

Incest and the Silences: Reading Nandini Sahu’s “that elusive orgasm”

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ABSTRACT

Nandini Sahu’s collection of short stories *Shedding the Metaphors* engages with myriad complex human emotions. Sahu pours herself into the stories that she tells in retrospect. The autobiographical elements provide the stories a personal touch that compels the readers to delve deep into the characters and introspect on the intricacy of human nature. This paper attempts to critically analyse the story “That Elusive Orgasm” and understand the dynamics of incest and the related silences. The paper refers to Sgroi, Blick and Portar’s conceptual framework to understand how a child gets entrapped in the cycle of sexual abuse. The paper further explores the psychoanalytic perspective of Laurence Joseph to comprehend the psycho-social aspects of silences. The paper also refers to Ricahrd P. Kluft to examine the ramifications of incest on adult survivors.

Keywords: *incest, silences, memory, trauma, child sexual abuse.*

“Many abused children cling to the hope that growing up will bring escape and freedom She is still a prisoner of her childhood; attempting to create a new life, she reencounters the trauma.”
— Judith Lewis Herman

Nandini Sahu in “That Elusive Orgasm” (2023) provides a horrifying glimpse into the chaotic world of Jhumpa Chatterjee, a childhood friend of Ninny, the narrator. When Jhumpa was sixteen her life took an unforeseen turn as her mother got into the wheel chair due to partial paralysis. Jhumpa failed to realize when did her mother’s ‘partial physical paralysis became a metaphorical paralysis’ for her life. Suddenly Jhumpa stopped coming to school, and got completely disconnected from her friends. Her parents never allowed anyone to meet her. Since there was no Internet or social media there was no way to connect to her. Meanwhile the narrator’s father got a transfer and they left the town. Years later the narrator discovered a terrifying truth. Grace, a common friend narrated how she once met Jhumpa in the absence of

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her parents and took her out of the house-arrest. What Jhumpa revealed in the Confession Box (which was secretly recorded by Grace) was horrifying. Jhumpa's parents were the ardent devotees of 'some ferocious looking Goddess'. Her father worshipped the deity in the basement of their house. They did Kumari Puja and Kumari Sadhna. Her parents told her that she was the offering or *prasada* of the deity and that she was a sacred girl. Hence, she was no longer allowed to go out. One night her father did an 'exclusive puja' for her while her mother was chanting the mantra. Once she was offered as *prasada* to the deity, her father took her to the bathroom to cleanse her of the worldly sins. He himself bathed her. Jhumpa confessed how uneasy it was in the beginning, but he explained to her that he was the devotee or *sahdak* of the deity and she was the *prasada*, so she shouldn't feel shy and submit herself completely to the deity. Jhumpa did as her father instructed. So, while her mother was asleep her father bathed her, touched her, and then forced himself into her. She was bleeding, she was in pain. Her father consoled her, put her in his arms and lulled her to sleep. After that night, he followed the same ritual every single night. What Jhumpa further said was really appalling. She said that she didn't mind whatever was happening anymore. Rather she liked whatever he did to her body and that she no longer could sleep unless her father does it and later lull her to sleep. What actually bothered her is the fact that her parents didn't allow her to talk to anyone or go out and that she missed her friends and school and that she was no longer preparing for the medical entrance. The fear that she might have a secluded, secret, clandestine existence for the rest of her life and that she might never experience freedom like anyone else made her more anxious than the actual act of incest.

Jhumpa's confession underlines some serious concerns. Sexual exploitation of children or adolescents is a grim reality that afflicts our society, but it often goes unnoticed and unreported. The reasons are many - the inability of the child to grasp what is happening, the ensuing confusion, fear, shame, trauma, social stigma, the constant denial of the assault, reluctance of the family to report, the insensitivity of the investigating and legal officials. Sgroi, Blick, and Porter in "A conceptual framework for child sexual abuse" attempt to understand how a child gets entrapped in the vicious cycle of abuse. They identify five stages involved in the sexual exploitation of a child. In the first stage – "Engagement", the perpetrator takes the child into confidence and develops an intense relationship through games or activities and even violence or threats. In the second stage – "The Sexual Interaction Phase", the perpetrator grooms the child and initiates sexual involvements, often progressing from exposure and touching to the

penetration. In the third stage – “Secrecy”, the perpetrator makes efforts to ensure privacy, to continue the sexual exploitation without being caught. The child is brainwashed and made to feel accountable for what has happened. The child is often threatened that if he/she reveals their secret it would have bad consequences. The child is made to understand that people would not believe him/her; in fact, people would consider him/her bad as if he/she wanted what was done, and even God will reject him/her for not honouring the father or father figure. Thus the child is convinced that he or she is evil. In the fourth stage – “Disclosure”, the secret gets revealed, either unexpectedly, coincidentally, or consciously. The role the perpetrator plays in the family often determines the reaction of the concerned persons. Family loyalty and shame are generally given more importance than the well-being of the child. In the fifth stage – “Suppression”, the family members or the concerned persons try to suppress the child, negating the sexual abuse and the trauma, in order to avoid the ugly truth and the associated shame and legal procedures.

