The Guru of Abuse: Analysing Cultural Distortions in Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter*

Dhruvee Sinha
National Institute of Technology Patna
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, India.
dhruvisinha29@gmail.com
Orcid iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0883-5702

Zeeshan Ali
National Institute of Technology Patna
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, India.
zali@nitp.ac.in
Orcid iD: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9674-4359

Abstract

This research paper delves into the intricate relationship between culture as a tool of oppression and liberation, focusing on the experiences of child abuse within the context of Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015). The study investigates how the abuse perpetuated against the orphaned girls reflects distortions of cultural norms and traditions, thereby revealing the potential for culture to be used as an instrument of oppression. The central figure in this narrative, Guruji, manipulates religious notions of the guru-disciple relationship, exploiting his claimed status as the girls' new "God" to mask his exploitation. Through a comprehensive analysis of the novel, this study reveals the dichotomous role of religious and cultural elements. The paper argues that while religion can be harnessed for oppression and liberation, its enduring symbols and narratives form the foundation for survivors to reclaim their agency and cultural heritage. On one hand, the guru's invocations of worship and devotion underscore the manipulation of cultural symbols to enable abuse and control. On the other hand, the paper explores how the orphaned girls find solace by re-engaging with Hindu mythological narrative traditions through storytelling. The study demonstrates that the tales from the Ramayana provide solace from the guru's falsehoods. Ultimately, the paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate interaction between cultural forces, gender dynamics, and the potential for empowerment within the framework of religious traditions, as depicted in the novel.

Keywords: Culture, Child abuse, Religion, Hinduism, Resilience.

Introduction

This study uncovers instances of cultural distortions, the manipulation of religious symbols, and the resulting impact on the victims. Furthermore, the research will explore how these girls find healing and empowerment through reconnecting with religious narrative traditions, particularly drawing from the tales of the Ramayana, one of the two most important Sanskrit epics of Hinduism.

Stories often whisper of the interplay between darkness and light, pain and resilience. Few authors possess the ability to intertwine such profound narratives with socio-cultural examinations seamlessly. Anuradha Roy stands among these literary craftsmen, delicately weaving the threads of human experience with the fabric of societal concerns. In her oeuvre, she consistently ventures into the uncharted territories of cultural nuances, unearthing the complexities that shape the understanding of human interaction. Her remarkable novel *Sleeping on Jupiter* (2015) deals with the haunting theme of child abuse. This deeply distressing issue is intimately entwined with culture, as cultural norms, beliefs, and practices play a significant role in shaping how abuse is perceived, understood, and addressed within a society.

Child abuse, a concept that encapsulates various forms of harm inflicted upon the innocent, resonates not only with its universal condemnation but also with its diverse cultural interpretations. The World Health Organization (1999) defines child abuse as acts undermining a child's health, survival, development, or dignity, spanning physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect. However, these definitions fluctuate, reflecting the tapestry of cultural values across societies. Traditional Indian culture is no exception, balancing the reverence for children with the historical acceptance of corporal punishment as a form of discipline (Kacker et al., 2007). A staggering estimate of up to 50% of Indian children experience sexual abuse, a harrowing truth that often remains concealed beneath the veil of shame and privacy norms (Choudhry et al., 2021). Within this disconcerting reality, the true weight of cultural context comes to bear, shaping the alarming risk and deeply entrenched underreporting.

As the narrative in *Sleeping on Jupiter* unfolds, Roy masterfully unearths the hidden layers of cultural complexity that intertwine with the experiences of child abuse. The author's penetrating gaze lays bare the harsh reality that despite valuing children, traditional Indian culture can sometimes condone harsh discipline as a means of moulding them. *Sleeping on Jupiter* resonates as an invitation to confront the often-unseen implications of cultural values on child abuse. A multifaceted approach is required to address these dynamics; one that recognises the complex interplay between societal norms, traditional values, and the pressing need for comprehensive social change. Roy's narrative serves as an evocative landscape where cultural intricacies converge with the heart-breaking realities of child abuse. By extracting and analysing text excerpts that illuminate instances of child abuse and their entanglement with cultural norms and religious influences, the research seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which these factors interact to either facilitate or counter abusive dynamics.

