



THEMATIC STUDY OF VIOLENCE AND ABUSE AGAINST FEMALE CHILDREN IN SELECTED SOUTH ASIAN LITERATURE: A REVIEW

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ABSTRACT The abuse against a girl child in the form of discrimination, exploitation and domestic violence in the name of honour is ubiquitous theme as reflected implicitly in literature. It is not always perceived as a violation of human rights and hence a girl child is prevented from reporting the crime. The perpetrators remain unknown and unpunished because social system of South Asian patriarchal society endorses tradition of silence against the crime of female child abuse. To break this silence authors and critics have tried to reflect issue of female abuse as a hidden theme in their works of literature. The present paper aims to examine the thematic study of abuse and violence against women in aesthetic efforts of various eminent writers. Literature is the mirror of the society so to mirror violence and its implications, the thematic analysis of the chosen texts has been done. The present paper will contextualize the issue of female child abuse by providing the reader an introductive outlook of the texts to raise awareness among masses about the prevalence and existence of this social evil which is making this world an unfit home for girls of South Asian patriarchal society.

KEYWORDS : Violence, Abuse, Patriarchy, Subordination

Violence and abuse against female children is a strategic device employed by men in social systems to subordinate them. As Francine Pickup remarks:

The violence to which women are subject is not random, or abnormal, or defined by specific circumstances alone. It is used as a weapon to punish women for stepping beyond the gendered boundaries set for them, and to instil in them the fear of even considering doing so. It is a systematic strategy to maintain women's subordination to men(303).

There is abundant literature in the form of fiction, non-fiction, stories, novels, poems and other literary genres available on violence and abuse but not much was said or found about violence and abuse against female children. In the review of literature on the thematic study of female child abuse it was analyzed that the essays, novels and research papers etc. have reflected and touched many other issues and themes like purdah, polygamy, incest, myths, karmas, etc but no specific interpretation of the issue of female child abuse has been given. Very less has been discussed about female child abuse in literature explicitly. So, this research paper tends to throw light on different implication of the problem and its thematic study in various works of literature of South Asian origin. This paper is a voice to raise awareness in the society towards the social problem of female child abuse as has been reflected in the selected texts.

Jasbir Jain in her essay entitled, *Images of Women in Myth and History*, elaborates the hegemonic tendency of both myth and history in assigning a subordinate role to females. Myth marginalizes and history excludes women making them traditionally ahistoric entities. All the myths especially of Indian origin privilege fatherhood over women. They are positioned in terms of either sources of temptation or agents of procreation. However, it cannot be generalized but is the mark of cultural difference as in India dharma and karma are the main focus in the conceptual structure of religious myths. Myths by emphasizing on chastity, abstinence and sexual fidelity, guide and restrict woman's duty towards her husband as Stree Dharm. Similarly, history too highlights the value of chastity, virtue and sacrifice in women. Hence these images of women in myth and history project women in secondary role and position. So by interpreting the images of women in myth and history the author discusses the theme of discrimination against the girl child.

Mahesh Dattani's *Thirty Days in September* is a play about incest and its impact on shaping the life of the child protagonist. The play depicts and dramatizes the crime of female child sexual abuse. The play endeavors to lift the veil of silence. The muteness, refusal to acknowledge the existence of girl child molestation into the hand of trusted relations and lack of family support evokes critical attention. The child incest leads to psychological trauma and shakes humanity. The molestation of Mala by her maternal uncle results into silence due to social pressure and social taboos. Dattani unveils the conflicts taking place inside the unconscious mind and how sexual assault destroys the soul. The mother's indifferent attitude towards the crime further adds to inconsolable emotional loss giving no solace to the

victim. Through this play Dattani has raised a voice against the hegemony of male in the traditional Indian world and its hidden consequences on the lives of innocent female children. play is an unflinching effort to raise the issue of female child abuse. Asha Kuthari Chaudhari in her article 'Numbness is all; Thirty Days in September' comments, "child abuse spans a range of problems but it is this complicity of the family through silence and a lack of protest that it is the ultimate betrayal for the abused."

Mrinal Panday's short story *Girls* interrogates the double standards of the society. It is a satire on the role and position of girls in traditional Indian families. It revolves around the mentality of the entire family, be it the very mother of the daughters who shows that the desire and need of a son is supreme and of foremost importance and family is considered to be incomplete without a son. The story gives a peep into the psychology of the members of the family that how they actually think about girls. The story is a contrast between religious pretention and social reality. The deep rooted desire to have a son in the family explores the patriarchal construct of the society. The girls in Indian society are treated as inferior beings. The hypocritical attitude of the family towards the girl children is typical feature of Indian families. On the auspicious occasions girls are worshipped and treated as goddesses but the protagonist feels irritated that if the girls are not loved then why the pretention of worship is there.

