

Gender Disparities in India: A Comparative Study of Gender-Based Child Abuse in Indian Novels

Dhruvee Sinha and Zeeshan Ali

Abstract

Gender inequality remains a deeply rooted issue in Indian society, pervading various aspects of life, including the experiences of children. The present research conducts a comparative analysis of two Indian novels, namely Kishwar Desai's *Witness the Night* (2010) and Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015), with the aim of exploring the theme of gender-based child abuse as a manifestation of gender inequality in India. These novels portray distinct narratives of abuse, highlighting the unique challenges faced by children in a patriarchal society. Employing a qualitative research approach, the article employs close reading to uncover the underlying socio-cultural factors that contribute to different forms of gender-based child abuse in the novels. The theoretical framework of Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll's gender system is utilised to comprehend the correlation between gender inequality and child abuse in India. The results shed light on precisely how prejudice and gender biases foster child abuse and obstruct children's cognitive growth. The research study is grounded in fictional narratives, yet it is supported by empirical evidence in the form of published statistics and case studies. The case studies have been taken from news articles and Pinki Virani's *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* to draw parallels with the episodes of abuse in the fictional narratives. The research findings highlight the imperative for a fundamental shift in societal norms and values to promote a more equal and secure milieu.

Keywords: gender inequality, child abuse, patriarchy, Kishwar Desai, Anuradha Roy, child sexual abuse

Introduction

Gender-based child abuse encompasses acts of abuse or mistreatment directed at children based on their gender. The prevalence and impact of gender-based child abuse, particularly sexual abuse, poses significant threats to the well-being and fundamental rights of individuals. Extensive scholarly research highlights how child abuse has a deep-seated connection with patriarchy, gender inequality, power imbalance and various societal norms that perpetuate harmful attitudes and behaviours.¹ In a country like India which is home to nearly 20% of the world's child population with almost 440 million children, the issue of child abuse is an alarming concern.² A study conducted on child sexual abuse in India found that 53.2% of children reported facing one

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¹ Sydney Moirangthem et al, "Child Sexual Abuse: Issues & Concerns," *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, vol. 142, no. 1 (2015), p. 1; Suman Moharana, "Child Sexual Abuse in India," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2020. At: <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3685668>.

² S. Tyagi and S. Karande, "Child Sexual Abuse in India: A Wake-up Call," *Journal of Postgraduate Medicine*, vol. 67, no. 3 (2021), p. 125.

or more forms of sexual abuse with 21.9% facing severe forms of sexual abuse.³ Gender-based child sexual abuse is a distressing reality that affects countless children worldwide, and it is no exception within the narratives of Indian novels namely *Witness the Night* by Kishwar Desai and *Sleeping on Jupiter* by Anuradha Roy. The novels are powerful literary works that delve into the harrowing experiences of young protagonists who become victims of gender-based child sexual abuse and its long-lasting effects on their lives. In both novels, girls under the age of twelve fall victim to the heinous crime of sexual abuse, perpetrated by individuals who hold positions of trust and responsibility. The novels show that the impact of gender-based child sexual abuse extends beyond immediate physical harm, significantly affecting the mental health of survivors.

The hierarchical power structures within families and communities can further suppress reporting and exacerbate the vulnerability of victims. Pinki Virani's comprehensive work, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*, concentrates on the cases of sexual assault of children wherein both male and female children are showcased as victims. However, the statistical evidence reveals gender disparity in child sexual abuse cases, with girls being disproportionately affected. Virani's compilation presents compelling data indicating that 62.5 percent of girls and 37.5 percent of boys, spanning the age range from a few months to sixteen years, have experienced child sexual abuse in India.⁴ Although research has traced the consequences and problems associated with child sexual abuse, there is insufficient scholarship that specifically explores the intersection of gender-based child abuse and gender inequality in the context of Indian society.

