

Representation of child abuse in literature and cinema

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Abstract: *Child abuse is actually a physical, emotional, sexual harm to a child. Although, it is a global problem, yet the lesser explored and discussed because many nations do not consider their traditional practices as a part of child abuse. Though there are certain laws to deal with it still they are not enough to stop such disease. Likewise, when we trace the history of child abuse in literary texts, we find that it was always there though the term is modern, but we still remember the classic fairy tales such as the story of “Cinderella” and “Snow White” where they were abused and tortured by their step mothers. Moreover, the advent of industrialization and emergence of child labour gave subject to literary writers and scholars to discuss child maltreatment and vulnerabilities. This paper explores the representation of child abuse in literature and cinema.*

Key Words: *child abuse, literature, cinema, Hindi literature, Indian cinema.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

If we look at history, we find that a child has always been subjected to physical, mental and sexual abuse. But society never talked about this harassment even in many cases, it was accepted. India has a patriarchal family system where a child lives in the protection of his father, cared and nurtured by the mother. In this system many forms of abuse are accepted as a part of discipline, such as beating a child means ‘training,’ to make him/her a better person. In history, there were no laws for child abuse because it was never considered a problem and crime. It is only in recent decades that law, rules and directions have been made and given by governments in order to fight against child abuse and promote children’s rights. As Smt. Renuka Chaowdhury, Former minister of state, Government of India says:

Child abuse is shrouded in secrecy and there is a conspiracy of silence around the entire subject. In fact there is a well-entrenched belief that there is no child abuse in India and certainly there is no sexual abuse in the country. Further, certain kinds of traditional practices that are accepted across the country, knowingly or unknowingly amount to child abuse. (MWCD i)

There are many controversies in defining the term ‘Child abuse’ because of its nature and forms which vary from culture to culture and nation to nation. As some societies do not consider corporal punishment for kids as a physical abuse while in some sexual relations between adult and child is not considered abusive and illegal. As Scannapieco and Carrick in the book *Understanding Child Maltreatment: An Ecological and Developmental Perspective* points out:

Even today the Bible is used as justification for beating children. Proverbs tells us, “He that spareth the rod hateth his son: but he that loveth him chasteneth him betimes” and, “Withhold not correction from the child; for if thou beatest him with the rod, he shall not die. Thou shall beat him with a rod, and shall deliver his soul from Hell.” These and many other biblical passages imply or are interpreted by some as support for parental harm to children. (3)

Thus, the specific definition of child abuse cannot be given because every nation has its own laws and jurisdictions to define child abuse, according to its culture and traditions, but there are certain components that exist nearly in every definition such as physical, sexual, mental, emotional harassment, exploitation, harm and neglect of a child. “While certain child abuse and neglect issues are common in almost all countries at the global level such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional and psychological abuse, abandonment and, increasingly, problems of street children, there are also many issues which are prevalent only in certain regions of the world” (MWCD 5). Some working definitions of child abuse used by the international and national authorities are as follows-

1-Child maltreatment, sometimes referred to as child abuse and neglect, includes all forms of physical and emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation that results in actual or potential harm to the child’s health, development or dignity. Within this broad definition, five subtypes can be distinguished – physical abuse; sexual abuse; neglect and negligent treatment; emotional abuse; and exploitation. (WHO “Child maltreatment”)

2- Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act as Amended by P.L. 111-320, the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010 of USA defines child abuse and neglect as, at minimum:

•“Any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caretaker which results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation”; or

•"An act or failure to act which presents an imminent risk of serious harm."(6)

3-Goa Children Act 2003 and rules 2004-"Child abuse" refers to the maltreatment, whether habitual or not, of the child which includes any of the following:—

- (i) psychological and physical abuse, neglect, cruelty, sexual abuse and emotional maltreatment;
- (ii) any act by deeds or words which debases, degrades or demeans the intrinsic worth and dignity of a child as a human being;
- (iii) unreasonable deprivation of his basic needs for survival such as food and shelter; or failure to immediately give medical treatment to an injured child resulting in serious impairment of his growth and development or in his permanent incapacity or death;

4-Ministry of Women and Child Development, India (MWCD) in the report Study on Child Abuse: 2007, takes the following working definition of child abuse—"Child abuse refers to the intended, unintended and perceived maltreatment of the child, whether habitual or not", including any of the following:

