exchange for a bag of sweets issued under a threat to kill her if she told anybody (14). In this case, both Abigail and Edwin are minors but Edwin cannot be treated the same way as Abigail in this discourse since, from his actions, it is clear that he has attained the age of responsibility (though not the age of majority or consent). The sentence, “Even at that young age she knew what men were like” (48), carries the weight of the culture of silence which forces the abused to keep quiet and accept mistreatment as permissible and the norm.

The male dominance imposed on the female in patriarchal
societies is also felt as being responsible for part of Abigail's tragedy. The decision to go to London with Peter is not made by her. Although it might be said that she is a minor and as such her father is in a position to take decisions for her, the novella records her feeling towards this decision as something anchored on patriarchy: “She had felt caught in the sheath of men's plans. From the time her father and Peter had decided that she needed to come to London” (61). London does not hold the promises of better education for her, as her father and Peter made her believe. Peter turns her to his sex slave and dresses her up in adult clothes and make-ups in readiness for business as a sex worker. Her resistance to the first customer whom Peter steals into the house in the dark of the night earns her the most unimaginable kinds of treatment: she is handcuffed, kept outside the house in the cold in a dog's kennel, urinated upon, fed tossed out leftovers or rotten food and rancid water or sometimes Peter's urine (75, 77-78). Fifteen days of being made to live like a dog subdues Abigail “and she no longer fought when Peter mounted her. Wrote his shame and anger in her. Until. The slime of it threatened to obliterate the tattoos that made her” (81), but there is a limit to endurance in every human being, even the subdued ones. Peter's treatment brings out the venom in Abigail: “One night. Unable to stand it anymore, she screamed. Invoking the spirit of Abigail. And with her teeth tore off Peter's penis” (83).

All through the text, it is observed that Mary's presence does not deter Peter from his perversion. He threatens to do the same to her if she intervenes. This is not an empty threat as Peter has done some horrible things to her before. He beat her and their two-month old baby up in annoyance over the sex of the baby (a girl, and not the boy he wanted), pushed her off the staircase so that she fell and hit the baby that she was carrying on the floor causing it to die. This is another case of the extreme form of sexual violence against the child for reasons associated with its sex. It is the same as experienced by Zakeya in Nawal El Saadawi's *God Dies by the Nile* for the sex of her daughters. In both instances, mother and child(ren) suffer for biological determination over which they have no control. In the period of Abigail's incarceration, Mary comes to talk with and comfort her in Peter's absence, bringing the house heater out to warm her. Finally, when Abigail bites off Peter's penis, it is Mary that unchains her and asks her to go. It will be easy to call Mary an accomplice because she does nothing to alert the police about the husband's trafficking business, but her situation is such that her hands are tied and there is nothing much she can do: she is jobless and solely dependent on the husband. Even when the police pick Abigail off the streets clutching a bleeding penis, she does not disclose the owner or how to locate him because she wants to protect Mary: “But no matter how hard he [Derek] pressed, the memory of Mary's eyes at the door on the first night of her rape kept Abigail from telling him or the police where to find Peter” (95). It is not impossible that Mary's papers of migration, since they were prepared by Peter, are not authentic or are done with fake names since that is what he has done for Abigail who when she gives the police her name as Abigail Tansi, does not exist anywhere in the British records as an immigrant. Being a ghost in a foreign country takes away Mary's powers to negotiate her sexual rights as well as Abigail's as does her economic dependence.

There is enough evidence in the text to show that Abigail feels something rare and valuable for Derek. Derek is her social worker, the only man apart from her father, for whom she has any soft feelings. From the first time Derek crosses his boundary by kissing her while showing her round Greenwich Park, Abigail's feeling for Derek shifts from the filial to the erotic:

He kissed her then and looked into her eyes with an infinite sadness….What they walked up was more a rise than a hill, a gentle bumping in the ground. Not
unlike what she felt for him: an unassuming tenderness.
Like what she felt for her father. At least before he died....And now here he was again, in this stranger's tender fumbling....This wasn't the familiarity she had expected. Instead she felt passion enveloping her, and she gave into the safety, the warmth, looking up into his eyes, eyes blue as the sea she had never seen except on television, eyes looking at her wanting no more than was there. This was love? To be seen. No turning away. No turning toward. Just there.

Later that night, in Derek's home, while his wife slept in their floral wallpapered bedroom under the warmth of bed-clothes, they made love on the sofa. Abigail was giving. For the first time, she wasn't taken....Abigail, this Abigail, only this Abigail, always this Abigail, felt herself becoming, even in this moment of taking (36-38).

The transmutation undergone by this feeling is attributable to the deficiency in the relationship she has had with her father who never saw the girl in her as a person different from her mother. Derek sees her, and in this seeing, she gains an acceptance that she cherishes and labels as “love”.

