

Deafening Silence of the Gendered Subaltern: Exploring the Untold Stories of Female Child Sexual Abuse

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Abstract

In the words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the term ‘subaltern’ defines social groups that are placed on the margins of society, suppressed, oppressed, deprived of identity, voice and, dignity. The condition of the subaltern becomes more dreadful when the subaltern is a female and also a child because like women children also do not have a voice of their own. Because of their double subalternity, female children become easy prey to all forms of abuse especially sexual abuse. Female child sexual abuse is the most muted form of violence where the voice of the subaltern is always silenced into the patriarchal arena. The present paper attempts to scrutinize the deafening silence of the subaltern female children who are sexually abused at the hands of their own near and dear ones. It will exhumate the mechanisms that patriarchal society develops to conceal this crime, the insidious onset of psychological and physical pain of sexual abuse and its grievous impact on victim’s life with reference to select literary and cinematic texts like Manju Kapur’s novel *Home* (2006), Imtiyaz Ali’s movie *Highway* (2014) and Sujoy Ghosh’s *Kahaani 2* (2016). Kapur’s *Home* depicts the insecurity of a female child in her own family whereas *Highway* explores the psychic trauma of Veera as well as the silence of the subaltern female. *Kahaani 2* explicitly portrays the nuances of sexual abuse and the hypocrite attitude of family, police and, society towards this crime as well as the victim.

Keywords: Female child, subaltern, silence, child sexual Abuse (CSA), patriarchy.

Introduction:

“As object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”

--Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 287.

As explicated by Spivak, the term 'subaltern' stands for social groups that are placed on the margins of society, oppressed, deprived of identity, voice, and dignity. When the subaltern is a female as well as a child the condition is ingravescens because like women children also do not have a voice of their own. To speak with Spivak's expounded theory of subaltern, we may say that, female children are the most vulnerable and fragile subaltern group because they face double marginalization; for being a female as well as for being a child. If women are the 'weaker sex' then female children constitute the 'weakest section' in a patriarchal society. Because of their gendered subalternity, they become easy prey to all forms of abuse especially sexual abuse. Female child sexual abuse is the most muted form of violence against children where the voice of the subaltern female is always silenced into the patriarchal arena.

In the *Report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention* by the World Health Organization (WHO) child sexual abuse is defined as "the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society" (15). According to the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, CSA involves different forms of sexual activities like

- (i) Penetrative sexual assault (penetration including inserting objects)
- (ii) Sexual Assault without penetration (involving any kind of physical contact/touch, however No penetration)
- (iii) Sexual Harassment (including all forms of non-contact activities with sexual intent).

(POCSO, 2012).

The Annual Report (2007-2008) of the *Ministry of Women and Child Development* reveals shocking statistics on CSA in India. According to the report "53.22% children reported having faced one or more forms of sexual abuse... (and) 50% abuses were the persons (abusers) known to the child or in a position of trust and responsibility"(67). It means that every second child is a victim of CSA in India. Our society turned a deaf ear to these alarming statistics. The patriarchal culture maintains a system of silence around this issue especially when female children are concerned because if it addresses this heinous crime against female children then its hypocrite reality of treating females will be exposed to the world. Indian Culture is known for putting women on the pedestal as goddesses but in reality, placing them at the bottom of the

social hierarchy in terms of gender and to muffle the voices of female children and their parents against this hypocrisy and sexual abuse the male-centric society has associated shame, guilt, stigma, and fear to this issue.

In her path-breaking book *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* Pinki Virani says that “Child Sexual Abuse happens because the system of silence around the act perpetuates it, Child Sexual Abuse happens because this system of silence encourages some more men to want it to happen: and so the political, societal, cultural and religious attitudes which serve to underestimate the child, especially the female child, creates a climate in which abuse can thrive” (xxviii). She also questions the reliability of the statistics because she believes that most of the cases are under-reported due to the shroud of secrecy and shame around this crime as she says, “Given the furtiveness of the perpetrator, the secrecy by society and the silences of those lambs, the sexually sacrificial children, it would be impossible to run a confirmation on any kind of statistic” (Virani 22). Hence the reality is far more alarming than the one illustrated by the official data.