- 1- Psychological and physical abuse, neglect, cruelty, sexual and emotional maltreatment.
- 2- Any act, deed or word which debases, degrades or demeans the intrinsic worth and dignity of a child as a human being.
- 3-Unreasonable deprivation of his/her basic needs for survival such as food and shelter, or failure to give timely medical treatment to an injured child resulting in serious impairment of his/her growth and development or in his/her permanent incapacity or death. (13)

In general words, child abuse means any form of physical, emotional or sexual mistreatment or exploitation by parents or caregiver or adult (known or unknown) which causes any type of injury, emotional damage even death to a child. Ministry of Women and Child Development, India classifies the following types of child abuse-

- Physical abuse is inflicting physical injury upon a child. This may include hitting, shaking, kicking, beating, or otherwise harming a child physically.
- Emotional abuse (also known as verbal abuse, mental abuse, and psychological maltreatment) includes acts or the failure to act by parents, caretakers, peers and others that have caused or could cause serious behavioural, cognitive, emotional, or mental distress/trauma.
- Sexual abuse is inappropriate sexual behaviour with a child. It includes fondling a child's genitals, making the child fondle an adult's genitals, sexual assault (intercourse, incest, rape and sodomy), exhibitionism and pornography. To be considered as child abuse, these acts have to be committed by a person responsible for the care of a child or related to the child (for example a baby-sitter, parent, neighbour, relatives, extended family member, peer, older child, friend, stranger, or a day-care provider).
- Child neglect is an act of omission or commission leading to the denial of a child's basic needs. Neglect can be physical, educational, emotional or psychological. Physical neglect entails denial of food, clothing, appropriate medical care or supervision. It may include abandonment. Educational neglect includes failure to provide appropriate schooling or special educational needs. Psychological neglect includes lack of emotional support and love (13)

Thus, child abuse is actually a physical, emotional, sexual harm to a child. Although, it is a global problem, yet the lesser explored and discussed because many nations do not consider their traditional practices as a part of child abuse. Though there are certain laws to deal with it still they are not enough to stop such disease. Likewise, when we trace the history of child abuse in literary texts, we find that it was always there though the term is modern, but we still remember the classic fairy tales such as the story of "Cinderella" and "Snow White" where they were abused and tortured by their step mothers. Moreover, the advent of industrialization and emergence of child labour gave subject to literary writers and scholars to discuss child maltreatment and vulnerabilities.

As the term child abuse was officially introduced in society in the late 1970s, but it was discussed and represented in the literary canon in the form of incest, psychological neglect, pedophilia in the background of the plot, as we see in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender in the Night* (1934), William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), *Absalom, Absalom* (1936), Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955), etc. Furthermore, in the earlier writings, child abuse is represented as one of the segments in character's life and never discussed as the principal traumatic experience of the protagonist's life that later affects the child's physicality and psyche and how does his/her whole life becomes a dark journey?

As child abuse is a very secretive crime and the victims of such crimes could not share their suffering. While psychologists say that sharing is the primary and foremost way to overcome the trauma and pain, the victims undergo and experience and in such state, literature plays an important role in helping the child abuse victims as Ellen Bass and Lura Devis in *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* writes, "So often survivors have had their experiences denied, trivialized, or distorted. Writing is an important avenue for healing because it gives you the opportunity to define your own reality. You can say: This did happen to me. It was that bad. It was the fault &

responsibility of the adult. I was—and am—innocent”(31).When we look at the literary representation of child abuse, we come across two types of writings. First is in the form of fictional stories that represent the child abuse as the main theme and its consequences in the protagonist’s life and second in the form of autobiographies and memoirs. Here is an attempt to provide a review of award- winning books dealing with the issue of child abuse. There is a long list of fictional stories written on child abuse, some of them are as follows-

Searching the theme of child abuse in contemporary Indian writing, we find that both Hindi literature and Indian literature in English treat the subject in a very subtle way such as *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke* (1972) is a kind of Bildungsroman, deals with early experiences and pain of the child abuse written by Krishna Sobti, a prominent and Sahitya Akademi Award -winning Hindi writer. Ratti is the main protagonist who suffers from the haunting and agonizing memories of child sexual abuse. Whenever she touches her female part, she feels incomplete and unable to establish a relationship with any man. She has accepted what society says about her, “Ratti is not a good girl and she is not a woman. She is just a wet wood, when burns, will smoke, just smoke” (17). Another important work on this theme is *A Doll for the Child Prostitute* (1977) by Kamla Das. It is a gripping and moving story of a twelve- year- old girl Rukmani who is raped by her step-father and forced into the prostitution at the age of playing with dolls.

