

The Effects of Sexual Abuse on Children: A Study of *The Gaze*Urooba Shahbaz*¹, Dr. Rab Nawaz Khan², Hina Zaheer³**Original Article**

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Abstract

Child's sexual abuse is a reprehensible act that inflicts profound and lasting damage on a child's physical and psychological well-being. The devastating effects can persist into adulthood, shattering their innocence, warping their personality, and crippling their mental health. This study delves into the harrowing consequences of child sexual abuse, exploring its impact on the physical and mental development of survivors. Through close reading analysis of Elif Shafak's novel *The Gaze*, this research exposes the traumatic legacy of child sexual abuse, revealing how selfish desires can ravage a child's life. The study lays bare the horrific truth: child sexual abuse is not only a childhood tragedy, but also a lifelong affliction, causing irreparable harm to that person's entire being. Grounded in Sigmund Freud's trauma theory, this research probes the hidden themes and profound impacts of child sexual abuse, illuminating the darkest recesses of human suffering. By studying the long-term effects of this heinous act, the study aims to raise awareness, spark action, and bring hope to those whose lives have been scarred by sexual abuse in their childhood. The researchers conducted a detailed analysis of how the novel depicts the devastating impact of (oral) sexual abuse on a child's personality and development. Through close reading of the text, the study reveals the ways in which child sexual abuse can lead to long-term psychological trauma, emotional distress, and distorted self-perception. The research provides insight into the destructive effects of child sexual abuse on a child's formative years, highlighting the need for increased awareness and support for survivors of such abuse.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Trauma Theory, Physical and Mental Impact

Introduction

The study examines the devastating impacts of child sexual abuse through the character 'the child' in Elif Shafak's *The Gaze*. The researchers focus on the long-term effects of oral sexual abuse on the character's life, revealing how it led to a lifetime of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Research has revealed that child sexual abuse has more sensitive consequences for mental health than physical abuse (Noll, 2008). The human mind is shaped by interactions with the external world (Rekret, 2018), and traumatic experiences, like child sexual abuse, can have lasting impacts on physical and mental health.

The study highlights how the character's traumatic experience led to a range of psychological and social problems, including despondency, shame, guilt, and low self-esteem (Briere & Runtz, 1988).

The traumatic memory of the abuse continues to haunt the character throughout her life, manifesting as various psychological disorders.

Using close reading technique (Greenham, 2019), the researchers analyze the selected passages from *The Gaze* to explore how the character's childhood trauma affects her personality development, physical and mental health, and social life. Studies demonstrate how child sexual abuse can lead to lifelong mental health problems and somatic disorders (Steil et al., 2018).

This research aims to raise awareness about the severe consequences of child sexual abuse, and highlights the need for support and intervention to help victims heal and recover.

Research Objective

To analyse the traumatic experience and other effects of child sexual abuse, ravaging the young body, leaving behind the lasting legacy of pain and sufferings.

Research Question

How does the novelist represent the way traumatic experience and other effects of child sexual abuse ravage the young body, leaving behind the lasting legacy of pain and sufferings?

Review of Literature

Children often suffer due to their powerlessness and ignored rights. It is after 1970s that attention has been paid to child protection from any type of abuse (Parton, 1985). Child sexual abuse was a taboo, and could not have been talked about openly till 1970s. Following the 1970s, child sexual abuse was formally criminalized and made punishable under the law, marking a significant shift towards protecting children's rights and safety (Perveen, 2015). Up to 1960s, child abuse was constrained only to physical abuse, but after that the definition was extended to child's emotional and sexual maltreatment (Gilbert, 1997).

Child abuse has severe impacts on child's physical and psychological health, and also on the society in which the child lives. Child abuse has long and destructive impacts on children not only in homes, but in society and schools as well (Tsegba et al., 2021). The effects are deep and harmful (Barber & Odaci, 2020). When a child is abused, he/she adopts some behavior or coping mechanism, like depression, avoidance of intimate relationship and substance abuse, etc. (Davis, 2001). Child abuse has life-long consequences on child's health. According to Glaser (2000), child abuse is deviant behavior and relation with a child which negatively affects the child. It is not necessary that the impact of child abuse would be a repeated action, and it must be very dangerous. Both number and quality are effective in child abuse and negligence. A single and less harmful event is included in child abuse and negligence (Glaser, 2000). As children are innocent and they adopt things which they experience, therefore, when they experience something negative in their childhood, it impacts them negatively (Barber & Odaci, 2020). Researchers have concluded that child abuse in childhood has negative impacts on their brain development (Glaser, 2000), mental and behavioral development (Al Odhayani et al., 2013), leading to mental disorder, suicidal ideation and suicidal attempt (Afifi et al., 2014), depression and anxiety (Infurna et al., 2016), juvenile delinquency and adult criminality (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2008), educational weakness, inappropriate behavior and relationship problem (Fleming & Updegrave, 2018), alcohol addiction (Widom & Hiller, 2001), interpersonal relationship and intimacy problem (Davis et al., 2001), difficulties in controlling and regulating emotion (Kim et al., 2021), smoking and alcohol use (Cole et al., 2008), low self-esteem which results in depression, anxiety, and stress (Barber &