The intricate interplay between culture and religion creates a multifaceted backdrop that significantly impacts the facilitation of child abuse, thereby revealing the complex interrelationship between abusive dynamics and these contextual domains. This intricate relationship has been a subject of scholarly inquiry, with numerous experts delving into the complexities inherent in this interplay. Chakravarti's analysis (1998) of cultural, religious, and gender oppression reveals the potential for cultural norms and religious practices to be wielded as tools for oppressive authority. Doniger's work (2009) exposes the intricate ties between religion, cultural representations, and societal norms, which can either enable or challenge

abusive practices within specific cultural contexts. Expanding on these, Pathak (2021) examines the sociocultural factors contributing to widespread child abuse in India, emphasising oppressive cultural attitudes and religious teachings that promote violence against children. Meanwhile, India's legal infrastructure contains significant gaps regarding child protection (Dinesh et al., 2023). Foucault's seminal works (1975, 1976) offer a lens to understand how power dynamics inherent in cultural and religious systems can be manipulated to enable abusive behaviours. Herrenkohl et al. (2015) extend this by outlining how these dynamics shape parenting practices and responses to maltreatment. Additionally, a study by Deb and Modak (2003) analysed case records of abused children, finding high incidences of physical and sexual abuse embedded within family structures and enabled by sociocultural norms. Roy and Madiki (2020) expose the lack of national data and effective legal protections, enabling continuation of violations against children embedded within sociocultural frameworks. Kendall-Tackett et al. (1993) explains the profound impact of sexual abuse on children, reinforcing how cultural and religious contexts can exacerbate the consequences of abuse. The study by Bottoms et al. (2015) offers a profile of cases of religion-related child maltreatment, emphasising how religious institutions can serve as platforms for abuse enabled by cultural and religious norms. The work by Paul et al. (2021) on child abuse in an Indian perspective brings forth the pervasive nature of this social evil, highlighting the intersection between cultural norms, religious beliefs, and abusive practices. Lalor and McElvaney's study (2010) explores child sexual abuse, underlining the potential for cultural and religious environments to contribute to the normalisation of abuse. Collectively, these diverse studies elucidate how culture and religion can serve as enablers of child abuse, urging comprehensive efforts to address these complex intersections and protect vulnerable individuals within culturally embedded frameworks. While the existing studies have illuminated the significance of cultural and religious factors in enabling child abuse, there remains a dearth of exploration into the nuanced processes by which these factors are manipulated and harnessed to maintain abusive authority.

Patriarchal Entrapment and Counterfeit Divinity

Child abuse and neglect in India are closely associated with cultural and religious contexts (Seth, 2015). As society grapples with these profound challenges, it is no surprise that the canvas of literature bears witness to the intricate interplay of these issues. Nestled within the vivid landscapes of the fictional Indian town of Jarmuli, Anuradha Roy's *Sleeping on Jupiter* embarks on an exploration of child abuse amidst cultural and religious circumstances. The narrative follows the poignant story of a young Nomi, who is abandoned by her mother when she is about six years. She is then taken to an ashram that shelters orphans. At the age of twelve, she manages to escape the ashram. After being adopted, she is taken to Oslo. Nomi later returns to India at the age of twenty-five, confronting the haunting memories of the abuse she experienced during her formative years at the ashram. This ashram, shrouded in spiritual mystique, serves as both refuge and crucible for the displaced souls who seek solace within its walls. The narrative revolves around young victims of abuse under the orphanage's overseer, Guruji, a spiritual leader.

The profound influence of religion on India's socio-cultural and political landscape, as highlighted by Singh (2019), becomes a pivotal backdrop. In the context of Anuradha Roy's narrative, Guruji capitalises on this widespread and significant role that religion plays in shaping various aspects of society and politics in India. He distorts religious concepts to conspicuously illustrate his exploitative and manipulative intentions for personal benefit. His manipulation extends beyond the realm of religion, permeating the lives of the girls placed

under his custodianship. The character of Guruji is depicted as using religion within the Indian cultural context to abuse girls under his care. He justifies his actions by claiming divinity: "I am your father and your mother now. I am your country. I am your teacher. I am your God" (Roy, 2015, p. 28). This statement echoes orthodox notions of the guru-disciple relationship. It becomes imperative to explore his calculated exploitation of his perceived status, positioning himself as a deity-like figure to exert control and perpetrate abuse upon vulnerable girls within the ashram. His actions extend beyond spiritual guidance, perverting the line between devotion and exploitation.