Phaniyamma (1983) by M.K. Indira, a Sahitya Academy Award-winning novel, originally written in Kannada language, is about the life and experiences of a child widow. It is a story of Phaniyamma, a girl child who is married to an older man, but he dies and at the age of twelve she becomes a child widow. This novel traces the harsh realities of child marriage and widowhood where they are not allowed to eat more than once in a day, they have to shave their head and wear white clothes. As a child widow they have to perform several traditions in the name of religious practices. One more award- winning work that traces the issue of child abuse is Arundhati Roy’s debut novel *The God of Small Things* (1997).The whole novel deals with several issues, but the fourth chapter focuses on the issue of child abuse and raises the question how the powerless beings are subjected to neglect, abuse and agony. Dina Mehta’s *Getting Away with Murder* (2000) also deals with the multiple themes and one of them is a child abuse where the protagonist Sonali is constantly sexually abused by her maternal uncle when she was eight years old. The most noticeable recent writing on child sexual abuse is Mahesh Dattani’s *Thirty Days in September* (2001). It is a grim, dark and painful tale of love and betrayal that explores the brutal realities of the bond between adult and child.

As most of the Indian writing is in the form of fiction, American literature presents the issue in the form of autobiographies and memoirs along with fictions. The first autobiography on child abuse was written in 1951 *A Tin Butterflies* by Mary McCarthy. It is a testimonial to all kinds of abuses borne by a six year old girl along with her three younger brothers at her great –aunt and uncle’s house after the death of her parents in an epidemic in 1918. One more important account on child abuse is a childhood memoir of American authors such as Christina Crawford’s *Mommie Dearest* (1978), Mary Karr’s *The Liars' Club* (1995),Dave Pelzer’s *A Child Called "It"*(1995).All these memoirs are about troubled and apocalyptic childhood where the children suffer physically , mentally, emotionally at the hands of their near and dear ones .Furthermore, the most celebrated Nobel Prize winning American novelist Toni Morrison is one of the few novelists who discuss child abuse in a very sensitive manner in all her novels, such as, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) is about sexual abuse where Pecola is raped by her own father twice and gets pregnant. *Tar Baby* (1981) deals with physical abuse where a young mother Margaret abuses her child physically by burning him with cigarette tips and cuts him with pins. *Paradise* (1997) is about child abandonment. Seneca is abandoned by her mother and physically and sexually abused by her foster family. Morrison latest novel *God Help the Child* (2015) is about the consequences of child abuse. This is the story of Bride who grew up without love, care and affection. Likewise, Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* (1982) is also about child abuse experiences. This is the story of Celie who is repeatedly raped by her step father in her childhood and has two children with him. This abuse makes her to believe that she is born to suffer and is unable to enjoy sex with man very much like Ratti in *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*. Tracing the theme of child abuse in modern British literature we come across many Scottish writers who discuss the issue of sexual abuse, especially incest in literary cannon sensitively and seriously, in their writings such as Dorothy Nelson’s *In Night’s City* (1982),Jennifer Johnston’s *The Invisible Worm* (1991), Lia Miils *Another Alice* (1996),Edna O'Brien’s *Down by the River* (1997), Patrick McCabe’s *Winterwood* (2006), but Shena Mackay’s *The Orchard on Fire* (1995)and *The Gathering* (2007) byAnne Enright are the masterpieces on the underlying theme of child abuse and molestation .

Shena Mackay’s *The Orchard on Fire* is a story told from the perspectives of two best friends April and Ruby, who suffer from physical and sexual molestation at the hands of adults. The novel throws light on the child’s reaction on abuse as April and Ruby’s feeling of shame, guilt and confusion, their helplessness to reveal the issue to their parents, their questioning if it’s their fault etc. Likewise, Anne Enright’s *The Gathering* is a trauma, testimony and reminiscence to 1990s Ireland when sexual crime in family and churches became a part of an open discussion in post-independent Ireland. This is a kind of testimonial and memoir narrated by the protagonist Veronica Hegarty following the suicide of her brother and bear witness of childhood molestation. Like literature, films are also not fictional tales or simply mere entertainment, but they also portray the realities of the society as a book does. When it comes to the

representation of child abuse in cinema, we find it has portrayed the issue more powerfully in comparison to literature. There are number of films and television film series centered on the true account of child abuse. Some of them are as follows- *Something About Amelia* (1984) directed by Randa Haines, is about incest, a taboo subject for society and most of the cases still go unnoticed. The plot revolves around thirteen year old girl Amelia, whose father has been forcing her to have sexual intercourse with him for last two years and the story takes turns when she breaks down in front of her school counsellor and the family's relationship starts disintegrating.