In Jhumpa’s case the perpetrator is her father with whom she shared an intimate relation of trust and care. Her mother’s ailment and her father’s involvement in taking care of her and the home strengthened that trust which he exploited. Her father further used the religious rituals and her faith in the goddess to groom Jhumpa for initiating the sexual act. Peter Berger says religion is often used to legitimise anomic phenomena in the society. Legitimations or the “socially objectivated knowledge” through language, gestures, accepted social behaviour and identities, moral maxims, popular myths and complicated theories explain and justify the constructed reality. Legitimations are thus used to convince people that “that constructed reality” has been existent from the very beginning; that they are “divinely-ordained, sacred order of the cosmos”. The elaborate rituals performed by Jhumpa’s father provided a sacred environment required to sacralise her sexual exploitation. Presenting himself as a *sadhak*, he gaslighted her into believing that she was the offering or prasada, who can be consumed by him and that there is no shame in surrendering before the devotee of the goddess.

Jhumpa was kept in confinement to hush up the exploitation. She went through the turmoil for several years failing to realize when the exploitation became a normative. Apparently “the unending consensual incest had set an increasingly ugly chain of events in motion in the life of an innocent girl. The worst part was, she didn’t consider this as unusual, obnoxious, objectionable” (Sahu, 106). The term ‘consensual’ is problematic though. Silence is often (mis)taken as consent. Laurence Joseph, a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst, in “Denial of Incest: Between Silences and Misunderstandings” discusses the psychological aspects of

incest and the related silences. Joseph cites Sandor Ferenczi's work *Confusion of Language between Adults and Children* wherein Ferenczi explains how incestuous relationships generally begin. Children often engage in playful fantasies, such as playing a maternal role towards the adult. "This play may take an erotic form, but it *always* remains *at the level of tenderness*. This is not the case with adults with psychopathological predispositions, especially if their equilibrium or self-control has been disturbed by some misfortune, by the use of drugs or toxic substances. *They confuse children's games with the desires of a person who has reached sexual maturity*" (qtd. in Joseph). Thus the language of love and tenderness is misinterpreted as consent. Readers don't have access to the psyche of Jhumpa's father so it is difficult to assess what triggered him to abuse his daughter. Some studies have identified role confusion between mother and daughter as one of the reasons that leads to incestuous behaviour. "The mother, because of illness or other problems, steps aside, isolates herself and leaves the family in the care of the daughter. These turn of events often encourage the father to see the daughter as a substitution of the wife and thus sexual activities begin" (Marotta & Malizia, 385). Curiously Jhumpa's father initiated the sexual advances after her mother got bedridden and most probably became sexually inactive. He perhaps saw adolescent Jhumpa as a substitution of his terminally ill, voiceless, powerless, financially, socially and emotionally dependent wife.

Joseph further tries to interpret the psycho-social aspects of silences of the incest victims. He cites Camille Kouchner's *La Familia Grande* which illustrates how any sexual encounter between a child or an adolescent and an adult leads to trauma and "how speaking out about incest requires the subject to tear itself away from its own foundation, since it is a question of denouncing a person from its own family, a person who is at the origin of its life or who represents a figure of fatherhood." Kouchner explains how denouncing incest becomes difficult for children/adolescents as it would mean denouncing the person who has raised and taken care of them, who has taught them the language, who was supposed to teach them to differentiate between Good and Bad. Quoting her brother who was sexually exploited by their stepfather Kouchner explicates how the perpetrator used his power, the affection that her brother had for him to pervert both the body and language. Her brother got confused between affection and exploitation as he couldn't process the perverse act as he said, "... sometimes I don't know whether to get angry. He's nice to me ..." (qtd. in Joseph). Joseph explains that it is difficult for children to understand that a person who is supposed to protect them can exploit them and to protect themselves from this trauma they "keep silent, they allow themselves to be used as an

object, afraid of the consequences that their revelations could have.” In fact this acceptance might take a long, painful time and during the process they would have to return to the incest suffered “in order to distinguish the roles to free oneself from the words and images and to be able to replace them by new terms, by a new perception of the roles: from being an accomplice, it is necessary to think of oneself as a victim” (Joseph).

Jhumpa too was confused between affection and exploitation. She loved her father and a part of her couldn't accept that he could do anything wrong to her. The prolonged exploitation, complete severance from social interaction, the 'silence' of the mother, the overwhelming religious rituals – everything might have pushed her to feel an emotional numbness. She could no longer differentiate between right or wrong.