Sleeping on Jupiter navigates the interplay of vulnerability and resilience, inviting readers to bear witness to the poignant lives intertwined within the confines of this oppressive ashram. Foucault's seminal works, *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976) examine how power dynamics interlaces with knowledge constructs to enable systems of oppressive control and domination. His theories illuminate how dominant discourses perpetuate behaviours and reinforce ideologies that serve the interests of authority figures and institutions wielding power in society. In the novel, Guruji's unquestioned authority within the insular ashram environment reflects Foucault's concept of hierarchical observation and normalisation of behaviour. Guruji observes the girls' actions, judges any dissent as transgressions, and administers punitive measures rooted in distorted religious rhetoric and cultural practices. This indictment discourages resistance, propelling self-policing and self-discipline among the oppressed. In line with Foucault's argument, marginalised individuals become conditioned to monitor themselves, adhering to societal expectations for behaviour and character. This cultural norm and societal reverence create a challenging environment for reporting abuse, especially when religious leaders are revered, thus perpetuating a cycle of victimisation (Capps, 2009; Bennett, 2003). There are several disturbing instances within the narrative that are indicative of abuse inflicted upon the girls. These instances encompass punitive measures entailing confinement along with allusions to physical violence endured by girls and their unsettling interactions with Guruji including distressingly inappropriate physical contact, and instances of sexual assault: "His hand went up my thighs and down. He shifted my weight and slipped down my knickers and put his hand right between my legs" (Roy, 2015, p. 69). The protagonist's episode of assault serves as a stark depiction of the intrusive and inappropriate physicality sustained by Guruji, further contributing to the unsettling environment within the narrative. Guruji manifests a distressing pattern of physical maltreatment perpetrated against the girls under their custodianship. If the girls resist complying with Guruji's directives, an intriguing albeit grim dynamic emerges, wherein a potential avenue for evading sexual exploitation intersects with the persistence of other forms of abusive maltreatment. Specifically, while the act of rebuffing Guruji's advances could potentially offer a degree of reprieve from sexual exploitation, it regrettably does not entail immunity from other corporeal practices like public beatings, systematic food deprivation, and egregious humiliation:

> I remember how Piku was punished for not going to Guruji. They tied a big bag
> of dung to one of her ankles and she had to drag it with her wherever she went.
> She wasn't allowed into the school or the dining hall. (Roy, 2015, p. 129)

These abusive practices, beyond their immediate physical ramifications, bespeak a broader systemic issue involving the abuse of authority and an inherent disregard for the rights and dignity of those in their care. This lens of scrutiny further unravels the complexities of the guru's manipulation of both cultural and spiritual facets, where his assumed status as an arbiter of divine authority is exploited to maintain an environment rife with exploitation and the unchecked exertion of dominance.