I Know My First Name Is Steven (1989) by Larry Elikann is another such true account of Steven Stayner, who was kidnaped and sexually abused by a man for seven years and when he returns home, it becomes difficult for him to adjust with the family. *The People under the Stairs* (1991) by Wes Craven, is a surrealistic horror comedy film, based on a true story where a brother and sister keep their stolen children locked in a basement for years. This story is very similar to Nithari case which happened in 2005 -2006 at Noida in India. Another film on child abuse is *The Boys of St. Vincent* (1992) directed by John N. Smith. It is a true story of boys being sexually abused at Mount Cashel Orphanage in St. John's, Newfoundland run by a religious community of Roman Catholic Church. Larry Peerce's *Child of Rage* (1992) is centered on the real story of Beth Thomas, who was severely sexually abused by her father and suffers from behavioral and dysfunctional thought patterns as a result of being sexually abused, as a child.

Luc Dionne's *Aurore* (2005), is Quebec biographical drama, set on the life of Aurore Gagnon, who was born in 1909 and her mother dies in 1918 due to illness and after that she is physically tortured by her step mother. Aurore dies from blood poisoning in 1992. *An American Crime* (2007) by Tommy O'Haver, is based on real incident of disturbing depiction of torture and murder of Sylvia Likens in 1965 by Gertrude Baniszewsk. South Korean film *The Crucible* (2011), directed by Hwang Dong-hyuk and based on the novel with the same name, written by Gong Ji-young, is also centered on the real incidents of Gwangju Inhwa School where hearing-impaired young students are sexually abused for five years by the school faculty. The above mentioned films are the real depiction of child abuse incidents. Likewise, there is a long list of films dealing with this issue through fictional plot but very close to unreported realities such as *-Abuse* (1983) directed by Arthur J. Bressan Jr., *Bastard out of Carolina* (1996) directed by Anjelica Huston, Spanish drama *El Bola* (2000) directed by Acheró Mañas, *The Unloved* (2009) directed by Samantha Morton, etc.

When we look for representation of child abuse in Indian cinema we find that it has not portrayed the issue as potentially as the world cinema does. There are a small number of films that deal with the subject at the very surface level, such as Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994) that is a biography of Phoolan Devi known as Indian bandit. The film portrays the painful memories of child abuse where she was physically and sexually abused by her older husband as a child bride. Furthermore, Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding* (2001) is one of the rare films in Indian cinema that sensitively juxtaposes the issue of pedophilia and also deals with child sexual exploitation as a sub theme in the film. Another two films on child abuse are Digvijay Singh's *Maya* (2001) and Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005). The protagonists of both the films Maya and Chuhiya are the victims of traditions and norms of Hindu religion and suffer from emotional, mental and physical abuse at the hands of Hindu patriarchy. Addressing the issue of pedophiles and child abuse Dev Benegal's *Split Wide Open* (2001) and *Achchamundu! Achchamundu!* (2009), Tamil film directed by Arun Vaidyanathan are the rarely known films in Indian cinema. Likewise, Vikramaditya Motwane's *Udaan* (2010), a coming of age drama, is the story of a 17- year- old boy Rohan who suffers from verbal and physical abuse at the hands of his abusive father. Onir's *I Am* (2011) is an anthology film about four different issues in which "Abhimanyu" is centered on the theme of incest and child abuse. *Lakshmi* (2014), directed by Nagesh Kukunoor, discusses the child abuse in the form of child trafficking and child prostitution and *Highway* (2014), directed by Imtiaz Ali, shows the issue of child molestation in elite class of the society. Though literature and cinema both have portrayed the issue of child abuse, still there are various layers of this problem that need additional consideration such as the issue of ritual abuse as a part of child abuse.

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