Grace and her cousins perhaps understood this emotional paralysis of Jhumpa and decided to help her. Grace counselled her, made her realize that she was being 'trapped into a bottomless pit' and helped her to start her life afresh. With the help of the church authorities Jhumpa was sent to America before her parents returned. Jhumpa's father was furious at the maid, and he threatened Grace to file a complaint but couldn't do much as Grace had the audio recording of the confession.

In America Jhumpa got a degree in Nursing and got engaged in serving the society. However, her trauma was too deep and intense; the geographic distance couldn't heal her and the traumatic memories from the past kept haunting her. “She thought about the serpentine creeping of two male hands on her body, bathing her, interleaving her contours with restless respite” (Sahu, 107). She came across Abraham, a gentle and compassionate man. He knew that she has a turbulent past but what exactly it was he had no clue. Believing that time would heal Jhumpa he proposed to her. They got married. However, they didn't have a happy conjugal life. Initially Abraham thought that perhaps Jhumpa was an introvert and would take time to open up. He waited for the consummation of their marriage with patience. But “Jhumpa locked her room every night after dinner, touched herself passionately, whispering something to herself. Her body was not prepared to accept the touch of any other male. Her body had its own chemistry” (Sahu, 108). Abraham couldn't comprehend this. He did everything possible to comfort her, give her love and an orgasm but he failed. Jhumpa would caress his head and put him to 'a restless sleep' and remain awake herself staring at the ceiling with tears in her eyes. She became 'insomniac, nonchalant, monotonous'. She loved him but her body didn't respond.

Perhaps the intimate male touch rekindled her past memories of trauma, shame and guilt. Diana E. H. Russell, a feminist writer and activist, in *The Secret Trauma: Incest in the Lives of Girls and Women* (1986), states that in incestuous relationship that involved daughters and their biological fathers the forced sexual encounters were baffling to the daughters as while they despised the abuse they might have enjoyed the attention, affection, and connectedness. Self-loathing was common as they wondered if the abuse was their fault or was fuelled by their own desire. Thus, the father-daughter incest survivors live with certain guilt. Possibly because of this guilt and shame Jhumpa could never tell Abraham about her troubling past. Nor did Grace ever share with him about her “full-fledged, compulsive, obsessive sexual relationship with her father” (Sahu, 108). There was no communication. Gradually they fell apart. They lived in one house ‘like two guests’.

Jhumpa felt lost again. She was suffering and wanted to spend time with Grace. When Grace suggested her to rather work on her marriage and spend time with Abraham she threatened to go back to her father. They were shocked; however, they decided to be with her. Jhumpa came over to Kerala. She was a changed person, always lost in her thoughts. She did everything mechanically. One-night Jhumpa slept nude on the couch. On being asked to cover up she said, “Come on Grace, what is there in the body! It’s just a concealment for the soul. And I am soul-dead since my childhood. I have been sleeping like this since my sixteenth year, and I don’t find anything wrong with this. Why do we have such inhibitions about the body?” (Sahu, 110).

Ninny delved deeper to understand what was troubling Jhumpa now that she was ‘free’, why she never experienced an orgasm with Abraham even when she loved him. She wondered if Jhumpa’s mind and heart were still with her father and if her childhood abuse was a guilt-ridden pleasure for her. There is no definite answer; human psychology is too complex to decipher. Jhumpa was perhaps going through a complex series of biopsychosocial issues that incest survivors often experience. Richard P. Kluft in his article “Ramification of Incest” identifies emotional incontinence, affective dysregulation, dysfunctional self-soothing, somatoform dissociation, comorbidity, sexual dysfunction, re-enacting and re-victimization behaviours, and failures in relatedness as some of the common symptoms that incest survivors encounter. Jhumpa’s anxiety, her irrational behaviour, her robotic attitude, her indifference, her inability to experience that elusive orgasm with her husband - everything is rooted in the overpowering memory of her traumatic past. Her mind and her body were no longer in her

control. The emotional numbness, the confusion of the mind, the hollowness of the soul of Jhumpa was thus manifested through her physical nakedness.

While in Kerala they received a call from Jhumpa's father, telling her that since she was in India, she must visit her dying mother. Though the friends protested Jhumpa went back home. Her parent behaved as if everything was normal. Nanny and Grace were in constant touch with her over phone to ensure her safety. Late at night while they were on video call, they could hear a 'surreptitious knock' at her door. They had anticipated it. Grace kept on reminding her to be strong but Jhumpa didn't respond; she looked different. Jhumpa whispered, "No Babai, please, please go! Don't do this to me!" Her father was overheard saying in a convincing tone: "Open the door Jhumpa, my love. I am here, for you. I'll take care of you, I'll soothe, pacify, mollify, comfort your sad body. You are my prasada, how can you forget that? You were born only for a devotee like me. I won't hurt you. I will put you to sleep. You look so tired, you haven't slept since ages" (Sahu, 113). Jhumpa was benumbed. While going towards the door, she disconnected the call and switched off her phone. They knew that night Jhumpa had slept peacefully suggesting she finally had "an elusive orgasm that was indefinable, subtle, intangible, indescribable, fulfilling, soul searching" (Sahu, 101).