Representation of Gender-Based Child Abuse in the Novels

The gender system, as theorised by Ridgeway and Correll, offers insights into how gender beliefs and social relationships contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequality, including instances of gender-based child sexual abuse.⁵ *Witness the Night* by Kishwar Desai and *Sleeping on Jupiter* by Anuradha Roy explore the dreadful experiences of young victims of gender-based child sexual abuse and investigate the enduring and profound impact of such abuse on their lives.

One key tenet of gender system is the concept of differential gender beliefs, which refers to cultural beliefs about stereotypical differences between men and women regarding traits, roles, and competencies.⁶ These gender stereotypes and biases lead to the devaluation of feminine qualities and entities compared to masculine ones. For instance, the practice of female infanticide and foeticide described in *Witness the Night* stems from the lower value accorded to women in Indian society.⁷ *Witness the Night* portrays the distressing experiences of Sharda and Durga who fall victim to the sexual exploitation perpetrated by their tutor, Harpreet. Despite the expectation of safety and empowerment within the educational space, Sharda and Durga endure repeated instances of abuse, highlighting the betrayal of trust and the violation of their rights. The novel opens with the tragic event of Durga's family being brutally murdered, and initially, Durga herself

³ Loveleen Kacker, "Study on Child Abuse: India," *Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India* (2007), p. 12.

⁴ Pinki Virani, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India* (Penguin Books, 2000), p. 51.

⁵ Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll, "Unpacking the Gender System: A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations," *Gender & Society*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2004), pp. 510–531.

⁶ Cecilia Ridgeway, *Framed by Gender: How Gender Inequality Persists in the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ Rohini Pande and Anju Malhotra, "A son preference and daughter neglect in India: What happens to living girls?," *ICRW*, no. 268 (2006).

is implicated as the prime suspect: “every single member of her family had been poisoned and some of the victims stabbed with a knife. Since there was no other evidence or fingerprints, she is the chief suspect, and under investigation.”⁸ It is only when Simran Singh, a social worker, intervenes that the actual details of the murder are disclosed. Harpreet is revealed to have had a son with Sharda, but the child was taken away from him by Sharda’s parents. It becomes apparent that this loss had deeply disturbed Harpreet and fostered a feeling on revenge within him. Hence, he manipulated and assaulted Durga, then murdered her entire family. In the narrative, Harpreet engages in deeply disturbing behaviour. He impregnates Sharda, the eldest sister. She is subsequently sent away to preserve the social image of their parents. Tragically, Harpreet continues his pattern of sexual assault, targeting Durga, Sharda’s younger sister, in a distressing display of abuse and exploitation, “The sister was just sixteen years old when she bore [his] child, and Durga is only fourteen.”⁹ This portrayal serves as a poignant reminder of the profound betrayal and violation experienced by children when subjected to abuse by individuals they trust. Through the character of Harpreet, Desai unearths a more vicious agent of patriarchy who rapes two minors, impregnates one of them.

The novel mentions the overall degradation and maltreatment of women through minor characters. Durga’s cousin, Jitu, brings young girls to the farm under the pretext of involving them in agricultural labour. However, it becomes evident that his true intentions are of a highly inappropriate nature, as he had deliberately brought them for his personal exploitation. These innocent girls are subjected to a distressing routine wherein they are compelled to accompany him to a designated room each night against their will, “they were boys and needed to have some fun.”¹⁰ These girls were tragically sold by their own parents to Manubhai, Jitu’s employee, for an alarmingly low sum of three thousand rupees. This distressing transaction resulted in their involuntary placement under Manubhai’s control and subjected them to a profoundly exploitative situation.

Similarly, *Sleeping on Jupiter* delves into the intricacies of several children’s lives, prominently featuring Nomi, a young girl who endures the disturbing ordeal of gender-based child sexual abuse in Jarmuli, a temple town. Nomi is abandoned by her mother at the tender age of nine and subsequently, she is entrusted into the compassionate care of Guruji, a devout religious leader, who provided her with refuge at an orphanage. The gender system theory also proposes that gender acts as a primary cultural framework that shapes what Connell terms the “gender order” of society.¹¹ This gender order involves hierarchical power relations between men and women, with men holding greater societal power and authority. The high status of male religious leaders like Guruji in *Sleeping on Jupiter* mirrors the androcentric gender beliefs that grant men greater prestige and legitimacy as authority figures.