Odaci, 2020), promiscuity, aggression and use of drugs (Arata et al., 2005), and low academic performance, feelings of inferiority and poor socialization (Tsegba et al., 2021).

Arata et al. (2005) revealed that child abuse leads to internalizing and externalizing. Internalizing effects include depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation and attempts, and self-esteem while externalizing effects, which they called acting out behavior, include promiscuity, delinquent behaviors, aggression and uses of drugs. The internalizing effects are mostly result of sexual abuse and externalizing is of physical abuse, but children, having multiple abuse, sexual and physical, have both internalizing and externalizing symptoms. Children, having sexual abuse history, are more promiscuous and have suicidal ideation (Arata et al., 2005). Barber and Odaci conclude that when children are maltreated, it impacts their self-esteem in negative way directly, and then this self-esteem leads to depression, anxiety and stress. Similarly, Infurna et al. (2016) find out, in their meta-analysis of childhood abuse, experiences associated with depression. Depression is also one of the effects of childhood abuse experience. According to Infurna et al. (2016), child abuse, like psychic and neglect, is more associated with depression as compared to child sexual abuse.

Child abuse has been studied by different researchers through various perspectives in their relevant fields. They explored the phenomena in relation to what they thought to be related with.

Afifi et al. (2014) find out the relation between child abuse and mind by delimiting their study to Canadian society. They find out the relation of connection between child abuse and mental disorder, like suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts. G. Nell (2008) go through the study of child sexual abuse by discovering its unique effect on development. He discern through different study and data analysis that child sexual abuse affect the neurologic development, regulating biological stress system, less brain development, issue of sexual identity, romantic relationship, sexual advances, and sexual partner violence throughout their adulthood.

Paolucci et al. (2001) conducted a meta-analysis of published researches on the impact of child abuse and find out with 6 outcomes of the study, that are, post-traumatic disorder, depression, suicide, sexual promiscuity, victim-perpetrator cycle and poor academic performance. They find out the report that child sexual abuse affects from 4% to 50% of children and adult with that common with average percentage of 15% to 20%.

Despite the existence of various studies on child sexual abuse, conducted through both quantitative and qualitative approaches, a significant research gap remains. Specifically, there is a lack of scholarly work that directly correlates child sexual abuse with Elif Shafak's *The Gaze*. The study seeks to address this gap by providing a psychoanalytic examination of the novel, shedding light on the profound impacts of child sexual abuse. By exploring this critical issue through a literary lens, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of child sexual abuse.

Research Method for Data Analysis

The study uses David Greenham's (2019) close reading technique for the analysis of data. Close reading technique is important for eliciting meaning from the text. Closeness means very near to the text and strictly and deeply engaged to the specific text (Schur, 1998). In order to understand a text critically, close reading technique is used to analyze it extensively (Saccomano, 2014). Close reading is getting the meaning out of the text which, otherwise, needs deep understanding. It enables the reader to understand and reread the complex text and understand the deep ideas

hidden inside it (Boyels, 2012). According to Hinchman and Moore (2013), close reading is the analysis of a text by drawing its semantic and pragmatic meanings. According to Greenham (2019), we cannot understand a text without referring to its context. He has explained six different levels or contexts of analysis in his method:

- 1. Semantic context/level:** To analyze a text at the semantic level or context, the researchers elicit various meanings attached to the individually used words in the text.
- 2. Syntactic context/level:** At this level or context, sentence or syntactic structures and their associated meanings are studied.
- 3. Thematic context/level:** At this level or context, themes of a text, and the way they affect meanings of the text are studied.
- 4. Iterative context/level:** Repetitively used words, sentences, patterns and ideas are studied which contribute to the whole meaning of the text and ideas of the writer.
- 5. Generic context/level:** During this level or context. The type or genre of the text and its normative structure are analyzed.
- 6. Adversarial context/level:** Various contexts, like political, social, historical and theoretical, are studied in relation to the text.