Jhumpa's decision to go back to her abusive father baffles us. Was it her conscious choice? Or an involuntary freeze response induced by trauma? The article "Adult Survivors Continuing Relationships with Abusive Family" attempts to understand why incest survivors return to their abusers. One of the reasons is the "damaged self". According to Judith Herman children owing to the sexual abuse form a core image of themselves as "bad" and they justify that they caused the abuse to preserve an image of the mother and father as "good." Even as the survivor grows up the core of inner badness remains as it is until he/she heals completely and until the self-blame stops the survivor cannot sever the bond (103). The "inability for self-protection" further leads the survivor to continue to submit to their sexual demands. Herman says that many survivors cannot imagine themselves having an agency or choice. They are not able to say 'No' to their parents, spouses, lovers or other authority figures (112). The terrible "grief" of letting go of the image of the "good" parent too can stop them to curtail all ties. Sometimes the "guilt" of abandoning the parents can be overwhelming. At times their "concern for other family members" makes them weak. "Disassociation and denial" can be another reason. Sexual abuse by a parent can be so horrifying that a survivor often denies the truth. Herman explains that by disassociating from the memories, or from the feelings, a survivor tries to protect his/her

relationship with the abusive parent (102). The “ambivalent equation” that a survivor has with the abusive parent too makes it difficult for a survivor to let go of the relationship. Then there is “hope for change”, emotional, medical or financial “dependency” that holds them back. “Conforming to the silence” is another pertinent reason. As children watch their mothers suffer in silence as they are beaten and sexually abused, they grow up believing in the rule of silence, and they too keep silent and continue to submit to the abuse. Next is “fear”. Survivors are often threatened with dire consequences and suicide. “Religion” or religious doctrines that promote the idea of forgiveness and obeying the parents too debar a survivor from cutting off the ties. At times a survivor returns when there is a “genuine reconciliation” “Acceptance” is again another reason. Many survivors reach a stage where they accept the truth and set boundaries what they will and will not tolerate. They choose to maintain contact with their abusive parents but on their own terms. These apart the “traumatic bonding” that develops inadvertently between abused and the abuser in a state of captivity can compel a survivor to return to the abuser.

Jhumpa was put into a moral dilemma. Exploiting the medical condition of her mother her father manipulated Jhumpa to return. But what was supposed to be a one-day visit turned out to be her lifetime imprisonment. She couldn't gather courage to resist her father. She couldn't say No. She succumbed to his reassuring words. M. Willemsen in “Reclaiming the body and restoring a bodily self in drama therapy: A case study of sensory-focused Trauma-Centred Developmental Transformations for survivors of father-daughter incest” explains how survivors of father-daughter incest often suffer from complex trauma and sensory insensitivity, making it difficult for them to decipher the sensations in the body and experience body ownership, self-location and agency. Jhumpa like a hypnotised, obedient child surrendered herself to her father.

Nandini Sahu through the story initiates a discourse on incest, trauma, memory, and the related silences. The story is an honest attempt to capture the intense, unspeakable and unintelligible trauma that keeps resonating throughout the life of an incest survivor. Confused and lost they continue to suffer in silence. This silence encourages the sexual exploitation to continue. Sakshi, a Non-Governmental Organization conducted a survey and found that every second child has experienced sexual abuse at least once before the age of 18, and 90% of these sexual abuses are at the hands of family members or someone known to them (Ravi, 2020). *POCSO* (Protection of Children from Sexual Offences) was enforced in India in 2012 to protect

children from sexual assault, sexual harassment and being used in pornography. It has provision for establishment of special courts for a speedy trial. It has no time limit for filing a complaint or the need for any specific injury to be present on the body of victim arising from the sexual assault. *POCSO* (2012) provides discretionary power to the local police officer to make arrangements if a child needs special care and protection. It mentions that the statement of the child should be recorded by a female police officer. The law also directs the court to hold proceedings ensuring that the victim never comes into contact with the accused and provide for a separate waiting room for the child while the accused is being questioned or examined. However, unless the sexual abuse is reported nothing can be done. Thus, it is extremely important to introduce children to sex education so that they understand what amounts to sexual assault. It is equally important to assure them that there is no shame or stigma in accepting and voicing the assault. Awareness, acceptance, and psychiatric help can break the vicious cycle of abuse. Thus, many such stories need to be told to help the incest survivors find their lost voices. They need to be heard and understood.

Notes

1. *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*

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