Through her novel, Roy effectively illuminates the unsettling reality of societal complicity, wherein religious establishments and individuals alike prove incapable of safeguarding vulnerable girls. The orphanage maintains a distinct division for young boys, and it is noteworthy that the boys have never been reported to encounter instances of assault or exhibit attempts to escape from the facility, unlike girls who go through physical and sexual abuse. The girls from the orphanage are surreptitiously brought to Guruji’s private quarters, where he asserts

⁸ Kishwar Desai, *Witness the Night* (W F Howes Ltd, 2010), p. 15.

⁹ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 156.

¹⁰ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 73.

¹¹ Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1987), p. 27.

his authority to engage in actions that align solely with his personal desires. The girls are explicitly cautioned against disclosing these events to anyone, reinforcing a climate of secrecy surrounding the matter. Upon Nomi's onset of menstruation, she is directed to accompany Guruji to his private quarters where he forcefully assaults her. In a vivid scene, Roy conveys the powerlessness of the orphan girls through the imagery of Guruji's abuse, describing, "My body felt as if it would tear into two when he forced my legs apart, then wider apart. He stuffed cloth into my mouth to stop me shouting for help."¹² The physical description underscores the violence, pain, and complete domination experienced by the girls at the hands of Guruji's unfettered male authority.

Both novels intricately depict the profound psychological and emotional repercussions that stem from gender-based child sexual abuse. They delve deeply into the enduring wounds inflicted upon the victims, illuminating their ongoing challenges with trust, intimacy, and self-esteem. Gradually, the narratives reveal how cultural, religious, and systemic factors contribute to the vulnerability of children, allowing such abuse to persist. It becomes evident that the abuse endured by the protagonists is not an isolated incident but a result of deeply ingrained gender inequalities and power dynamics within the patriarchal society.

Trauma Narrative Structure in the Novels

The trauma narrative structure often incorporates the loss of memory and a fragmented structure to reflect the psychological impact of trauma on individuals and their recollection of events. Extensive research on the language of trauma has highlighted the role of fragmentation, in trauma narratives as important tools for conveying the experience of trauma.¹³ LaCapra's *Writing Trauma, Writing History* posits that a "deep structure of trauma" exists, which defies linear narrative and comprehensible portrayal.¹⁴ Both novels use fragmentation as a narrative device reflected in incoherent sentences, fluctuating viewpoints, and irregular temporal frames to accurately portray the disoriented and disintegrated nature of traumatic experiences. *Sleeping on Jupiter* follows the story of Nomi Frederiksen, whose terrible past progressively unravels as she comes back to the small town where she suffered sexual abuse as a child. Through fragmentary recollections and flashbacks, Nomi's history of abuse is revealed, demonstrating that she had fundamentally suppressed her suffering. Dreams also serve as a compelling illustration of the non-linear nature of narratives, highlighting how trauma can induce fragmentation within the human psyche. Research has found that individuals with a history of childhood sexual abuse had more frequent nightmares and dream content that was negative and emotionally intense.¹⁵ Nomi's dreams play a pivotal role in the narrative, as she wakes up breathless, haunted by visions of a man grasping her, and in some instances, she envisions herself striking him repeatedly with a bat: "I would kick a ball hard and cry with joy...it made me weep because that ball wasn't a ball, it was a man's head, it was that man I was kicking dead."¹⁶ The narrative switches between Nomi's memories of abuse and her present-day experiences, often without clear transitions or parallels between the two. Many significant aspects of Nomi's story are unveiled through poignant

¹² Anuradha Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter* (London: Macmillan, 2015), p. 129.

¹³ Bessel van der Kolk et al., "Pierre Janet on Post-Traumatic Stress," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 2, no. 4 (1989), pp. 365–378.

¹⁴ Dominick Lacapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. 26.