Conceptual Framework

The study uses trauma theory given by Freud and other researchers for studying the issue under study. The word trauma originated from a Greek word that means a wound that is imposed on the body. Trauma is very explicitly defined by Ruth Ley as “an experience that immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what happened” (2000, p. 9). Trauma is generally defined as any event in the life of a person that is so terrible that he or she is unable to bear the shocks of the event. Thus, the memory of the event destroys the life of the victim by awakening it through nightmares, compulsive disorders, anxiety attacks, etc. El-Sameea’Monir (2019) also explains that the victim of the traumatic incident experiences this trauma in the form of nightmares and repetitive behaviors, like compulsive disorders. She further explained that even the past incidents of trauma are so strong in their minds that, sometimes, it feels like the incident is not a past happening, but a live experience. The trauma continues to haunt the person's dreams and memories throughout his or her life.

In Freud's *Beyond The Pleasure Principle* (1920), trauma is mainly referred to as the mental wound inflicted on the individual instead of harming them physically. However, El-Sameea’Monir (2019) argues that it is still both physical and psychological. It is because psychological and physical wounds are related to each other. Freud is of the view that the survivor of a traumatic incident is unable to control their memory and recall the event without doing something harmful. Mandal and Singh (2022) explain the trauma theory in the psychoanalytic approach of Freud by referring to hysteria and find that Freud's concept of trauma and its connection with hysteria could not be disregarded. Traumatic experiences cannot be repressed, but they can be changed into other behaviors. Freud has written a book, *Studies on Hysteria*, in collaboration with Joseph Breuer. They argue that those, who have trauma inflicted on their minds, will never get free from the memory of the traumatic incident. The memory of the incident is like a foreign agent that continuously works for the victim of post-traumatic problems. Freud also argued that there is no

direct relationship between the traumatic incident and the memory of that incident. It is just the residue of that incident that is stored in the mind. When the person again encounters the incident or related thing, he or she starts memorizing those incidents, and thus has a panic or hysteric attack. According to Freud, memories of traumatic incidents are more severe and harder to forget than other memories. It is for this reason that the memories of traumatic incidents influence a person's psyche and physical health.

Analysis of Data

Child abuse has devastating consequences for children, with child sexual abuse being the most harmful form of abuse. It has a profound impact on both the psychological and physical well-being of a child, with these two aspects often intertwined. The psychological trauma inflicted by child sexual abuse can manifest physically, while physical harm can also lead to psychological distress. In Elif Shafak's novel, the nameless character's experience of oral sexual abuse illustrates this complex relationship. The initial physical sensation of a terrible taste in her mouth led to an obsession with food, highlighting the far-reaching and interconnected effects of child sexual abuse on a child's physical and psychological development.

The oral sexual abuse left an indelible mark on the protagonist's psyche, manifesting as an obsessive need to eradicate the nauseating taste. When she was abused, her mouth tasted nauseating due to the leftover liquid from the "piece of flesh" (Shafak, 2006, p. 218). Despite vomiting and washing her mouth repeatedly (Shafak, 2006, p. 223), the taste persisted, driving her to overeat. This coping mechanism temporarily shifted her focus from anxiety to food. The protagonist's actions became ritualistic, washing her mouth after every minor action (Shafak, 2006, p. 223). However, no amount of washing or eating could cease the taste she felt in her mouth.

The novel skillfully illustrates the protagonist's desperation, as she ate obsessively, even chewing on grapes printed on an oilskin tablecloth (Shafak, 2006, p. 224). Her hunger was not physical but emotional, stemming from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Her insatiable appetite led to devouring food, surprising her grandmother and neighbors (Shafak, 2006, pp. 223-225).

The protagonist's grandmother remarked that if she continued eating at such an alarming rate, she would become the fattest girl (Shafak, 2006, p. 223). Neighboring women brought food, and she consumed entire pots of pilaf and carafes of ayran, yet her hunger remained (Shafak, 2006, p. 225). This paradox highlights the psychological nature of her appetite. Overeating as an anxiety-reducing coping mechanism, and it is a common response to traumatic experiences.

Similarly, a painful reminder of past trauma resurfaces when the protagonist's partner, on whom she had trust that he would not talk about her appearance, criticizes her body, echoing the harmful comments she'd grown accustomed to. This betrayal of trust triggers a relapse into her childhood coping mechanism: compulsive eating (Shafak, 2006, p. 188). She consumes an astonishing array of foods, disregarding taste, quality, and even spoilage, seeking solace in the act itself.