Cultural Distortions: A Passageway to Child Abuse

Extensive research has studied the implications of cultural distortions within the realm of child abuse. Choudhry et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review of child sexual abuse in India, underscoring the significance of cultural and religious distortions in fostering an environment conducive to abuse. The experiences of abuse suffered by displaced girls at the ashram reflect distortions of religious and spiritual traditions. The guru perpetrates violence behind the guise of religious authority, exploiting symbols of religious identity to manipulate vulnerable children robbed of family and community. However, his invocations of worship and devotion mask exploitation, as he molests girls sitting in his lap in a twisted mimicry of a child's connection to the divine: "He said again that he was God on earth and I would be purified by serving him. He held my face between his hands and stuck his greasy lips on my lips, pushed his tongue in" (Roy, 2015, p. 129). By asserting himself as "God on earth," Guruji establishes an air of divine authority, positioning himself as an arbiter of spiritual power. This declaration effectively plays upon the religious reverence and devotion that individuals may have towards spiritual leaders, creating an environment in which his directives are beyond question. The utilisation of silencing mechanisms, such as instilling guilt and fear of divine retribution, can deter victims from speaking out (Bottoms et al., 2004). This fear mechanism works in favour of Guruji as he abuses the vulnerable under the guise of religious rituals— making girls sit in his lap in "the service of God" (Roy, 2015, p. 129). This distorts legitimate spiritual practices and shames victims, making them blame themselves. The girls who feel they are being abused have the constant fear that no one will believe them since the acts are couched in religious terms. As a powerful guru with many devotees, his victims likely fear social repercussions for speaking out. They may fear ostracization from their community or not being believed against the word of a counterfeit guru. This social pressure combines with the religious authority to facilitate smooth exploitation and enable silence. This unsettling phenomenon is further evidenced by studies documenting religion-related child abuse across various contexts, including child physical abuse (Bottoms et al., 2004), religious institutions (Hurcombe, 2000), and the intersection between religious beliefs and crimes against children (Bennett, 2003). Furthermore, Guruji's distortion of religious contexts to sexually abuse girls relates to Foucault's analysis of sexuality construction through scientific and religious discourse. By framing abusive acts as conferring purity, Guruji propagates oppressive dominant notions of feminine virtue, relaying religious mythology through the lens of patriarchal sexual control. These oppressive dominant notions mirror the multifaceted techniques institutions use to engrain discourse on sexual morality.

Guruji strategically leverages cultural practices related to purity and austerity, specifically those associated with menstruation, to enforce a form of isolation upon girls subsequent to their menstrual cycle. The practice of isolating women during menstruation in makeshift huts commonly referred to as "menstrual huts" or "menstrual sheds" has been most notably reported in some parts of India and Nepal, as well as in other cultures in different parts of the world (Budhathoki, 2022; Kaur, 2022). Such practices expose the lack of awareness about the reasoning of cultural practises exacerbating vulnerability (Pathak, 2021). The abuse is often exacerbated by a misinterpretation of religious doctrines, which the leaders manipulate to normalise their actions (Lalor & McElvaney, 2010; Capps, 1995). It is important to note that Guruji's implementation of this practice deviates from its cultural significance, as it is devoid of genuine cultural intent. The isolation's primary function is to create an environment conducive to the perpetration of abuse, thus heightening vulnerability and exacerbating the potential for exploitation. As delineated by the narrator, Guruji strategically exploits the period of isolation as a means to subject girls to sexual abuse, thus transgressing the boundaries of

both childhood innocence and feminine virtue: "…he told me I was a nun in the service of God. I was the chosen one. How he had always known there was something special about me and so, from the time I was seven" (Roy, 2015, p. 129). His actions notably epitomise the most egregious manifestations of patriarchal ideologies about women's bodies and sexuality, thereby illuminating a disturbing nexus between his practices and the deeply entrenched gender dynamics prevalent within the context of cultural norms.

Guruji assumes a position of significant authority, bordering on divinity, commanding reverence and instilling fear. The narrator aptly articulates this supremacy by describing how his voice was soft and that "He never had to raise it, not even when he had a hundred people around him. When he spoke, it was as if all other sounds stopped so that his every whisper could be heard from far away" (Roy, 2015, p. 67), underscoring his exceptional stature among his followers. This exalted status renders his actions largely unchallenged, as complete obedience and devotion to him foster an environment wherein abusive behaviours are permitted to persist. Within the confines of the ashram or commune, isolation prevails, with the girls' limited interaction with the outside world hindering potential intervention. The authoritative norms perpetuated within this setting further compound the issue, as patriarchal ideologies grant male figures the assumed right to exert control over the bodies and sexuality of girls and women (Becker, 1981). This normalisation of objectification intersects with the girls' marginalised status as orphans, devoid of protective caregivers and rendered profoundly vulnerable. Dinesh et al. (2023) elaborate on legal infrastructural gaps that highlight the lack of oversight, enabling unchecked abuse to persist. The combination of the guru's omnipotent hierarchy, the seclusion of the ashram, compounded by impoverishment, scarce legal recourse, and socio-cultural restraints discouraging voicing dissent, fuse to establish an environment conducive to the proliferation of child abuse.