¹⁵ Michael Schredl and Hildegard Engelhardt, "Dream Recall and Dream Content of Psychiatric Inpatients," *Sleep and Hypnosis*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2001), pp. 44–54.

¹⁶ Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, p. 91.

flashbacks that emerge after her visit to Jarmuli. An encounter with a random monk on a street triggers a surge of anxiety within her, transporting her back to her vulnerable self at the age of ten when she was abused by monks: “A monk... He’s been after me from the first day I came here.”¹⁷ Through these vivid flashbacks, crucial accounts from her past are revealed.

Similarly, in *Witness the Night*, the narrative alternates between Durga’s present imprisonment and her past experiences, gradually unveiling the intricate tapestry of her life story, starting from the day of her birth. This narrative structure allows for a layered exploration of Durga’s character, delving into her past to understand her present. The disorganised and unorganised memories of the characters illustrate how trauma can destroy a person’s sense of self, making it exceedingly difficult to construct a cogent narrative of one’s experiences. In *Witness the Night*, Durga gradually discovers the disturbing reality of gender-based child abuse that exists within her own household. Desai reveals the devaluation of women through Durga’s account of female infants being drugged and left to die. With her sister Sharda missing, Durga begins to suspect that her parents may have played a role in her sister’s disappearance. These suspicions manifest in her dreams, where she vividly envisions the possibility that her parents have harmed or even killed her sister, just like they killed other females that were born to them, “I kept dreaming of the children my real mother had buried.”¹⁸ Through these dream sequences, the novels vividly illustrate how the lingering effects of their traumatic experiences infiltrate their deepest thoughts and emotions. The dreams act as symbolic manifestations of their inner turmoil. By interweaving the past and present, the novels provide a comprehensive understanding of the journey that Nomi and Durga go through, gradually revealing the complexities that have led them to their current situation.

The Cultural and Societal Factors that Contribute to the Suffering of Survivors

The gender system perpetuates gender inequality by assigning unequal status, power, and resources based on gender, shaping gender dynamics and outcomes within social structures. Within this framework, gender functions as a social structure that moulds power dynamics.¹⁹ According to research, parents are often the primary perpetrators of violence against girls, indicating that differential treatment starts within the home environment.²⁰ This is well reflected in *Witness the Night* with the yearning of Durga’s parents for a male child. Their desperation leads them to adopt their nephew: “My brothers were not as good looking, but no one cared really, they were boys and that was enough. We knew they were actually my cousins, but my father was crazy for sons, and so was my mother.”²¹ The novel centres on the oppressive conditions and discriminatory treatment experienced by women. It is set in Punjab which bears one of the lowest sex ratios in the country, with 895 females for each 1000 male.²² Desai brings attention to the deeply ingrained cultural practice of female foeticide and female infanticide as midwives would “take away new-born girls from their mothers, seal them in earthen pots and roll the pot around

¹⁷ Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, p. 166.

¹⁸ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 122.

¹⁹ Connell, *Gender and Power*, p. 27.

²⁰ Kelly Rose-Clarke et al, “Adolescent Girls’ Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing in Rural Eastern India: A Descriptive, Cross-Sectional Community-Based Study”, *BMC Public Health*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2019).

²¹ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 35.

²² Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner of India. “Census of India 2011, National Population Register & Socio Economic and Caste Census” *Census of India, Government of India*, 17 May (2022). At: censusindia.gov.in/nada/index.php/catalog/42619. Accessed 08/09/2023.

till the baby stopped crying.”²³ This horrifying tradition is also confronted by the characters of Sharda and Durga, who manage to survive the ordeal and the subsequent administration of opium. This preference for male over female is a disposition constructed by the social structure, that influence individuals’ expectations, judgments, and evaluations of others based on their gender.²⁴ When Sharda becomes pregnant, Desai highlights the intense regulation of female sexuality through the severe confinement and isolation imposed on her by the family. The text states Sharda was locked up in a small room and tied up during her pregnancy. This imprisonment demonstrates the strict control applied to restrict female autonomy and enforce purity. Meanwhile, her newborn son is embraced as their own, effectively becoming an integral part of their household. Desai also demonstrates how sexual purity is enforced on Sharda as she is ostracised and confined after her premarital pregnancy, which is due to the cultural emphasis on female purity. The characters’ agony reflects the complex dynamics that inform persistent gender inequalities in the society.