"I wasn't looking for taste . . . What was important was food, not what I ate. Nothing I ate tasted any better than anything else" (Shafak, 2006, p. 188). This quantitative focus on food mirrors her childhood behavior, where eating served as an escape from sexual abuse.

The protagonist's lifelong struggle with food obsession and mouth-washing, rooted in childhood trauma, persists. Even as an adult, she replicates the same rituals: "I washed out my mouth. I brushed my teeth. I soaped my hands. I washed out my mouth" (Shafak, 2006, p. 190). This repetitive behavior underscores the deep-seated psychological impact.

Survivors of trauma often re-experience distressing symptoms. The protagonist, a childhood trauma survivor, exemplifies this phenomenon. Specific stimuli present during the traumatic event become lasting triggers, haunting her throughout life. The coal shed, site of her abuse, elicits intense irritation, driving her to destroy it through the pit of cherries. This reaction underscores the profound psychological impact of trauma.

Moreover, the cat, a silent witness to her abuse, becomes a symbol of potential exposure. Fearing the cat might reveal her secret, she brutally kills it by hanging it from a cherry tree while "blindfolded with a cherry-colored muslin cloth" (Shafak, 2006, p. 203). This gruesome act serves as symbolic silencing so that to eliminate the perceived threat. The blindfold signifies avoidance blocking out the cat's accusatory gaze and guilt and shame concealing her own perceived culpability. By destroying the coal shed and killing the cat, the protagonist attempts to erase tangible reminders of her traumatic experience. However, these actions also reveal unresolved trauma that shows persistent psychological distress.

The protagonist's anxiety manifests in a self-destructive habit: compulsive cuticle peeling, a painful symptom of Excoriation disorder. This behavior, evident from childhood to adulthood, serves as a coping mechanism for stress and trauma. As a child abuse survivor, she resorts to cuticle peeling during distressing situations, finding temporary relief from overwhelming emotions. Despite physical pain and bleeding (Shafak, 2006, p.78), this compulsive behavior provides an escape: "Then I bit each one of them off with teeth. The taste was unpleasant, but it was not about taste... Sometimes it hurt; sometimes the area around my cuticle bled." (Shafak, 2006, p. 78) This habit persists into adulthood. "When I am anxious, I destroy my cuticles" (Shafak, 2006, p. 78). Her partner's public displays exacerbate anxiety, triggering cuticle peeling: "I became so anxious that I didn't have any cuticles left" (Shafak, 2006, p. 79). This destructive behavior of the victims signifies anxiety management and avoidance which Shifts focus from emotional pain to physical pain. Excoriation disorder, a symptom of underlying trauma, highlights the importance of addressing psychological wounds. By understanding the protagonist's self-destructive habits, we glimpse the lasting impact of childhood trauma like compulsive behaviors.

The protagonist's traumatic experience has indelibly marked her psyche, transforming seemingly innocuous numbers into sinister reminders. The perpetrator's counting game, "one, two, three," during abuse has created a lasting association, haunting her throughout life.

This numeric trigger illustrates the psychological concept of "conditioned response" (classical conditioning). Neutral stimuli (numbers) become linked to traumatic experiences, eliciting intense emotional reactions. Whenever she encounters counting, her mind involuntarily relives the traumatic event.

A chance encounter on a bus, where children and college girls count aloud, triggers intense anxiety: "My brain is throbbing. The numbers demons, with lamps on their waist and brooms in their hands, their tongues cut off and their eyes poked out with hot iron, banging on the door as they jump up and down tak tak donk donk there's no one here, they do not hear my voice" (Shafak, 2006, pp. 24-25). The use of the words reveal that how these triggers are scary for her. This vivid personification reveals: traumatic association (numbers evoke the abuse), unconscious triggers (innocuous stimuli reactivate past trauma), and emotional reliving (the protagonist re-experiences fear, anxiety, and helplessness). The reactions also show that trauma redefine the perceptions like transforming numbers into menacing entities and ordinary situation can reactivate past trauma.

By exploring the protagonist's unique response to numbers, we glimpse the profound, lasting effects of childhood trauma on mental health, relationships, and daily life.

The protagonist's traumatic experience has embedded specific phrases in her psyche, triggering intense emotional reactions. The molester's initial command, "don't move" (Shafak, 2006, p. 212), has become an indelible mark, associating this phrase with fear, vulnerability, and helplessness.

This linguistic trigger illustrates the psychological concept of "conditioned response." Neutral phrases can become linked to traumatic experiences, eliciting intense emotional reactions. Whenever she encounters this phrase, her mind involuntarily relives the traumatic event.

