

Echoes of Silence in a Cultural Vacuum: Study of Child Abuse in Select Hindi Cinema

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is a troubling and perplexing problem in any society. With reference to Indian social and cultural system it becomes even more disturbing because of the cultural vacuum around the same. The lack of terminology and unknowingness forces a child to succumb to silence. The article attempts to explore the evolving image of women's representation in mainstream Indian cinema with reference to child abuse. The present paper has emphasized the need for a change in the belief system while discussing the struggle of women who survived child sexual abuse as it's shown in the films. *Highway* and *Kahani2* have been used as the primary source as the strong women characters portrayed in these films reflect changing mainstream Hindi cinema. The conclusion portrays the need to reason the disabling aspects of social and cultural belief system and their role in the development of a healthy society.

Keywords: Silence, Child Sexual Abuse, Films, Women, Trauma, Socio-Cultural, Reputation, Fragmentation

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Every art form presents life and culture in its own unique way. We study art, culture, literature, humanities to understand our life struggles and achievements of past, present and future possibilities. The study of humanities allows us to understand and explore human experiences across the world. It lets us comprehend and be aware of the reason behind our different histories and a range of

common experiences. Literature has always been one of the richest sources of knowledge and enlightenment. Through stories of people from various lives and cultures, it illuminates us with an understanding of people from distant lands. And, cinema is not a break from other traditional art forms i.e. literature, paintings etc., rather, an expansion of the same lineage. Its similar to the expansion of love as discussed by A. J. Smith (2002) through Donne's poem "Forbidding Mourning", "endure not yet/ a breach, but an expansion,/ Like gold to airy thinness beat." (p. 366). While literature allows us to imagine and live a whole new world and life through our imagination, films with the aid of new tools and techniques present the world right before us. Like binoculars, films bring distant lands and lives right before our sight reflecting the flesh and blood of a place's culture and society. Films, with an audio-visual treat in a dark theatre call on us to immerse in a new world.

Films offer us the opportunity to look at multiple aspects of a society ensembled on a single screen. We can learn about the values of a society, its culture, mindset of the people, reality, imagination, dreams of the people and much more. Films on subjects like, patriotism, love, corruption, war, marriage, gangsters, freedom struggle, and partition have been prominent in Indian cinema. As Indian society is patriarchal in nature, films reflect the life and culture the same way. The focus of Hindi films has always been men and their representation in films. It has been observed by critics, since decades that even if there's a women-centric film, the characters will embody patriarchal values. Shabana Azmi in one of her interviews with *IndiaKnowledge@Wharton* on changing role of women in cinema and society said, "although, earlier, too, you've had very many women-centric films, women were cast in the traditional stereotypical mode of the forgiving wife, the suffering mother, the sacrificing

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mother, the understanding sister, etc. For instance, in the 1960s, there was a film called *Main Chup Rahoongi* [I Will Remain Silent], where remaining silent was considered a virtue for women” (Azmi, 2013).

Since the 1980s with the wave of feminism in India, films on women and issues associated with women started being portrayed. They found centre-stage with films on issues like dowry, rape, divorce, widow remarriage, female infanticide, girl child education, and many more. With the new millennium, Indian mainstream cinema has experienced films on a range of issues which had long been ignored. These films discussed problems of teenage motherhood, women freedom, desires, independence and sexuality. In addition to this, films started addressing the issues related to LGBT, disability, diseases like HIV, children with special needs and similar such content with a new perspective.

Films about children and their needs rarely found centre stage in the mainstream cinema in India. Children traditionally are used for some comic relief or as supporting characters in films to take the narrative ahead. The issues related to children never gained the attention it needed. Yet, films like *Bombay*, *Chillar Party*, *Taare Zameen Par*, *Stanley ka Dabba*, *Iqbal*, *Paa* etc. gave a new dimension to mainstream Indian cinema.