It is bizarre that not much attention is paid by society and law on this harrowing and ubiquitous crime. However, there are some literary and cinematic texts that unfurl the shroud of secrecy around this crime. Some of the texts analysed in this paper are: Manju Kapur’s novel *Home*, Sujoy Ghosh and Imtiaz Ali’s movies *Kahaani2* and *Highway* respectively. These literary and cinematic texts by telling the untold stories of female child sexual abuse not just divulge the secrecy around this so far considered taboo subject but they also portray the insecurity and helplessness of a female child, the psycho-physical consequences of abuse on the victim and the hypocrite attitude of family and society towards this crime. For instance: Kapur’s *Home* depicts the insecurity of a female child in her own family through the character of Nisha and how despite showing several signs of being sexually abused, her family fails to understand the reasons behind her changing behaviour due to lack of empathy towards female children. *Highway* represents the psychological consequences of sexual abuse in childhood that persists to the victim’s adulthood through the character of Veera and the inability of subaltern women to voice the abuse through Veera’s mother. *Kahaani2* powerfully portrayed the nuances of sexual abuse and the hypocrite attitude of family, police, and society towards this crime as well as the victim.

In Kapur's *Home*, the protagonist Nisha was living in a joint family including her parent grandparents, uncle and aunts and, their children. Nisha was just seven years old when she was abused by her cousin Vicky for the first time. Vicky and Nisha were on the roof alone when he "put his hand on the inside of her beckoning thigh and whispered, 'How soft you are Nisha'" (Kapur 57). Unable to understand his actions Nisha grows discombobulated and cries, "Chee that's dirty take your hand away...but Vicky was in no state to hear her...his grip tightened and his arm pressed her thigh down so that both her legs were parted" (Kapur 58). She was petrified with fear and seeks her mother's help: "'No, I want to go to Mummy. Leave me'...He grabbed her hand ... (and) gripped her wrist so hard that her fingers opened around the dark big thing...fear grew in her...when she tried to struggle he increased the pressure of his hand" (Kapur 58). In this scene, the helplessness and the fragile state of a subaltern female child are visible who is unable to resist against a male figure. Vicky warns her to be silent "'it's our secret. If you tell anyone, they will beat you and me'. He gripped her arm. 'No one must ever know. No one. You understand'. Nisha nodded wordlessly" (Kapur 59). Vicky not only sexually abused her but also used violence to silent the subaltern female child. Use of words like, 'gripped tightened', 'hard and painfully', 'fear', 'struggle' etc. show the violent attitude of Vicky towards Nisha. He was able to use violence because as a male, he has power over Nisha, a female.

Vicky started coming home early from the shop and always bought gifts for Nisha like chocolates, chewing gum, packets of sour mango, etc to make her feel "special" and entice her into performing sexual favours. Nisha's age group of children are young enough to be susceptible to simple gifts and chocolates lures and feels attracted towards the perpetrator and as a result of it, they easily become a victim of monstrous sexual abuse. No one in the family noticed Vicky's growing interest in Nisha. Though she gives many signs for her dislike of Vicky even then the family never cared. For instance; one day when she refused to drink milk her grandmother coaxed her to drink the milk for the sake of family members:

'One for Papaji...

Nisha took the smallest possible sip.

'One for Mummy'... 'one for chacha ...one for Dadi - one for Dada - one for Vicky'.

'I don't want to drink to Vicky.'

'Arrey, why? He is your Bhaiyya...'

'No, still'

‘O-ho, poor Vicky, what has he done to you?’

Nisha pushed the glass away.

Whatever it is, forgive him (61).

Vicky was emboldened by Nisha’s silence and the family’s ignorance towards her changing behaviour and that’s why she gets repeatedly victimised by him. One day when Nisha was doing her homework in her grandparent’s room alone, Vicky taking the advantage of the situation sexually abuses her again with the same violent force; “She tried shaking her head, bumping it against his shoulder, but he was concentrating on what he was doing and his grip grew harder. She winced in pain...In a daze, she struggled against the body that was pressing itself so completely into her” (Kapur 63). Once again he warns her and threatens her fierce punishment if she divulges the secret, “if you say anything to anybody... they will beat you. They will lock you up and never let you go to school” (Kapur 63). That day she was notable to eat anything because “her mouth felt dry, her head heavy, her hands clammy. When her Dadi coaxed a morsel down, she coughed and threw up” (63). Her mother Sona thought that her sister-in-law and her children who lived upstairs fed Nisha with too many snacks and that’s why she is not able to eat anything but “I wasn’t upstairs” said Nisha and “tears filling her eyes. ‘I was here only. Vicky also’. She choked on the word (and) threw herself on her grandmother’s lap...she wept and wept” (Kapur 64). She was suffering both physically and mentally but the family never tried to understand her plight due to lack of empathy towards a female child, as well as by acknowledging her plight they don’t want to disturb the equilibrium, the cocooned state of the family.