Ramayana: Religion as a Beacon of Hope

Myths, beyond their role as cultural narratives, possess a unique potential for liberation and psychological healing. These ancient stories not only unravel the mysteries of the universe but also serve as powerful agents that connect individuals to a deeper, meaningful understanding of themselves and the world around them. Ramayana, often categorised as a myth, is one such ancient Indian epic that serves as a cultural and religious touchstone reflecting the values and worldview of Hindu society. The Ramayana describes the narratives of gods, heroes, and moral dilemmas, offering insights into the ideals the culture upholds. Jugnu, one of the staff members at the ashram, imparts narratives from the Ramayana to the girls. In the Ramayana, Shabari, an elderly woman of the Bhil tribe, lived in a hermitage in the Dandaka Forest where Lord Rama, his wife Sita, and his loyal brother Lakshmana were in exile. Her guru, Sage Matanga, foresaw the arrival of Lord Rama and instructed Shabari about the significance of that divine encounter. He predicted that Rama, an incarnation of Lord Vishnu, would come to her ashram and bless her with his presence. Matanga advised Shabari to wait patiently for Rama's arrival, emphasising the importance of her devotion and the spiritual significance of meeting the divine incarnate During this period of waiting, Shabari is often portrayed as cleaning and preparing her humble dwelling. In her deep devotion, she meticulously tasted each berry and fruit to ensure that only the sweet ones would be offered to Rama when he eventually arrived. This act of tasting the fruits is a symbolic expression of her love and devotion, as she wanted to offer only the best to her beloved Lord. Shabari's patient and devoted waiting for Lord Rama ultimately bears fruit when the long-awaited encounter takes place in a moment of divine fulfilment. As Sage Matanga had prophesied, Rama, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu, arrives at her ashram:

The aged votaress pure of taint/ Revered by every perfect saint/ Rose to her feet by Ráma's side/ And thus in gentle tones replied: 'My penance' meed this day I see/ Complete, my lord, in meeting thee. This day the fruit of birth I gain/ Nor have I served the saints in vain/ I reap rich fruits of toil and vow/ And heaven itself awaits me now. (Valmiki, 8th century CE/1870, p. 317)

This divine meeting between Shabari and Lord Rama serves as a profound lesson in the rewards of unwavering faith, patience, and devotion. It highlights the idea that waiting for a higher purpose can lead to spiritual fulfilment and the realisation of one's deepest aspirations.

This perspective on the liberating potential of the Shabari narrative aligns with Joseph Campbell's scholarly insights into the psychological role of myths and stories. In his seminal interviews with Bill Moyers compiled in the book The Power of Myth, Campbell elaborates on the power of stories to provide psychological healing and meaning: "When we turn outward and experience the world as alive and meaningful, we connect with that eternal source which is the ground of our own consciousness" (Campbell & Moyers, 1988, p. 272). Shabari's story embodies qualities of patience, faith, and unwavering devotion as she waits for Lord Rama's arrival. Her story underscores the significance of unwavering faith and selfless devotion, transcending societal barriers. Her waiting for Rama was not merely a temporal waiting but a symbolic representation of her spiritual longing. Exploring her story during difficult times provides solace and guidance, as shared experiences provide resilience through mechanisms like identification, vicarious experience, and narrative resonance (Campbell & Moyers, 1988). In the novel, the reference to Shabari from the Ramayana serves as a guiding light for the victims, helping them navigate and make sense of their struggles. Jugnu's narration of Shabari's tale to Nomi holds a profound significance, particularly in light of Nomi's situation within the ashram where she is compelled to worship Guruji, a perpetrator of abuse: "'The moral is that true, simple devotion is worth a hundred such …' He waved his hands around, pointing at [the] ashram. 'A hundred such displays'" (Roy, 2015, p. 104). Shabari's story offers a striking parallel that resonates deeply with Nomi's struggles and challenges. Nomi's solace in the story's message of devotion is a poignant reflection of their emotional response to the narrative and how they find a glimmer of hope amidst their challenging circumstances: "The story had done something to me. I thought I would cry, my throat felt stuffed with an emptiness I could not swallow. I thought of how Shabari had waited" (Roy, 2015, p. 104). As described by Campbell and Moyers, myths and stories reflect universal themes and human experiences, allowing individuals to identify with characters' struggles and find emotional catharsis.