Nonetheless, Indian society always shied away from exploring its deep rooted beliefs and culture. Where films like *OMG*, *PK* etc. questioned the blind faith of people in God; *Highway*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Kahani2* and few others raised the question of a girl child’s safety in her own house. Films like these questioned the ability of a human to reason and ask them to break the silence on the unjust that is taking place in the pretense of culture and tradition.

Child sexual abuse is one of the most sensitive issues and has majorly been dealt with silence and secrecy. According to a research conducted by Lisa A. Fontes and Carol Plummer, the collective culture of Asian communities strongly believe in the values of “izzat” and the “ideas of filial piety, which require honoring older male relatives” (Fontes & Plummer, 2010, p. 501). Such aspects of the culture with the patriarchal set-up triple challenge a girl child when abused sexually; first in being a child, second, in her gender and then through abuse. In shame and fear

of stigma and social exclusion, the parents of the child do not speak about it and also restrain the child from doing so.

This paper discusses the struggle of women who survived child sexual abuse against the chauvinist socio-cultural bounds. To study the behavioural aspects of the society, qualitative research approach has been applied. The paper attempts to question the set belief system of patriarchy, meanings, definitions, and ideologies which has been reflected through symbols, dialogues, metaphors and other tools by the film makers. The focus of the paper will be on the need for change in the patriarchal socio-cultural beliefs that denies reason against set belief system. It touches upon the factors that restrain child sexual abuse disclosure and the need for children to be aware of their body and sexuality. While doing so, it talks about the need for an environment that supports women and children instead of judging them.

Films like *Highway*, *Monsoon Wedding*, *Kahani2* and few more have addressed this issue. For the present paper, *Highway* and *Kahani2* have been taken as the primary source. Both the films have dealt with the issue of women who have survived child sexual abuse. The significant aspect of the films is, the very characters stand against their abuser, the society and the internal deadlock of trauma.

Kahani2, is a story about Durga, a child sexual abuse survivor and her fight against a young girl’s sexual abuse. She is against the social system which first abuses and then blames women for their condition. The film has indicated cultural vacuum in the society where a section of society is suffering in silence. These children without any mental or emotional support from their socio-cultural environment feel “dislocated from the available socio-cultural reference points, with no models of how to respond and no words to define the abuse” (Kitzinger, 2001, p. 94). This lack of social and cultural recognition results in frightening and disorienting effects. This helplessness leads them to feel self-alienated from the world around and that sense of isolation; confusion and dislocation lead them to a fragmented self.

According to a study conducted by Jenny Kitzinger (2010), during her interviews with the survivors of child abuse, she found that during her interviews the interviewees

wanted to know about other interviews, their experiences and lives. Because, that gave them the sense of belonging, something with which they could relate to, of being a part of something even if that's fragmented. Surprisingly, when she sent the transcript of their interviews to them they reacted to their own stories as if this is for the first time they have heard such a story. This unknowingness was the result of the cultural vacuum where there was no space for such an experience (Kitzinger, 2010, p. 94).

Kahani2, shows this alienation in Mini, she had that fear and uneasy feeling which differentiated her from her classmates. The trauma of sexual abuse at tender age changed her into a completely different person. As Sandra L. Bloom has also mentioned in her work, "A traumatic experience impacts the entire person- the way we think, the way we learn, the way we remember things, the way we feel about ourselves, the way we feel about other people, and the way we make sense of the world..." (Bloom, 1999, p. 2). When Durga asks Mini, "who doesn't let you sleep?" Mini in response to this question runs away in fear and confusion. She was scared of the revelation of the secret which only she knew, that experience which haunts her and something which she was not supposed to share with anyone. This question from a person with whom she hardly interacted panicked her in discomfort and horror. In many cases of child sexual abuse children succumb to 'learned helplessness'. Mini hates the pain and suffering she goes through but the lack of support and the unknowingness makes her feel helpless. Veera from *Highway* faces similar situation, where she has to maintain silence in the name of "tameez" and "tehzeeb". When she tells her mother about her abuse by her uncle, her mother shushed her in the name of the family's honor and reputation. Her helplessness silences her, which is the worst of all conditions where an individual even loses hope. This situation is quite similar to the animal about which Sandra L. Bloom has talked about while discussing trauma. She states:

Once the animal becomes accustomed to trauma, it fails to try and escape from danger...Changes only occurs when the experimenter actively intervenes and pulls the animals out of the cage. At first, the animal runs back in, but after sufficient trials, it finally catches on and learns how to escape from the terror again. The animal's behavior improves significantly, but they remain vulnerable to stress (Bloom, 1999, p. 3-4).

Similar to this, is the case of Veera and Mini, both get scared when they are first pulled out of their cages. Mini secludes herself in her room and jumps off the roof blaming herself for the family's troubles. Veera in *Highway* when gets kidnapped, struggles hard to get back to her home. It is when she unconsciously hides from the police's search in Mahabir's truck, she realizes what she is trying to escape from. This unconscious act makes her confront her long buried pain and unease of child sexual abuse which was suppressed since her childhood. This takes her to a journey inward and she starts questioning her identity. During her journey with Mahabir, she experiences a difference between the identities, first, of "well behaved Veera" which was given to her by her family, that she lived all her life. And, the other identity which she is discovering from her new experiences, that is, bold and free. She was now freed from the bounds of "tameez", "tehzeeb" and the unwilling respect she was forced to show towards her uncle and the people who silenced her from voicing her pain and agony. She starts liking her new identity which had no image to follow and no one to judge. This gave her the feeling of liberation from a constrained image of self.

All her life she was imprisoned in her own body in the guise of protection from the unknown external threat while she was continuously been exploited in her own home. On her return, when Veera speaks about her uncle and questions him in front of everyone about her sexual exploitation, the patriarchal set up feels shaken with the raised voice and denial of the set structure. She, as an individual who belongs to the 'other' compartment, is not expected to move outside or even deviate from the provided concepts and definitions. Veera, not just deviates, she discards the structure, which silences an individual in the name of tradition, culture and honor. The pain, agony and the sense of self which trivialized and silenced her in the name of "tameez", "tehzeeb", "izzat" found a voice outside that structure.

There are many factors which lead to such conditions of sexually abused children. The major problem indicated by Jenny Kitzinger (2010) is the lack of terminology, a system or a medium to communicate their pain (Kitzinger, 2010, p. 95). This refers to the absence of education, information, social support system, and a space for child sexual abuse survivors in the society because of unacceptance of such facts in our stereotyped mindset. Pigeons close their eyes

on seeing a cat, thinking she doesn't exist. Similarly, our cultural social spaces have a closed eye towards issues like child sexual abuse.

In the same way, when Durga, tells Mrs. Diwan about Mini's abuse she turns a blind eye to it. To ensure Mini's safety, Durga complains to police about Mini's sexual abuse, and in the opinion of Mini's grandmother it ruined the reputation and honor of the family. The patriarchal ego and the social position of Diwan family feel taken aback. The responsibility to save the family's honor was with Mini's grandmother. She meets Durga and asks her to take her complain back. Durga in response, not just questions the need to make a child aware and be conscious of her body, but also raises the issue of the cultural vacuum where they are not taught to distinguish between love and abuse. That particular scene from the film also portrays very carefully how women are caged by the socio-cultural bounds in the name of honor, reputation and "izzat". To ensure that their "izzat" is unblemished they could even declare their own child insane. If it doesn't silence her, then she could even be killed to save family's reputation.