There are a host of behavioural changes including depression, aggression, eating disturbance, insomnia, and nightmares occur when a child is being sexually abused. For instance, Nisha was a girl who always went to sleep easily but now she refused even to close her eyes because when she did, she saw bad dreams, dreams that she couldn’t explain what they were. Because of those nightmares, Nisha’s screaming became worse day by day and she stopped going to school as well. When her maternal aunt Rupa and her husband realised that Vicky is Nisha’s abuser, she was sent to live with them but no action was taken against Vicky. Surely this shouldn’t be the solution to Nisha’s problem. Instead of this, her parents should have tried to know what causes Nisha to have nightmares, the reason behind her dislike of Vicky. To prevent sexual abuse the parents need to be friends with their children and build a trust relationship

between them so that, in times of need, the children can talk and disclose what is happening with them. This kind of relationship was lacking between Nisha and her parents due to which she was unable to disclose her abuse. The title of the novel *Home* symbolizes that home which is considered as the safest place on the earth for anyone can also become the most dangerous place for a female child. A female child is not safe even when she lived in the cocoon of the family.

Imtiyaz Ali's movie *Highway* delineates the character of Veera Tripathi who was a victim of Child Sexual Abuse. The psychological trauma of her sexual abuse was so intense and persistent that even after many years, on being kidnapped just before the day of her wedding; rather than hating the kidnapper Mahabir she develops Stockholm syndrome (a condition in which captive develops a psychological alliance with the captor during captivity) towards him. Though she was abducted, she feels secure and finds her abduction a source of self-realization. She built a trust relationship with an outsider i.e. her captor and doesn't want to return to her family. The reason behind Veera's unusual behaviour is that she was abused by a family member whom she trusted a lot as a child and her abuse has resulted in a lack of trust in her family members.

During her abduction, Veera told Mahabir about her painful past because she wanted to release herself from the unbearable burden of her abuse by telling it to him. She recounts the traumatic event in the following words

I was nine years old...he used to bring imported chocolates... my uncle...he used to make me sit in his lap...and love me. And when alone... in the bathroom... he again used to make me sit in his lap and love me...I used to scream but he used to put his hand on my mouth so that no one could hear my screams...It used to hurt a lot...‘Sshhh... sshhh...It's done... my doll...you are the best girl in the world’...He used to come again...repeatedly...and I used to scream inside (the bathroom)... sshhh...sshhh...don't tell anyone...OK (*“Highway”* 00:53:12-55:17).

While looking at this scene carefully we can draw a comparison between Veera and Nisha's sexual abuse. Though they both were abused inside their homes by a family member, a dominant male figure whom they trust but Vicky's way of silencing the subaltern was violent, on the other hand in Veera's case, to compel her to preserve the secret her uncle calls her out “My doll’ ... ‘You are the best girl in the world’... ‘sshhh...sshhh...don't tell anyone...OK”, thereby

affectionately threatening her. Both ways of silencing the victim are common strategies adopted by child sex abusers.

The worst part of Veera's abuse was that when she told her mother about the uncle her mother also silenced her in the same way as her abuser did, " 'sshhh...sshhh...don't tell anyone. OK' ...I didn't tell anyone" (*Highway* 00:55:33-52). At first, it seems that Veera's mother's attitude towards her is worse than her abuser as she silenced her daughter for the sake of family's reputation but we should not forget that if Veera is a subaltern female then her mother is a subaltern too whom the patriarchal society has filled with too much fear, shame and insecurity to maintain her silence against the atrocities of the patriarchy that's why even if she wants to voice the abuse she couldn't. Virani observes that, "A mother who does not take immediate protective action for her child who is being sexually abused at home...because she risks external judgments of her mothering, the inevitable breakdown of her family, the removal of herself or her child or her husband from the scene of the crime, the retaliation by the accused and all the men and women around him, social stigma, continuous court appearances and loss of financial security" (68). These are the reasons why a mother remains silent because of her gendered subaltern position in a patriarchal society as Spivak says that, "there is no space from which the sexed subaltern subject can speak" (103).