The story's impact on Nomi is multi-layered; firstly, it empowers her with a sense of perseverance and determination by demonstrating Shabari's ability to endure trials while maintaining her higher purpose. Secondly, the narrative becomes a guiding light for Nomi as she navigates her isolation and uncertainty within the ashram, motivating her to retain her sense of self and purpose. Thirdly, the connection between Shabari's spiritual journey and Nomi's quest for self-discovery becomes more profound, emphasising the importance of individual growth and empowerment even within challenging environments. Fourthly, Shabari's patient waiting resonates with Nomi's experience, imparting the understanding that waiting can bear transformative meaning. Lastly, the parallel offers Nomi a message of hope amid adversity, reminding her that her journey within the ashram, despite its difficulties, may lead to positive change. Ultimately, Shabari's story functions as a compelling lens for Nomi, providing her with the strength, insight, and courage to navigate her complex journey of self-discovery and empowerment, even as she grapples with the coercive dynamics of Guruji's authority and her vulnerability.

Towards the end of the novel, Nomi accepts that "Shabari was a simple-minded woman. She waited and she waited, all her life" (Roy, 2015, p. 119). This statement encapsulates a profound sense of resignation, contemplation, and perhaps even a degree of empathy with Shabari's prolonged waiting. There is a departure from the initial solace and hopeful interpretation she found in Shabari's story of devotion. The character's mental state evolves from seeking solace in narratives of devotion to a realisation of the harsh realities she faces. This transformation in her perspective reveals a sense of disillusionment and resignation that has settled within her psyche. The repetition of Shabari's wait encapsulates the character's growing recognition of the enduring nature of waiting, irrespective of whether the desired outcome materialises. It suggests a realisation that the act of waiting can possess a certain inherent meaning, even in the face of uncertain or unmet expectations.

The Dichotomy of Religion's Potential for Liberation and Repression

Within the intricate web of cultural and religious dynamics, *Sleeping on Jupiter* eloquently portrays the perpetual struggle between the potential for liberation and repression inherent within Hinduism's cultural fabric. This dichotomy is vividly exemplified through the central figure of Guruji, who exploits the reverence associated with the concept of God not just in Hinduism but in other religions as well, to enable abuse and control over vulnerable orphaned girls:

> He spoke of how the Buddha left home in search of truth. He spoke of Sufi saints and Jain monks. He recited a sacred Hindu poem and then quoted from the Bible to show how the love for God sounded similar everywhere. He spoke of how true mystics, such as he was, had been thought of as madmen by ordinary people. (Roy, 2015, p. 106)

The notion of the guru as a divine authority, akin to God, becomes a vehicle for manipulation and subjugation, reinforcing the power dynamics that thrive within cultural hierarchies (Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). Guruji capitalises on the revered position of a spiritual guide to mask his exploitation, distorting the essence of faith and spirituality to further his abusive agenda. The guru's formidable political affiliations render the girls profoundly disempowered by comparison. His influential stature dissuades society from confronting him, as evidenced by the observation that "Guruji had other rich and powerful disciples who respected his powers and this was why even illegal boat girls were safe inside the ashram" (Roy, 2015, p. 106).

The haunting memories of trauma continue to linger as Nomi leaves the ashram and settles in Oslo. When she accompanies her foster mother to a church, the distress becomes overwhelming, causing her to get nauseous. The presence of the religious institution triggers painful reminders for her:

> I remember the first time I went to a church, somewhere in Italy. The coloured glass windows, the death-stench of incense and the enormous painted stone statues of Christ dripping blood, the priests in their robes. I ran down the aisle and out into the square and in the bright, hard day my head spun, my eyes went sun-blind and I threw up near the fountain. (Roy, 2015, p. 128)

Judith Herman discusses how trauma survivors can experience retraumatization when they encounter environments that resemble the original trauma context. This occurs due to conditioned learning processes that link certain stimuli and situations to the initial traumatic event. Particular sights, sounds, smells or dynamics that were present during the original abuse have become triggers that instantly activate the traumatic response:

> Long after the danger is past, traumatized people relive the event as though it were continually recurring in the present. They cannot resume the normal course of their lives, for the trauma repeatedly interrupts. It is as if time stops at the moment of trauma. (Herman, 1992, p. 37)

In Nomi's case, the church environment perhaps inadvertently replicated specific stimuli that were associated with the trauma she endured under Guruji in the ashram. The religious symbols and imagery, the towering ceilings, the reverential energy may have aligned too closely with sensory elements of the ashram where ritualised abuse occurred.