Women in the Middle East: Past and Present by Nikki R. Keddie is a comprehensive and authoritative history of the lives of the middle east women since the rise of Islam providing a unique overview of their past and rapidly changing present, including a brief autobiography that recounts Keddie's political activism as one of the first women in Middle East Studies. Women in the Middle East examine the experiences of women in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, in Iran, and in all the Arab countries within their individual economic situations, identities, families, and geographies. The Islam is changing with political, cultural, and socio-economic developments. Keddie challenges and breaks the notions of Middle Eastern females as faceless victims, and assesses their involvement in the rise of modern nationalist, socialist, and Islamist movements thereby bringing significant improvements in Middle Eastern women's suffrage, education, marital choice, and health.

Jasbir Jain in the critical essay *Erasing the Margins: Questioning Purdah* elaborates the practice of purdah in many Asian countries as an indicative of a whole social system which reinforces the idea of female subordination inbuilt in patriarchal society. Jasbir Jain delineates the culturally constructed women that have been assigned secondary position through this veil. The origin and practice of purdah has psychological and social constraints on the lives of women as it is extreme restrictive lifestyle hiding the double moral standards. This demarcation is a strategy of exclusion, confinement, dominance and symbolic of hierarchal position of patriarchy. This man-made safeguard of female honour sanctions the crime of rape, incest, violation under patriarchy and male dominance.

Susan Moller Okin, in her essay, *Gender, Inequality and Cultural Difference*, argues that any universal theory, even universal feminist theories, inevitably excludes certain people. She argues that women's experience of oppression is universal that the conditions which women endure in poorer countries are similar to, but worse than, the experiences of western women in richer nations; she claims their problems are, "similar to ours but more so" (Okin 1994, 8).

The Quilt (Lihaaf) by Ismat Chughtai, is about female sexuality and loneliness of a woman who yearns for her husband's love. A frustrated housewife, whose Nawab husband has no time for her, finds sexual and emotional solace in female servant-a lesbian relationship. The protagonist of *The Quilt*, Begum Jan after marriage, is deposited in the house with other possessions. This highlights how the institution of marriage reduces her to an object. Begum Jan yearns for her husband's love and company, but Nawab fails to realize sexual needs of his new bride. The child narrator, a nine year old girl, who is sent to live with Begum Jan for some days, brings to light the fact that a woman who has been oppressed can at times become oppressive. Ismat Chughtai, with great sensitivity, represents the plight of poor girls who are exploited callously by both, men and women of middle and upper classes. By portraying the suffering and abuse of women, Ismat Chughtai projects the prevailing social order.

I Am Nujood, Age 10 and Divorced by Nujood Ali is a tale of a child marriage and an unforgivable form of child abuse. Nujood lived in terror of her husband bursting into her room each night and raping her repeatedly. Nujood Ali's childhood came to an abrupt end in 2008 when her father arranged for her to be married to a man three times her age. Nujood tells of abuse at her husband's hands and of her daring escape. With the help of local advocates and the press, Nujood obtained her freedom-an extraordinary achievement in Yemen, where almost half of all girls are married under the legal age. Nujood's courageous defiance of both Yemeni customs and her own family even inspired other young girls in the Middle East to challenge their marriages. This is an unforgettable story of tragedy, triumph, and courage.

Mukhtar Mai's *In the Name of Honour* examines the world of ancient tribal justice, rampant illiteracy, poverty and repression of women in Pakistan. It is firsthand account of a journey from culturally sanctioned gang rape victim to an outspoken advocate of women's rights. Mukhtar recounts her struggle, fight against tribal rules, brutality against women prevalent in the community and struggle to survive. The survivor chose to fight back, and changed the feminist movement in Pakistan. Her decision to stand up to her accusers was an act of bravery unheard of in one of the world's most adverse climates for women. Mukhtar Mai went on to open a school for girls in an effort to ensure that future generations would not suffer, as she had, from illiteracy. In this account, Mai describes her experience and how she became an agent for change and a beacon of hope for oppressed women around the world. In the Name of Honor is the remarkable and inspirational memoir of a woman who fought and triumphed against exceptional odds.

