

## CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE ON SCREEN: A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF SELECT MALAYALAM FILMS

By

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### Abstract

*Childhood is a precious period in the life of every human being irrespective of caste, gender, religion and region. Films can be useful in articulating the central dilemma of Child Sexual Abuse to a large audience. Films can keep the identity and experience of victims behind the veil of fiction while revealing the essence and truth of cases. So here, this paper tries to analyse the scenes that are related to Child Sexual Abuse from the select films to understand how this issue is stigmatized in Kerala, even in films. The select Malayalam films for the study are Aabhaasam (2018) directed by Jubith Namradath, Amar Akbar Anthony (2015) directed by Nadirshah and Manjupoloru Penkutti (2004) directed by Kamal.*

**Keywords:** *child sexual abuse, social taboo.*

### Introduction

The discourse of Child Sexual Abuse remains still a social taboo even when it is dealt with by the film industry. This is due to the factors that work behind the silence in our society to keep it as a social taboo alone, especially in the public as well as private spaces. Finally, it has resulted in the widespread of Child Sexual Abuse as a social evil than a simple tagline of an offence in the reality because of the silence that exists around its discussion in public space.

An abuser becomes an offender, only when he is convicted by the trial of court. This needs a collective effort from each node of society to clear this issue faced by innocent children. Here comes the importance of a medium called film, as an eye-opener to give an insight into the dark area of the issue.

The film as a means of communication, uses its language, especially the codes and conventions of both visual and sound signals to convey ideas. When words fail to represent an idea implicitly, the filmmakers, who

disseminate these ideas, could fulfil their intention using other elements like symbols, lightings, metaphors, images within a short duration on the screen. As a universal language, films can communicate the core of any social issue to its audience. One such serious social issue is Child Sexual Abuse and caution and attention are required when it is represented in a mass media like film. The researcher finds the framework of Semiotic analysis as an apt tool to decipher the intended meanings of the signs and codes that are associated with the concept of Child Sexual Abuse from the select Malayalam films. The main concepts of Semiotics such as Signs (both as a signifier and signified), Codes and Icon will be analysed in detail. Next, the idea of metaphor and metonymy will be observed to get a clear idea of the context it is used. The former one “establishes a relationship based on association – instead of asserting a resemblance”, the latter “substitutes one thing with another”. (Edgar-Hunt et al 24)

### **The Portrayal of Child Sexual Abuse**

Jubith Namradath, in his film *Aabhaasam* (2018), uses an image of a

mosquito to depict the aspect of Child Sexual Abuse. Mosquito is a bloodsucking long-legged fly that can be found almost everywhere. It just comes and sucks blood, sometimes without our knowledge too and goes away. But when this creature is shown while the abuse is going on, it does get other connotations. Here, the mosquito gets the disguise of an abuser. Like how a mosquito comes in, sucks blood in and goes away, abuser also comes, takes the very essence of life from the child and goes away. Sexual abuse is presented as a mosquito trying to approach a girl on the bus which seems to be a common concept in reality. But the signifier of mosquito changes as the same image is used by the girl to compare the face of that to the insect with her relatives' face. She stresses the figure of a mosquito with a creature who got wings to the Button onion. As the plot moves further, the signified meaning gets revealed as the sequence reveals her bad experience encountered with her uncle through some flashbacks. The mosquito symbolically signifies the abuser and the act of the mosquito represents Child Sexual Abuse in which the girl is unaware of what is happening to her.

When she realizes the presence of a mosquito that was biting her, she slaps and kills it. Then she uses that same mosquito to compare her uncle, like a big mosquito who got wings to a button onion. It becomes very clear after the sequence where she reveals the incident of “game”. The sound made by the mosquito also disturbs the audience as well as the character until she spots and hits it. This indicates the continuation of the abuser’s next quest for his prey. The absence of disclosure of the victim within her family, in the film, suggests, her helplessness to come out of her struggle. The next sign that can be identified from the same sequence on her bag is an image of a fully-grown butterfly. Butterfly, as its appearance brings to our mind, is something at the stage of adulthood or childhood (a few days before its demise). Here the child starts to understand the world (initial days of butterfly). The wings of the butterfly are colourful and it shows the colour of her childhood before the abuse. It connects to the trauma which she had to face till she recognizes such “game” as sexual abuse and her inability to resist it. This film portrays the lack of such a listener to communicate with

the child when the abuser is from the family.

The film that speaks more about the nature of abusers is *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015). In *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015), the abuser is presented as a suspect at that point when sexual abuse happened to the life of Pathu. Here the police officer introduces the abuser by showing a photograph of the habitual offender from Bengal as a suspicious person for the missing cases of three children who were raped and murdered. If the abuser is an outsider, it will become easy to represent on the screen but when the abuser is within the family, silence spreads on the screen as we can see in recent films as well. As observed in these films, the abuser uses some playful objects or just a smile or a simple gaze to attract children. Here, in this film, the abuser uses a red coloured balloon to attract the kids from the public space very easily from their parents. This signifies the lack of affection and attention that a child gets from his or her family or society to what they easily get attracted to the stranger’s care and affection. The film *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015) symbolizes a girl child as a

flower which can be identified from the children's costumes. The film presents five girl children as victims. The flower is placed symbolically either on their dress or their clothes. The idea of a flower is common usage in literary forms and it has different meanings like love, childhood but in this film, it is mostly used to represent girls. In the same film, while Pathu sings the song, the lyrics of the song also uses the idea of a flower as a metaphor to the child and also on her dress, there are three flowers. These flowers on the dress of Pathu signifies three abused girls and their death.