Though after a period of time the uncle stopped sexually abusing Veera, he continued to visit the family and have cordial relations with the victim. Veera's mental condition is reflective of the grave impact the recurrent appearance of her abuser had on her mental well-being and how she is traumatized and suffers mental abuse. Many a times the abused child doesn't want to go near her abuser but the family forces her to respect and confront the offending person without realizing the child's hesitation. Subaltern children like Veera vulnerably fall prey to child sexual abuse because of their social and cultural conditioning. The patriarchal society has moulded the psyche of innocent children in a way that they are not able to resist against the abusive behaviour of an elder. From the very beginning, children are taught to respect and obey their elders especially men; that's why when an elder abuses a child then she is left with no option except to remain muted to the sexual advances of the elder. Veera told Mahabir why she was unable to question her uncle because she was always forced to respect him even when she didn't want to. "Decency, etiquette, greet him, touch his feet" 'Tameez, Tahzeeb. Namaste Karo. Paon chuo inke' (my trans.; 57:00-57:31) says Veera with an abstracted look of pain, anger, and betrayal on

her face. Veera's social and cultural upbringing makes her vulnerable and reduces her ability to resist, because of which she never breaks her silence on the ugliest experience of her life. Thus, the subjugation of children, especially female children also occurs due to the patriarchal ideology of respect and obedience obtrudes upon them. Virani jots down some important reasons why children easily fall victim to CSA in her book *Bitter Chocolate*. Some of them are,

- Children are not taught to be autonomous, they are expected to be obedient to adults
- Children are not encouraged to question adult actions, such behaviour is seen as rebellious
- Children do not realize that the abuser is violating a relationship of trust with them because the abuser is known to them
- The abuse is happening at home and children absorb that happening at home as being safe and consequently all right (41).

Due to this kind of social conditioning, the child becomes unable to understand the abuse and remain silent. Virani warns the parents that “remember your child's silence is what the abuser has been trading on” (160). To prevent sexual abuse parents should observe any unusual behaviour in the child and establish a comfortable environment so that the child feels free to “disclose anything he, or she, may have felt as a violation” (Virani 161). They should not teach and force children to respect elders unquestionably, rather they should teach them to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour, ‘good touch’ and ‘bad touch’ and question any action of the elder which makes them uncomfortable. They should not force their “children to hug and kiss others, this sets a critical pattern for abuser later” (Virani 161).

The film ended with a denouement where Veera confronts her abuser in front of her family and when the abuser asks Veera's father to keep his daughter's mouth shut; then her volcano of pain, anger, and subjugation erupts and she starts yelling at him and asks him to shut up. Veera, who lived for so long in the state of voiceless, suppressed, and abused subalternity; suddenly shatters all boundaries of silence as her whole body gets absorbed in her throat-wrenching scream. Veera's exasperated behaviour shows the extent of the psychological trauma she was suffering from her abuse. After vociferously confronting her abuser, she miserably asks her father why he always cautioned her about the dangers of the outside world but never told her to be careful even in the home also because, for a girl, the danger lies in the home too where the protectors become predators. Virani says that, “The politics of domination, the vulnerability of a

woman, the girl's very gender being a liability to herself as a human being...because she is always, always in sexual threat" be it at home or outside the home (Virani xv).

Sujoy Ghosh in his movie *Kahaani2* throws light on the other important aspects of female child sexual abuse. The story revolves around Durga Rani Singh and her adopted daughter Mini Dewan. Few years ago when Durga worked as a receptionist in a school in Kalimpong, she often saw a six-year-old girl Mini who was being brought to the principal's office for indiscipline as she often used to sleep during her classes. When Durga asked Mini about the reason for sleeping off during the classes, she only said, "Because he doesn't let me sleep at night" 'Kyunki wo raat ko mujhe sone nahi dete' (my trans.; 00:28:19-23). Mini's words were like an arrow that flung at Durga's heart and soul and she who herself was a victim of child sexual abuse realizes that there must be something wrong happening with Mini. The continuous echoing of Mini's words in Durga's mind prompts her to go to Mini's home to know the reason behind her unusual behaviour. There Durga tries to befriend reclusive Mini so that Mini could tell her what is happening with her, in between she also witnessed bruises on Mini's thighs and knees but when she asked her about it Mini remained silent. After many attempts of Durga, Mini finally confides that her uncle Mohit sexually abuses her. Due to her abuse, she becomes reclusive, morose, and taciturn and cannot even focus on her studies.

This movie not only shows the trauma of CSA on the victim but through the character of Durga it also portrays what a subaltern woman has to go through if she raises her voice against the issue. It also unveils the hypocritical attitude of family, police, and society towards this issue as well as the victim. For instance, the moment Durga comes to know about Mini's abuse at the hands of her uncle she immediately informs Mini's grandmother who simply admonishes her. Mohit also starts harassing, verbally abusing, and threatening Durga to be away from Mini. She was fired from her job also because she entered the Dewans house pretending to be a teacher. Durga lies to save Mini but Dewans and the school used Durga's lie as a pretext to punish her for raising her voice against CSA. When she tries to explain to the principal that she went to the house of the Dewans because Mini's uncle sexually abuses her, the principal who was a close friend to the Dewans starts shouting on her, "Are you blind...Mohit loves Mini like his daughter and why would a family abuse their own child?" (00:57:09-22). The principal said this because like many Indians she also believes that child sexual abuse, especially in the family is not

happening in India. It is just a foreign phenomenon. Our society has closed its eyes on this issue and cannot or rather do not want to see the harsh reality of CSA in India.