What the Body Remembers by Sauna Singh Baldwin is a depiction of violence and patriarchal control. It illustrates that how the lives of females are affected in Punjabi culture. An extreme commodification of women can take place. The bodies become sites for violence, rape, abduction and torture. Story pertains to a Sikh family, polygamous marriage and atrocity of 1947 partition. Their bodies are used, abused and traded both psychologically and physically from fathers to husbands. Women as territories are colonized and discarded as per convenience. Sauna Singh Baldwin reveals the concept of intimate colonization in her narrative. She discusses polygamy, female identity, and patriarchal constraints. The story revolves around two wives; a child wife Roop and other mature Satya. Their desire for respect and gender equality is in conflict with their internalized ideology of patriarchal control.

In her essay, *All the Third World of Women*, 1973, Susan Sontag illustrates: "Women live in as imperialist situation in which men are colonialists and women are natives" (P184). She further says that the situation of women in "economically advanced countries" is "neo-colonialist" explaining that "although western women's overall situation has improved the same basic relations of inferiority and superiority of powerlessness and power, of cultural underdevelopment and cultural privilege, prevail between women and men in all

countries" (185). Women are victims both intra and inter families and communities. They are bereft of their rights, opinions and made voiceless. They are traded, killed and dismembered to save fake honour.

A Thousand Splendid Suns authored by Khaled Hosseini in 2007, narrates the tale of Mariam, an illegitimate girl child who suffers both the stigma of her birth and abuse throughout her marriage. The story is set in Afghanistan. It is a multi generational novel which deals with complex and contradictory relationship between parents and children. It is basically a mother daughter story. The love gives them the strength to transcend their limitations. They are exposed to vulnerabilities and have to endure tragedies, difficulties and gender based violence. They suffer discrimination which everyday takes place in Afghan society. They find themselves in an inescapable web. They have to wear burqa, implemented under the Taliban law. But behind this veil everything happens which is not permitted by religion and humanity. Novel is about patriarchal structure where women are dependent on fathers, husbands, and son. Bearing of male children is sole path to social status.

In Michele Elliott's edited book *Female Sexual Abuse of Children*, a courageous and powerful account of secrecy, distress anger and fear surrounding female sexual abuse of child has been given. The book demystifies the myth that abusers can only be males being a patriarchal society. The abusers can be females also. It refutes the rational for our lack of attention to the problem. It combines contradictory beliefs related to abusers and survivors. It discusses various aspects of abuse ranging from impact to treatment for the victims. The purpose is to provide self help guidelines through sharing of stories. The book concludes with a review of the existing literature on female child molestation and help organizations. The book also addresses the current statistics that questions of it being under reported due to fear from the survivors. Book is important for documenting the issue.

Gita Aravamudan's *Disappearing Daughter: The Tragedy of Female Foeticide* is self-explanatory book that alarms the people with a serious issue of girls secretly disappearing from the society in the name of female infanticide and foeticide. This book examines systematic extermination of an entire gender taking place right before our eyes in India. Until the 1980s, women and girls died due to neglect or were killed after birth. Today, technology is used to eliminate the girl child in the womb. The tool of investigative reporting has been used to expose the imperatives that drive this horrific phenomenon. She unravels deep embedded, destructive patriarchal beliefs which restrict women to have no claim on their own bodies. The macabre practice of eliminating female fetuses is bound to bring a disastrous impact on future generations.

The other similar and related works on the topic are India's *Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* by Mala Sen signifies the story about Phoolan Devi, the queen of bandits, Shobhan Bantwal's *The Dowry Bride* is specific about the miseries of dowry, Subhadra Butalia's *The Gift of a Daughter* implies the dowry given by a daughter's parents to her in-laws, *Rudali* by Mahasweta Devi represents the profession of a mourner undertaken by Sanichari to survive in her life. Kamala Markandaya's *Two Virgins* deals with the story of two adolescent girls: one who loses her virginity and another one who escapes with her virginity intact, with the help of the lessons she learnt from the other, Mahasweta Devi's *Bedanabala* indicates the name of the girl who narrates her mother's story. Her mother was brought up in a brothel but she escapes as a virgin from that place luckily and gets married etc.

Hence the issue of female child abuse has started emerging in the literature of Indian sub-continent though on a minimal scale. There is very little research done in this area in India and only a few books have been written, away from the consciousness of the patriarchal societies. Certainly, the problem exists and there is a need to understand the complexity of the real situation. The crime of violence and abuse is worst in the case of a female child as has never been documented explicitly. The thematic focus of the study highlights the problem of female child abuse in South Asian society which is predominantly patriarchal. The review of literary texts explores how female child abuse has continued unabated despite commendable societal and educational developments, technological advancements, modernist attitudes and cultural progress.

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