However, Shabari's steadfast waiting and devotion present a counternarrative, offering a glimpse into the potential for genuine spiritual connection and empowerment within cultural myths and narratives. Jugnu's narration of Shabari's story to the girls underlines a sense of hope and anticipation:

> Jugnu would tell me the sea was nearby, pointing at the horizon, saying softly, 'Listen and you'll hear it.' I tried, but I couldn't hear it. His weathervane had rusted now and hardly moved at all. Still I thought I would wake one morning to find the arrow had turned northward and we were setting off, sailing away. (Roy, 2015, p. 127)

The girls' engagement with the story of Shabari mirrors a process of reclamation, where the cultural identity embedded in Hindu narratives becomes a source of strength, resilience, and healing. This story reflects what Campbell describes as stories connecting us to the broader fabric of life and significance beyond limitations. The patient devotion motif gives the girls glimpses into their resilience. Within this perspective, the abused girls' resonance with Shabari's narrative represents their receptiveness to a story that challenged their assumptions of perpetual victimhood. Rather than remaining constrained within trauma, the mythological tale of devotion and liberation unlocked their moral imagination to acknowledge their latent agency.

So Campbell's perspective further validates how embracing cultural stories aids rehabilitation as it awakens imagination to profound identity narratives. Moving from Foucault's theories on oppressive systems to Campbell's almost celebratory approach reveals the spectrum of theoretical lenses applicable to understand the multi-layered role of stories in both oppression and liberation. This narrative motif signifies the potential for Hindu cultural traditions to serves as tools of liberation, allowing the victims to transcend the confines of their oppressive circumstances and find empowerment through their faith.

Conclusion

The novel shows the complex relationship between religious beliefs and the abuse of power. On one hand, Guruji uses Hindu teachings to justify his exploitation of the girls. As a supposed "God on earth," he claims divine authority to sexually and physically abuse them. This represents the corrupt side of religion, where spiritual ideas are twisted to enable oppression. On the other hand, the legend of Shabari offers hope. Her patient devotion symbolises an alternative vision of Hindu faith based on genuine spirituality rather than domination. When Jugnu shares the story, it functions as a guiding source of inspiration to the girls. It reminds them that faith can be liberating rather than confining. Religious concepts provide frameworks for both abuse, as seen in Guruji's manipulation, and empowerment, seen through the resilience Shabari's narrative fosters. This underscores the complex, multifaceted capacity of belief systems to channel oppression or liberation. The novel adeptly illuminates the perilous consequences of societal silence surrounding sexual abuse, providing a platform for predators

to thrive while leaving victims isolated and vulnerable. This pervasive silence is bolstered by the cunning manipulation of religious justifications, where the girls are coerced into accepting their abuse as an act of religious devotion. The narrative compellingly underscores how broader societal attitudes perpetuate this silence, reinforcing isolation and stigma that embolden the religious leader to engage in sexual abuse without facing accountability. The novel's exploration extends to the exploitation of religious and cultural symbols by the guru, illuminating the intricate internal dynamics of the religion and the prevalent lack of social awareness. However, amidst these complex realities, this study asserts that religion also harbours philosophical tools that can empower survivors to reconstruct their identities, extricating them from the clutches of oppression. The novel refuses to paint religion with a broad brush. Instead, it thoughtfully examines how religion and culture shape power dynamics, acknowledging both their oppressive potential and their aspirational power within the lives of the marginalised. The interplay between uplift and harm spotlights the intricate, nuanced imprint of faith on questions of exploitation versus freedom. Ultimately, this paper elucidates the interplay of culture, religion, and abuse by dissecting how the cultural milieu shapes the characters' experiences and moulds the power dynamics at play.

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