Durga files a complaint against Mohit Dewan but in return, she was charged for lying from Mini's family. Not only this, but the police officer dismissed the case against the Dewan because Mini was not able to tell him about her abuse and above all because the Dewans were highly reputed and so powerful. Virani says, "The benefit of the doubt is given to the perpetrator because he has his good reputation and social standing which must be protected at all cost. Including against the interest of the child; there is nothing more damaging than the bastard's inconsistency" (xxvii).

The most execrable part of Mini's abuse was that instead of taking care and supporting her, Mini's Grandma manipulates her into believing that it was all her fault and now Mohit Chachu will not love her anymore. She mentally tortured Mini to such an extent that she jumped off from the terrace and becomes paralysed down her waist. The grandmother held Mini accountable for her abuse and questions that if she was abused then why she never told her, "surely she knows the difference between love and abuse" "surely use pyaar aur abuse me farq maaloom hai (my trans.; 01:07:28-32). This shows the culture of victim-blaming. Especially in the cases of rape and sexual abuse the society portrays victims as accused and holds them responsible for their abuse even if the victim is an innocent child. The grandmother was not even able to understand how a six-year-old child would know the difference between love and abuse? How would she know that her uncle is not playing with her but sexually abusing her? The grandmother knew about Mini's abuse but she always denied it and supports her son because of which Mini was abused by her uncle again and again. He was emboldened because he knew that even if the child hesitantly voices her trauma the truth will be denied. "Hush the child will be told, 'little children should not talk like this!'" says Virani, "Child sexual abuse, is thus, for the perpetrator is about malevolence and the mastery of it" (18). If the grandma would have taken any strict action against his son, Mini would have not been victimised by him time and again. Instead, she and her son give Mini so many gifts, dresses, and toys to keep her mouth shut but when she reveals Durga about her abuse then out of rage the grandma goes to kill her. Durga manages to save Mini and flees with her to Chandan Nagar. Thus, *Kahaani2* not just deal with the issue of Female Child Sexual Abuse at physical and mental levels but at a social level too

where a woman or a girl falls prey to abuse because of their gender and they have to pay a heavy price if they raise voice against their abuse.

Conclusion:

Nisha, Mini and, Veera, all of them are sexually abused at their homes by an adult male member of their family and their screams are suppressed by the power of patriarchy. Their characters show how sexual abuse in childhood stunts the child's social, emotional, and cognitive development. In all the three stories it is visible that "Sexual Abuse isn't about sex. It's about power and control" (Bromley, 56). In this game of power and control, it is always the man who holds power and the female is to be controlled as per the patriarchal ideology. The male gets the right to use his power over females through his position in the family as well as in the social structure. As A. Elizabeth Stanko in her book *Intimate Intrusions: Women's Experience of Male Violence* says that, "...An adult male, be it father, stepfather, grandfather, uncle (etc) asserts his rights over a (female) child's sexuality, his power, and right to use the child sexually, as he pleases. The source of this power is located in adult emotional and physical experience and in the trust male adults automatically receive within the family unit" (23). In the Indian familial structure also, the male adult always holds the supreme position and power and on the contrary, the female child holds the subordinate or subaltern position and therefore, is powerless. Stanko believes that the position of a female child in the family structure and "her lack of life experience (who could expect a 6 or 7-years-old to negotiate sexual relations with an adult male?) do not often give her the structural or emotional power to fend off sexual advances: her femaleness is her powerlessness... (female child sexual abuse) is the most glaring example of men's power over women and women's sexuality" (23-24).

All the three literary and cinematic texts unflinchingly portray the subaltern position of female children in the patriarchal society who are subjugated and exploited both on the basis of age and gender as well as the issue of CSA that has always been brushed under the carpet. By narrating the untold stories of female child sexual abuse, these texts make the deafening silence around this issue perceptible and enable us to understand the plight of sexually abused female children. The stories analysed in this paper serve as a voice for many silent victims and empower them to speak out their own experiences of sexual abuse. These texts also articulate the need to raise awareness on child sexual abuse and break new grounds for conversation on this hushed-up issue.

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