The intricate connection between the gender system and social hierarchies in the Indian context perpetuates gendered inequalities, with men typically holding positions of higher status and power.²⁵ Unfortunately, this societal framework provides a breeding ground for abusers, including family members, teachers, and religious leaders, who often occupy positions of authority and trust. In the novel *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the individuals in positions of power within the narrative are predominantly men, including religious leaders, administrators, and police officers, who collaborate to prevent girls from escaping Guruji’s exploiting orphanage. Initially portrayed as a devout and influential character, Guruji’s true nature gradually unfolds as the story progresses. He is shown to engage in the reprehensible acts of sexually abusing and exploiting the young girls under his care within the orphanage. Through the character of Guruji, the novel presents a critical commentary on the potential dangers associated with unquestioningly accepting religious leaders and the abuse of authority: “Guruji had other rich and powerful disciples who respected his powers, and this was why even illegal boat girls were safe inside the ashram... Guruji even had his own aeroplane.²⁶ It highlights how spiritual figures can exploit vulnerable individuals under the guise of enlightenment, shedding light on the exploitation that can occur when individuals in positions of power misuse their influence. The novel underscores the challenges faced by survivors in coming forward due to religious biases, as doing so often invites further repercussions. The cultural emphasis on upholding hierarchies and respecting authority further marginalises survivors, making it difficult for them to seek justice and support.²⁷ As depicted in both novels, institutional assistance for sexual abuse survivors is lacking, reflecting the broader systemic deficiencies in addressing and supporting survivors of abuse.

The gender system elucidates how these elements of the gender structure combine to produce gendered patterns of behaviour and outcomes. Practices like victim blaming and stigma faced by survivors correspond to cultural emphasis on female purity and honour.²⁸ Both novels delve into the profound sense of humiliation and stigma experienced by survivors of sexual abuse, exacerbated by societal pressure to maintain an illusion of purity. Sharda’s isolation and mistreatment, driven by the family’s concern for their social image, exemplify the belief that her reputation has been tarnished, “kudi kharab ho gayee.”²⁹ Similarly, Nomi and Piku are paralysed

²³ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 49.

²⁴ Ridgeway and Correll, “Unpacking the Gender System,” pp. 510–531.

²⁵ Ridgeway and Correll, “Unpacking the Gender System,” pp. 510–531.

²⁶ Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, p. 105.

²⁷ Kacker et al., “Study on Child Abuse: India, 2007,” p. 88.

²⁸ Geetanjali Gangoli, “Reproduction, Abortion and Women’s Health,” *Social Scientist*, vol. 26 (1998), p. 83-105.

²⁹ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 91.

by fear, doubting that anyone would offer assistance if they were to disclose their abuse. They vividly recall how Champa, a fellow orphanage resident, was disbelieved by the police when she bravely attempted to expose these crimes. Through Champa's failure to get her report registered about being abused, Roy reveals the lack of institutional support. Instead, Champa was reprimanded for disrespecting a "pious man" and "she was dragged in by her plaits and locked up in a cottage" in the orphanage.³⁰ Both novels masterfully illustrate a disheartening reality of exploitative social structures and a legal system that frequently proves sluggish and ineffective. The consequence of these shortcomings is an alarmingly low conviction rate for sexual offenses. Through their narratives, the authors shed light on the inherent flaws within the social fabric, where victims of such crimes often face significant barriers to justice and struggle to find refuge.

Social Organisations: Unsafe Havens

Witness the Night addresses several crimes that are committed against women and none of them are brought to the court of justice. Desai states the reason for this while exposing the brutal indifference of society where "the justice system has been known to give up, and the wrong person ends up being convicted. If there is a conviction at all."³¹ Even an organisation dedicated to the wellness of female victims 'Nari Niketan' was held accountable for inmates' exposure to sexual assault, drug abuse and prostitution rackets. Moreover, Desai explores the complicity and silence of the community surrounding child sexual abuse. Despite witnessing the signs and having knowledge of the abuse, community members choose to ignore or cover up the truth, perpetuating a culture of silence that enables the continued victimisation of these vulnerable children.