A chance encounter with a Good Samaritan exemplifies this phenomenon. When her sweater becomes tangled in a door, a man offers assistance, saying "don't move" (Shafak, 2006, p. 76). This seemingly innocuous phrase: "I do not know why, but I was not at all pleased that the man had said this" (Shafak, 2006, p. 76). The protagonist's life becomes a perpetual escape from numbers, words (e.g., "don't move") and People.

The protagonist's traumatic past continues to haunt her through recurring nightmares, specifically featuring floating balloons. These nightmares serve as a manifestation of her unresolved psychological distress, perpetuating her distress and reinforcing the lasting impact of childhood trauma. The floating balloon imagery is deeply rooted in her childhood memories of sexual abuse. During her psychiatric evaluation, a revealing incident unfolded. Asked to color a painting, she deliberately left a floating balloon uncolored (Shafak, 2006, p. 9). The psychiatrist's inquiry about the omitted balloon sparked fear, as it eerily resembled the light bulb in the coal shed where the abuse occurred. This association illustrates traumatic encoding (balloons become linked to traumatic experiences) and unconscious avoidance of triggers (uncolored balloon).

The recurring nightmares of floating balloons serves as a painful reminder of her traumatic past, perpetuating her emotional pain. "I was dreaming about flying balloon... the flying balloon in my dream existed for a long as I could see it, but ceased to exist the moment I couldn't ... anxiously I opened my eyes. I was too late. It didn't exist after all. I existed. I was awake" (Shafak, 2006, p. 9). A subsequent nightmare echoes this theme, further illuminating the depth of her psychological scars. "I was dreaming about flying balloon ... a bright red, squeaky-clean car was swerving angrily down the middle of the road ... a huge spider had woven a web over the crack ..." (Shafak, 2006, p. 19). These nightmares symbolize persistent trauma, conditional fear and increased sensitivity to potential threats. The floating balloons in her nightmares may represent unprocessed trauma, constantly floating in her subconscious, and feeling of being disconnected from reality. The protagonist's reactions to floating balloons mirror her responses to other trauma-related triggers like the coal shed (site of abuse), the cat (witness to abuse), the phrase "don't move" (molester's command).

By exploring the protagonist's nightmares and associations, we gain insight into the complex, lasting effects of trauma on mental health and daily life.

Nightmares, as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), underscore intrusive memories and flashbacks, emotional reactivity and hypervigilance. Throughout her life, the protagonist's subconscious mind has been reliving the traumatic experience of her abuse through recurring nightmares, masquerading as dreams about flying balloons (Shafak, 2006, pp. 9, 19). These nightmares are not mere fantasies but symbolic flashbacks, echoing the horrors of her past. Dreams, as a window to the subconscious, often convey traumatic experiences through symbolism.

The flying balloon represents the broken bulb in the coal shed, site of the abuse and the painting shown by the psychiatrist, triggering her fear. The dream's narrative parallels the abuse incident. The molester's command: "Open and close your eyes" with counting and the protagonist's coping mechanism: Opening her eyes to make the abuser "disappear", parallels with opening her eyes makes the floating balloon "cease to exist" (Shafak, 2006, p. 9).

This narrative underscores the importance of acknowledging trauma's impact and seeking therapeutic interventions. By exploring the protagonist's nightmares, we gain insight into the complex, lasting effects of childhood trauma on mental health and daily life.

The protagonist's story serves as a powerful testament to the enduring impact of trauma. Through her dreams, we witness the haunting legacy of abuse, forever etched in her subconscious.

Conclusion

Survivors of childhood sexual abuse often face a lifetime of psychological and health problems due to the repressed memories of their traumatic experience. The sudden and traumatic event can bring about profound behavioral changes in a child's personality, affecting their psychological and physical well-being. Unfortunately, parents and caregivers may overlook these changes, leaving the child to suffer in silence, like a "secret sinner." The internalized trauma can manifest as psychological and health issues later in life. Children, being innocent and impressionable, absorb their environment and experiences, which can shape their reactions and behaviors. When a child experiences a traumatic event, it can leave a lasting impact on their mind, influencing their behavioral patterns and personality development. If left unaddressed, these patterns can become deeply ingrained, leading to maladjustment, deteriorated mental and physical health, and even psychosis. The character in the novel exemplifies this struggle, carrying the scars of her past trauma in silence, unable to cope with the memories that haunt her, and ultimately becoming a bizarre figure in society.

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