Girls are indeed like flowers. Once they are born, they start blooming into beautiful colours attracting everyone to them. But as the abuser's eyes reach them, they fall like withered flowers. The image of the flower can be traced from the painting that is shown as the artwork of the silent abuser. The painting as shown in the figure below correlates with the theme. It has some combination of red flowers and this could be decoded as a sign of the pedophilic nature of Mash in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015) too. A clear idea of the objectification of a child can be understood from this film. At first,

when the narrator introduces the family of Amar, he does not mention the main child character, Pathu as is evident from the first family photo. Later Pathu is introduced as a "trophy" from an unsuccessful married life, after giving a brief description about the marriage of Raziya, her mother. Here instead of mentioning Pathu as the daughter of Raziya, the term mentioned is a trophy which is not apt since this film was made to penetrate the soul of Child Sexual Abuse.

Even the film starts narrating the story of Child Sexual Abuse with the weapon in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015). The narrator, Faizal gets hospitalized due to an accident while riding the bike, caused by the same weapon, a piece of nailed wood which was used to attack the abusers by Akbar. The choice of weapon changes from character to character and this kind of approach is used to evoke the emotional urge among the audience to attack the abuser. Akbar at first uses his stretcher to attack the physically strong abuser because, at that time, he does not find any other effective weapon to get control over the other one. The character, Akbar is a physically disabled one due to polio in his

childhood. Later the weapon changes to a piece of broken glass bottle when the mother's turn as the punisher comes and the public takes their charge from the other pieces. Here, broken glass can be synonymised with the mother as well. She is broken yet powerful. This is supported by the Sub Inspector in charge to arrest the convict stating that the legal system in India is a failure.

But in the films like *Manjupoluru Penkutti* (2004) a knife and a gun are shown as weapons. The use of a knife is portrayed as a terrific dream of the victim's friend, where she takes the knife from the kitchen to murder her step-father, the abuser. To resist Child Sexual Abuse, a sharp-edged mathematical instrument, divider, is used as a weapon by the transgender in the film, *Aabhaasam* (2018). The decision was taken inside the classroom. This signifies the inability or lack of a proper medium in the Kerala education system in solving the struggle faced by the children. This same weapon is suspiciously caught by a Police officer as the film progresses. It can be read as the problem of a law in a state like, Kerala. The people who execute the law misuse it for their own

benefit, in order to suit their personal needs and that side is given proper importance by the film.

Another denoted meaning of this incident, becomes clear that the divider's importance as a weapon of protection is vanishing away. In addition to that, there is another incident simultaneously happens at the background, in which the abused girl is peeking into the situation in order to know what happens in front of her. This signifies as a lesson taught by the society to the growing child, that even if a victim responds strongly to the abuse, there is a high chance of that victim to get victimised again and again. Even in a democratic society, this notion shows lesser signs of going away. As it is evident from the recent issue regarding the Wallayar case, when there was a protest made by a plus one student in a school, he was suspended by the Principal. This proves the existence of the taboo in discussion of this Child Sexual Abuse even in an education system in Kerala.

In *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015), a mother touches her child who is listening to the tragic story of Pathu as a symbol of affection. This can make

the audience empathises with them because this sign manages to spread the need of parental affection to safeguard children. But this alone could not ensure the safety and there is a need for an open platform within the family to discuss the children's struggle, which is absent in most of the select films. If such a plot appears on the screen, then it could influence either the child or the parents to build a harmonious relationship. This could raise an empathetic feeling in the mind of the audience, as it indicates that the safety of the child is the parent's responsibility. Nevertheless, this alone could not ensure the children's safety as there is a need for an open platform within the family to discuss children's struggle even though this is absent in most of the select films.

The police officer in *Aabhaasam* (2018) touches the face of the girl in the bus with an affection, but the child fears back is felt annoyance. This is witnessed by the silent parents, who are unaware about the problems in their daughter's life. Another thing that appears on the screen is that the earlier discussed image of the butterfly. The film cannot convey its idea completely to a common audience

by the uses of such symbols unless he/she has recognized the same image of the butterfly as a sign. Finally, the images of victims are used as another sign of motivation for the hero to defeat the abuser physically through fight scenes. In *Amar Akbar Anthony* (2015) during the climax sequence, the following images are shown to inspire the heroes to fight back.

### **Conclusion**

The study on different signs that are associated with the elements of Child Sexual Abuse used in the select Malayalam films has revealed other hidden perspectives behind the screen as well. Each symbol has its own denoted and connoted meaning. The above analysis tries to decipher the coded language of Child Sexual Abuse not just the plot or story of the films. The presence and absence of silencing factors can thus be identified by the use of Semiotics. The main obstacle in expressing this social issue on the screen is mainly identified to be the existence of a taboo behind the discussion of Child Sexual Abuse in reality. The persistence of a social illness which is as grievous as Child Sexual Abuse is discreditable for a

state like Kerala that has not only a high literacy rate but also the first rank

in NITI Aayog’s School Education Quality Index (SEQI) recently.

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