In *Sleeping on Jupiter*, the orphanage that is supposed to provide a haven to the abandoned girls, is the same place that exploits them. Guruji who is the primary caregiver to the girls, the one who is solely responsible for the safety of the girls, is the person who exploits them, taking unfair advantage of his position. The girls have to do physical labour in the orphanage, from mopping the floors to unloading trucks, they also have to endure sexual abuse at the hands of Guruji and his employees in the orphanage. Through the character of Piku, it becomes evident that the consequences of gender-based sexual abuse extend beyond immediate physical harm, impacting victims' mental health. The abuse faced in the place of refuge elicits a profound emotional response in the victims, in alignment with research that reveals the psychological repercussions of sexual abuse, including increased risks of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder.³² As a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder, Piku is rendered speechless, she only cries, screams and utters a few sounds, she can no longer comprehend the trauma she endures, so it cannot be translated into words. The other girls at the orphanage talk about Piku: "She doesn't have a brain. She can't speak properly. All she can do is bang things and yowl."³³ Similarly, in *Witness the Night*, Durga and Sharda along with other women who were sent to social organisations, are negatively impacted by the abuse they faced at the place they were supposed to be safe at. Sharda is sent to a home for rehabilitation where she is constantly tied up, she ends up losing her sanity. The novel also mentions several women being sent to mental asylums because they could no longer be controlled by the agents of patriarchy: "A large

³⁰ Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, p. 126.

³¹ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 16.

³² Kathleen Kendall-Tackett, "The Health Effects of Childhood Abuse: Four Pathways by Which Abuse Can Influence Health", *Child Abuse & Neglect*, vol. 26, nos. 6-7 (2002), pp. 715-729.

³³ Roy, *Sleeping on Jupiter*, p. 175.

proportion of women in these hospitals... had families who found them difficult to live with—too aggressive or argumentative.”³⁴ Through their powerful portrayal, the novels confront readers with the dark and disturbing realities of child sexual abuse, compelling them to confront the prevalence of such abuse within families, institutions, and society.

Case Studies on Gender-Based Sexual Abuse

The novels’ portrayals find validation in recent empirical case studies documenting the disturbing prevalence of child sexual abuse faced by girls in India. A 2023 newspaper report analysing cases found that 90% of child abuse occurs within the home by a family member.³⁵ These findings align with the novels’ depictions of young girls exploited by relatives and trusted figures like tutors and priests. Multiple reported cases corroborate the abuse in the novel, such as a 7-year-old abused by her uncle³⁶ and a 10-year-old assaulted by her tuition teacher³⁷ resonating with storylines in the novels. By mirroring patterns substantiated through contemporary case evidence, the narratives provide a potent fictional lens into the ongoing crisis of gender-disproportionate sexual violence against children in Indian society. The novels, *Witness the Night* and *Sleeping on Jupiter*, reflect real-life incidents of child sexual abuse and can be substantiated by case studies from Pinki Virani’s non-fictional work. These case studies, documented in 2000, vividly illustrate the horrifying experiences endured by victims of abuse and bring the prevalence of the issue into focus. In one case study, an eleven-year-old girl is sexually assaulted by her class teacher, referred to as ‘Sirji.’ The perpetrator, aided by his sister, cunningly takes the girl to his home, located far from her residence. To deceive the girl’s parents and generate a false sense of security, his sister makes a phone call to the parents, assuring their daughter’s safety.³⁸ This calculated collaboration enables the perpetrator to carry out his heinous act away from immediate scrutiny. The novel *Witness the Night*, provides parallel narratives of similar sexual assaults where both sisters, Durga and Sharda, are sexually assaulted by their tutor, Harpreet.