Women are considered as the protector of the social, cultural and spiritual values of a society. Partha Chatterjee in one of his articles on women has tried to explain this through the binaries of 'inner and outer' which is linked with 'ghar' and 'bahar'. Women, as representative of 'ghar', "They represent one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests...the home is the essence and must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world" (Chatterjee, 2010, p. 122). Correspondingly, Veera's mother was the bearer of the responsibility to maintain the essence of home and the socio-cultural values. She learned from her mother, aunts and grandmothers that "the ideal image is that of women who expresses an obsessive fidelity to the family members, irrespective of sensitive reciprocity or callous exploitation" (Dasgupta, Dipankar, & Sudeshna, 2011, p. 7). These values allowed her to silence her daughter against the abuse she was facing. In the same way, Mini's grandmother fails to understand the plight of Mini. Her son was not shown asking for a favor from his mother, but, Mrs. Diwan stands by his side and blames Mini for everything.

Mini's grandmother and Veera's mother were responsible for their acts, but we must understand that they also acted as the agents of the patriarchal structure of the society, its culture and values which are equally and additionally responsible for the same. In *The Country Wife* by Wycherly, these lines where Horner says, "[Y]our women of honour, as you call 'em, are only chary of their reputations, not their persons, and 'tis scandal they would avoid, not men." (Wycherly, 2014, p. 197). It reflects the shallow idea of honor and respect in a society which is more focused on the views and reactions of the people of the society instead of an individual's conscience. It is the patriarchal infection that has infected the minds of the people and has disabled their critical faculties. The popular practice of the same has naturalized this and this disability is so widespread now that it is considered as normal where people believe, "it's how things are done around here". A renowned American computer scientist, Grace Hopper has suggested that to be one of the most damaging phases. Let's understand this with reference to a modern fable formed from a part of an experiment conducted by G.R. Stephenson, in "*Cultural acquisition of a specific learned response among rhesus monkeys*":

The scientists placed five monkeys in a cage, and in the middle, a ladder with bananas on top. Every time a monkey went up the ladder, the scientists soaked the rest of the monkeys with cold water. After a while, every time a monkey would start up the ladder, the others would pull it down and beat it up. After a time, no monkey would dare try climbing the ladder, no matter how great the temptation. The scientists then decided to replace one of the monkeys. The first thing this new monkey did was to start climbing the ladder. Immediately, the others pulled him down and beat him up. After several beatings, the new monkey learned never to go up the ladder, even though there was no evident reason not to, aside from the beatings. The second monkey was substituted and the same occurred. The first monkey participated in the beating of the second monkey. Same continued to happen till the fifth monkey was finally replaced as well. What was left was a group of five monkeys that – without ever having received a cold shower – continued to beat up any monkey who attempted to climb the ladder. If it was

possible to ask the monkeys why they beat up all those who attempted to climb the ladder, their most likely answer would be “I don’t know. It’s just how things are done around here (‘The Famous ‘Social Experiment’: 5 Monkeys and a Ladder”, 2014).

We must reason before following any belief or accepting any values. There’s nothing constant, with time our needs and demands also change. Humans are blessed with the ability to reason and if it is absent, it classifies us as disabled according to the definitions of disability provided by many dictionaries.

Socio-cultural aspects play an important role in curing or infecting an individual or a society. Child abuse is one of the diseases that leave lifetime traumatizing effects on an individual. To cure the society from this disease, it becomes imperative to work on the stereotypical social and cultural surroundings that restrain an individual from voicing his/her abuse. As, Sinha (2009) in his book *Culture and Organizational Behaviour*, quoting Kakkar has mentioned, what is prescribed in the ancient classical text *Charak Samhita* of Ayurveda:

the medical examination should include patient’s emotional and social sphere. The doctor should take into account the region in which the patient is born, grew up and have developed the disease. The peculiarity of land, food habits, general condition of health of the inhabitants of the region, the kinds of diseases they [are] most likely [to] contact, people’s special features, etc. are also considered before a line of treatment is decided upon (Sinha, 2009, p. 39).

So, probably if there’s any solution to the disability of naturalized belief system that would be to work upon the socio-cultural set up and bring change in the conditioning of the self.

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