Using Derek, Abani explores the value of recognition of the individual's identity. Human beings are not empowered by the blotting out of their self-assigned definition of self/personhood (especially when this is done to make them align with the ideology of an oppressive centre) but by its recognition and appreciation. Derek identifies with Abigail in a way nobody else does and in that way enlivens her dark world for the period their relationship lasts (two months of knowing her and three and a half weeks of time spent together with her). However, Derek defaults on sexual rights in many ways. First, Abigail is a minor, only fourteen. Second, he is placed by the government in a position of trust over her as her social worker – a position which confers on him the responsibility to protect Abigail, especially from the kind of abuse which he himself indulges in. The compounding twist to his story is that he feels something warm for Abigail, which makes his imprisonment something that draws the sympathy of the reader:

So much of love is memory, she thought, her mind tracing the outline of Derek. She had loved him so completely and he her. But what are the limits of desire? The edges beyond which love must not cross? Those were the questions she had heard others discuss in these last few days. Discuss as if she were a mere ghost in their presence. Called this thing between Derek and her wrong. How could it be?

There is only so much we can do to save those we love (65).

But, Abani makes it such that the sympathy is quickly reined in on the consideration of his abuse of power and position. It may be said that Abigail did not have to deal with any form of coercion in her relationship with Derek as she appears from the onset to be a willing party to the affair. In fact, after the initial kiss from Derek, she initiates the rest of the action (37). But, a careful analysis calls attention to what is termed “consent”, especially, given the position of the two actors: Abigail, on the one hand, a minor, homeless, on the run from Peter and his sexually abusive business, psychologically destabilised and very much in need of rehabilitation, re-acculturation and reintegration into the society; and Derek, on the other hand, an adult, employed as a social worker, professionally trained to cater for the emotionally and psychologically disturbed/challenged persons like Abigail. The disparity in their statuses places Abigail at a disadvantaged vulnerable position which removes her power to negotiate consent.
An examination of Abani’s use of language reveals an attempt to convey the state of mind of the tragic protagonist, Abigail. The psychology of the disturbed and unstable is very much present in *Becoming Abigail*. There is a sense of disjointedness and a struggle to connect which appears to fail before the connection is made. Efforts are not made in realising long or full sentences. Most times, a word or phrase is enough. Yet, Abani, in this compressed way which utilizes nouns, verbs and adjectives mainly, condenses the experience being explored and makes sense in that way which belongs to poetry. The novella is action-packed, an impression realised with the form of sentences and structures in it. His language can be said to belong to the unconscious/sub-conscious, following the stream of consciousness. A look at the scene where Molly walks in on Abigail and Derek, for example, reveals the use of language to create mind pictures that give the reader a sense of cinematography and clinical detachment of the narrator from the experience he is narrating:

Turning the knob, opening. The door, opening. And there was Abigail, rump on the edge of the kitchen table, skirt up around her waist, naked breasts rubbing pert lines of sweat up and down Derek's chest, ankles locked around his back. Lost in the hot damp of Abigail: Derek. And over the shoulder, the women locked eyes. Abigail smiled.


With utmost brevity, Abani captures every detail of the moments in his work in a way that suggests clinical observation, but giving it enough emotional material while maintaining a safe distance from the experience being shared.

Using this style of writing, these Abani succeeds in the creation and management of grief in his heroine. The heroine's grief and tragedy are convincing although her action – committing suicide – is not redeeming but goes to show the level of destruction sexual abuse can bring to the life of a child. With Abigail, one may be forced to ask whether the apprehending/punishment of the perpetrator of sexual abuse is worth it if it ends up taking the life of the victim. But, the answer is still a yes. The thing to consider in Abigail's case is that the proceedings of justice did not take appropriate and holistic consideration of her psychologically abused state. If this was ascertained, it would have been discovered that emotional bonds, albeit wrong ones, have been established between the victim and perpetrator which renders the situation sensitive. Again, if this was established, perhaps, Abigail would not have had to sit through the hearing where what she feels for Derek is ridiculed, which to her young impressionable mind is injustice. It calls to the fore that extreme care should be taken in the handling of matters dealing with the minors since they, in most cases, lack the sense of judgement and stability to navigate through dangerous waters such as Abigail's. Although the text does not specify it, it is not unlikely that the justice system in the text does not do its best for Abigail for obvious reasons like her immigrant status and refusal to give information on Peter. However, these are just speculations. Abani, by allowing Abigail die, calls attention to the justice system in the fight for sexual rights. While the perpetrator should be brought to justice, the overall wellbeing of the victim should be taken into consideration.

**Conclusion**

Parents should no longer abandon sexuality education to their
children's Biology or primary school science teachers. The cliché “ignorance is bliss” no longer applies, and has never applied to sex/sexuality. Stakeholders do not do children favours by providing education and information on sex and sexuality; they are rights which children are entitled to. As such, allowing a child to grow in ignorance and without sex education is a violation/denial of his/her rights. The sexually educated child is safer from sexual harm than the sexually ignorant one. Such dangers as witnessed in Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail can be averted with sex/sexuality education.

Works Cited

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