In another distressing episode of child sexual abuse occurring within the confines of a home, Ila Pandey from Varanasi courageously takes legal action against her husband, Jagdish Pandey. As the mother of three daughters, Ila uncovers a note from her eldest daughter, revealing that her father engages in inappropriate and abusive behaviour with her, described as ‘gandi harkat’ or dirty acts. When confronted, Jagdish responds with violent aggression, brutally beating Ila and strongly denying the accusations.³⁹ *Sleeping on Jupiter* features a similar father figure, the character Guruji, entrusted with the care of orphanage girls, betrays their trust by subjecting them to acts of assault, disrupting the supposed “safe” space meant for them. These parallel narratives underscore the pervasive nature of child sexual abuse and the urgent need for societal awareness and action to protect vulnerable children.

³⁴ Desai, *Witness the Night*, p. 84.

³⁵ Megha Chaturvedi, “Child Sexual Abuse in India: Alarming Statistics, Lifelong Impact, How to Heal,” *India Today*, 4 August (2023). At: <https://www.indiatoday.in/education-today/featurephilia/story/child-sexual-abuse-in-india-alarming-statistics-lifelong-impact-how-to-heal-2416285-2023-08-04>.

³⁶ Express News Service, “7-year-old girl found dead in Ghaziabad; uncle arrested for sexual assault, murder,” *The Indian Express*, 8 October (2023). At: <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/lucknow/uncle-arrested-sexual-assault-murder-7-year-old-girl-ghaziabad-8973299/>

³⁷ Hindustan Times Correspondent, “Teacher held for sexually assaulting 10-year-old student in E Delhi,” *Hindustan Times*, 9 July (2023). At: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/delhi-news/tuition-teacher-arrested-for-sexually-assaulting-10-year-old-student-man-arrested-for-molesting-10-year-old-neighbour-101688925452513.html>

³⁸ Virani, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*, p. 46.

³⁹ Virani, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*, p. 59.

The case studies corroborate a distressing reality where girls are subjected to heinous acts within the confines of their own homes or supposed safe spaces. The gendered nature of these abuses highlights the unequal power dynamics and the specific risks faced by girls in society. The case studies serve as chilling examples, echoing the themes and realities portrayed in the novels. A significant appalling aspect of these cases is the fact that the perpetrator in most of these cases is a familiar person assuming the role of a parent, relative, employee, worker, or someone in position of trust and responsibility. Virani mentions that approximately 50 percent of these child sexual abuse cases involve family members and close relatives as perpetrators, corroborating that these distressing incidents often occur within the victims' own homes or supposed safe spaces.⁴⁰

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse, being a grave infringement upon a child's rights, holds a significant place within the broader spectrum of child abuse. This heinous act is aggravated by the gender system which operates at both the macro and micro levels of society. This article substantiates the interconnectedness between gender inequality and the prevalence of gender-based child abuse, underscoring the necessity of challenging harmful gender norms. Through the gender system theory, we establish gender as not solely an individual characteristic but rather a relational and collective phenomenon that organises and structures social interactions. Both *Witness the Night* and *Sleeping on Jupiter* reflect the traumatic experiences of abuse survivors and the lasting impact of child abuse on their lives. The authors explore the intricate cultural and societal factors that contribute to the suffering of these survivors, emphasising the pervasive nature of these factors that perpetuate abuse. Through their poignant narratives, the novels underscore how the endemic issue of gender-based child sexual abuse is a consequence of deeply ingrained societal constructs that facilitate power imbalances. The novels' depictions of abuse enabled by son preference, stigma towards victims, and impunity for powerful male authority figures highlight the need for fundamental changes in cultural belief systems that devalue girls and grant men disproportionate power. The novels portray incremental steps toward reform, including community-based initiatives led by activists such as Simran in *Witness the Night*. This article calls for the promotion of gender equity, the empowerment of women, and the implementation of inclusive policies and initiatives that acknowledge and dismantle intersecting forms of discrimination.

⁴⁰ Virani, *Bitter Chocolate: Child Sexual Abuse in India*, p. 50.